

Ethics of Research in Social Sciences¹

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Introduction

In general, sociology and psychology investigations have been considered to pose low risk to the subjects and, therefore, with less need of analysis by ethical review committees. This assessment is inadequate.

In all scientific studies there are ethical dilemmas. In the social sciences they adopt different forms manifested in the interrogations about what to prioritize at the moment of selecting a topic of investigation, in which way to be carried out, what to publish, considering furthermore the relevance of the problem for the community.

On that note, one should question everything from the research design, evaluating the method and the techniques that are used in the pursuit of the objectives, to the impacts of the study for the scientific and social community. Therefore, the interpretation of the information obtained is of utmost importance since, depending on that, one can or cannot apply policies of social intervention that have an impact on the life of the people.

It is interesting to emphasize that the dissemination of information has frequently been a topic of great interest and ethical debate, since it involves confidentiality but also there is need to publish and disseminate. It is a matter of determining how to recognize the work and the contributions of others, the intellectual honesty and the responsibility that the results of the study are utilized in order to better society (in our case, for example, in the formulation of public policies in distinct sectors).

This chapter addresses the ethics of social research, that is to say, that which utilizes the methodology of the social sciences.

Subsequently it succinctly presents the types of social investigation and their different methods, then it takes on the ethical aspects that denounce the social studies, as well as, the products of said investigations.

Types of social investigation (1)

1. Studies that utilize quantitative method

The quantitative method works under the assumption that the relationships between a series of variables represent the reality, independently of individuals. This has allowed to determine a series of factors that influence the phenomena, in an overall context, in what

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subsequently will be general and replicable patterns that will constitute social theories, or simply will verify those that already exist (2).

Likewise, among the conditions of the quantitative method are found criteria of representation, validity, control of the situation, the investigator as expert, orchestration of behavior, sampling, and the criteria that permit to objectify behavioral research.

Under these assumptions and quantitative criteria, the studies gather information of the reality by means of polls and surveys generally, it is said information highly standardized and that can be analyzed by statistical methods.

One of the fundamental characteristics of the quantitative method which makes it highly desirable for hard science investigations is that it maximizes the control of biases by means of the control and selection of variables. One of its limits is that the size of sample should be sufficiently large in order to obtain valid conclusions. Furthermore, it excludes some aspects of the reality of difficult quantitative expression.

Studies of intervention: These are quantitative experimental studies that select subjects according to the variables in study. They consist in comparing two types of subjects: those that are experimental, exposed to the factor in study, and the controls, identical or very similar to the experimental group in all variables, except in the one to be studied. The assignment to the group can be randomized or not. They permit to evaluate the utility of the intervention, independently of other factors which could be interposed, quantifying the differences between the two groups.

The study is denominated quasi-experimental when there is no assurance of equivalence between the control group and the experimental group.

Observational Studies: The studied reality is not manipulated, rather the exposition to specific factors by the subjects is observed. The possible uncontrolled differences between the groups are minimized by means of diverse methodological approximations which include the use of statistical models. Causal inferences of the observed phenomena are studied. In order to achieve objectivity, prescribed rules are sought searching for agreements among the observers to unify the collection of data, so that the same numerical values are assigned to objects and collections of objects.

Descriptive Studies: These permit to know the state of the study of a problem and to represent it in a temporary determined moment, but they do not establish causal inferences since they lack the criteria of temporality. There are two types: transversals and ecologicals. The former generally use the survey as methodology, in which the most important thing is the correct elaboration of questions, as much in quantity as in quality. Samples of the population are selected to find the incidence, distribution and relative interrelations among social and psychological variables. Additionally, findings can be achieved through personal structured interviews, that is to say, by means of questions whose sequence and composition are fixed. In the ecological studies the unit of analysis is a group rather than an individual.

Systematic reviews: They try to compile and analyze all the available information in all the biomedical or psychosocial literature about a given problem. The collected data can be analyzed with statistical methods. They are called meta analysis when, with statistical methods, results from different publications are analyzed in a joint form.

2. Studies that use the qualitative method

The qualitative method is based in the assumption that reality is constructed socially by their individuals and by the meaning they give to it, which allows to create a social order. Precisely in the qualitative analysis, one expects comprehension of the problem of investigation in inductive form, through their own actors, with interpretive singularity and flexibility of approaches, without delimiting reality, rather better situating it in a particular context (2).

Another important aspect of the qualitative investigation is the reflexive position, that is to say, the investigator and the object of study are affected and both are part of the process of investigation, they are not considered as independents (3), but they are social actors that create the process of investigation from interpretation, in a historical and social context which includes race, sex, class, etc (4,5).

Additionally, the qualitative focus has critical and reversible capacity. Critical, given that it is not a matter of rigid sequence: the investigation is a process of construction; and reversible, since the methodological sequence is enriched throughout the same process (6).

In this way, the investigations with this methodological focus are characterized by gathering information based on social discourse, for which mainly techniques of recollection of information are used; such as observation, questionnaires, interviews, focus groups and analysis and review of existing data.

The purposes of this methodological strategy are to develop hypotheses and look for supplying the deficiencies of the quantitative studies by complementing them. However, the qualitative studies are more difficult to systemize due to the nature of the information.

Observational qualitative studies: A phenomenon is observed without directly interfering with it. Generally, specialized personnel are needed, in anthropology for example. There are various levels: total observation, observation as a participant, participant as observer and totally participant. There are difficulties when one is totally an observer, one can have poor interpretations of social phenomena that occur; and when one is totally a participant one loses the detachment which allows the analysis of the situation.

Qualitative interviews: They enjoy great flexibility in obtaining information. They can be more or less structured according to the object of study. Non-structured interviews are

called interviews in depth and they are addressed to a much reduced number of people with the purpose of obtaining the maximum possible of details about a topic. The way questions are made is flexible and open.

Group interviews or focus groups: In the former one looks to generate a debate in the selected population about a specific topic; in the focus group on the other hand, one looks to expound upon a specific topic. Both serve to determine how and why people reflect in a determined manner. A moderator who guides the discussion in an open and free way is needed.

QUANTITATIVE STUDIES	Intervention	Observation (surveys, interviews)	Description	Literature Review
QUALITATIVE STUDIES	Observation	Individual Interview	Group Interview	Literature Review

Ethical Aspects of Social Investigations

All research that involucrate human beings assumes risks for the people who participate in it. This is valid for all types of investigation, including those realized in the social sciences. Social investigation is of a lower or minimal physical risk, therefore emphasis is placed on confidentiality of information, especially in studies linked to stigmatized behaviors such as delinquency, homosexuality, drug use or mental illness.

The classic examples of risk in social investigations are the studies of maltreatment, which imply putting the persons that give a testimony in a situation that makes them to revive traumatic moments of their life, almost all the times without procuring the necessary help since what they are doing is an investigation and not an intervention. Many times, such evocations unleash perturbations (depressive or other types) in their mental health and expectations of help or attention that are not covered.

Some risks in social investigations are:

- Revelation of purveyed information can put the subject at risk of criminal or civil liability, or damage to their economic condition, employment or reputation.
- Actual or potential breach of confidentiality
- Violation of privacy, even when confidentiality is assured
- Validation of inappropriate or undesirable behaviors, possibly based on misunderstanding the intention of the investigator
- Presentation of results in a form that does not respect the interests of the subjects
- Possible damage to individuals that do not participate directly in the investigation, but from whom information is obtained indirectly or that the belong to the class or group from which subjects are selected.
- Damage to the dignity, image or innocence of the subject, as result of indiscrete or inappropriate questions for the age in interviews or questionnaires.

Informed consent: Social investigations also require informed consent. Before initiating the study the investigator and the subject should create an agreement that clarifies the obligations and responsibilities for of each of them. The nature of the investigation must be carefully explained. The subject should express his/her acceptance of tolerating deceit and inconvenience and the investigator must guarantee the safeguard of confidentiality and the welfare of the participant. Subjects must be made feel that they can abandon the study at any moment, without any penalization or repercussion.

Some of the inconveniences of the informed consent can be: to cause depression, anguish or fear in the patient, abandonment of attention, that the patient seeks to be attended by doctors that present more optimistic information or with less professionalism, that is to say, there could be false or alarming information, that would be directed to promote a diagnostic procedure or an unnecessary or excessively risky therapy, or the denial of a patient for economic reasons (7).

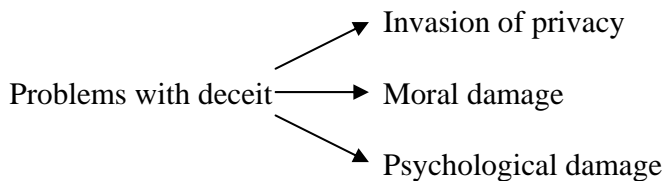
Observational investigation without informed consent: Observational investigation often functions without the knowledge or consent of the studied individuals (problem with the invasion of privacy). Observation without informed consent is only justified if: a) The investigation consists solely of observations of behavior without the possibility of identifying individual subjects, b) the observations are made in a public place or c) the information obtained is sufficiently important for science or public health and there is no other methodology that could be used to obtain the information.

The use of deceit (8): The use of deceit in social investigations represents an ethical problem, since the subject cannot use appropriately informed consent.

One of the most notorious studies that used deceit was conducted by the social psychologist Stanley Milgram (9), who recruited subjects for an apprenticeship experiment. He told the volunteers that they would be teachers and others would be apprentices; the first were in charge of teaching a list of words to the others. To the teachers it was indicated to administer electric shocks with a growing grade of pain each time the apprentice committed an error. However, the real purpose of the experiment was not to study the apprentice, but obedience to authority. Milgram was very interested in knowing if the statements of Nazi war criminals bear some truth, who declared to have committed atrocities due to obeying the orders their superiors gave. Without the participating subjects knowing it, all of them really functioned as “teachers.”

The apprentices were accomplices of the experimenter that feigned being randomly selected subjects. Furthermore, in reality they were never given electric shocks: teachers were deceived so that they believed that the yells of pain of the apprentices and their pleas for help were real. When they were indicated to increase the severity of the shocks, some of the participants doubted, however, when the experimenter told them to continue, they continued. Even they continue giving shocks of pain to the apprentices past the point when they asked to be freed from the experiment. Many of the subjects obeyed the experimenter without questioning and none left the laboratory disgusted or protesting.

The notable obedience was verified again and again in different universities where the experiment was repeated. This created a public anger, centered on the uneasiness and psychological damage that the deceit may have caused to the participants in the study. However, Milgram completed various monitoring studies with the subjects and did not find negative effects. At the end of each experimental session the deceit was revealed to participants and they were introduced to the apprentice to demonstrate that they had not received dangerous electric shocks. Due to this and other similar experiments the ethic of deceit was placed under question.



In general, deceit may be accepted in social investigations when these three conditions are simultaneously present:

- If it is demonstrated that another method cannot be used to achieve the objectives.
- If the investigation will produce significant advances
- If to reveal the information would cause a reasonable person to refuse to participate.

In the research protocol it is necessary to explain how the subjects will be informed of the deceit once the investigation concludes and the possibility of refusing to be included should be offered. In the case of concealment, the consent not to know certain objectives of the investigation until it finished should be requested. Some authors justify deceit in social investigation if it is the only way to obtain information, since another method would cause shame, disturbance, defensive attitude or fear of reprisal in the people (10). Also it has been justified for its significant contribution to the social science field (11).

The North American Psychological Association (APA)* has a normative for the use of deceit in investigation which states:

- Psychologists will not conduct studies that involve risk unless it has been determined that their use is justified for scientific or educational or application value, and that there are no other adequate alternative methods.
- Psychologists will never deceive participants in aspects that affect their will to participate, such as physical risks or undesirable emotional experiences.
- Any other deceit that has an integral part in the design of the study should be explained to the participants as soon as it is feasible. Preferably, at the end of their participations and not after the investigation has been completed.

Investigators should apply a cost-benefit analysis, consider possible alternatives, explain the nature of the deceit at the completion of the study or justify their not informing.

In consequence the ethical review committees should consider in social science research:

- The social value and the scientific validity of the investigation.

- The efficacy of alternative methods
- The assurance that the deceit does not signify an influence on the will to participate.
- The possibility of damage and the possibility of avoiding the damage by revealing the deceit at the end of the study.
- The potential that the deceit has to invade privacy in an inappropriate and undesirable way.

One crucial consideration is to evaluate the moral damage caused to the subjects by having been deceived. Intentionally lying is a deliberate form of assault on a person as it is physical violence; both can be used to coerce and make persons act against their will (12). Deceit manipulates the beliefs and decisions of the subjects and also responds to the situations; fundamentally, it does not respect the subject and therefore damages them morally. The subject is used as a means to the ends of the investigator, not as a free being capable of making decisions.

Therefore, in the analysis of balancing risks it is crucial to also include the moral damage exercised in lying to a person. The damage caused by deceit can be unfixable by revealing to the subject that they have been deceived, since they can feel that their privacy has been invaded.

One does moral damage to a subject by inducing them to act against their will and by invading the intimacy of their emotions and the way they behave. Subjects can feel ashamed, guilty or anxious by the way they act in the study and can also feel used as means by the investigator. Moreover, they may feel no trust to social research, and scientific research in general, which could be spread to other people once is known the practice of deceit. Most social psychology research is conducted with students in related specific majors and these, as part of their formation, see that their teacher- who supposedly should be a role model- deceives them. (13); this may influence the subsequent behavior of the students. Also there is risk of coercion to the students, by making them to participate as part of a requirements for a course (14).

In absence of benefit, the potential damage, although minimal, would be greater than the benefit for the subject.

Breach of confidentiality: There are investigations that obtain personal or sensitive patient information, through medical records or from the doctors; this represents a problem of breach of confidentiality.

The United States National Institute of Health grants certificates of confidentiality for some investigations which involve private or sensitive information that may lead to stigmatization or discrimination, in order to protect the investigators and the institutions from the pressure to reveal information from participating subjects (15).

The topics considered sensitive are the following:

- Information related to sexual attitudes, preferences or practices.

- Information related to the use of alcohol, drugs or other addictive substances.
- Information related to illegal behavior
- Information that, if revealed, could damage people in terms of their financial status, their capacity to pursue employment or their reputation in the community
- Information that normally would be registered in medical records and whose revelation could lead to stigmatization or discrimination
- Information related to the psychological wellbeing or mental health of the individual
- Genetic information.

Psychological damage and/or damage to personal or group reputation: It is a risk factor to expose participants to situations that may damage them or diminish their self esteem or position in their group or community. Clear examples of this are the generation of expectations, the stigmatization due to the presentation of results, subjection to situations of stress in front of others, or being made to recall painful life events, such as cases of abuse.

Absence of compensation for participants: It is also ethically suspect to deny their benefits to participants. This aspect includes, in the first place, to give an informative recap about the participation to the subjects and to inform the participants of the results of the investigation, matters that are not done very often. Also it is necessary to mention cases in which the results of a study are used to formulate public policies that would not cover those who gave the information.

In this section about the ethical aspects of social investigation, the importance that investigators should have access to rigorous ethical review of their work during the entire process of their study remains clear, including even the moment of publication and presentation of results.

Finally, a series of ethical considerations are briefly presented about the work of the investigation as a product (articles, meetings, etc) with the goal of making a critical reflection about the topic.

1. Articles of publication. The products of the investigation should reveal the main findings of the process of study. They should be coherent with the objectives of the investigation and in general, support new ideas, or rather, generate knowledge in the area of study. The importance of producing different manuscripts is based in getting know in an original and extensive manner all the main results of the completed study. In this way, information should not be duplicated. Unfortunately on occasion, articles are duplicated, being only differences in style of writing, type of scientific magazine, or the order of authors and coauthors. Aspects that damage the development of knowledge and research (7).
2. Clear criteria for the participation of the coauthors. In practice, certain relativity is still observed in the decision to be coauthors. There are some criteria that can regulate this aspect, like the participation in almost all the

phases of the investigation and the level of knowledge about an expert-topic (7). However, at the interior of these criteria there also exists much conceptual confusion, for example, in the expertise of the investigator.

3. Products of a conference. The information presented in a written or oral manner should be ad hoc to the forum that should be well selected as well. That is to say, the election of the conference should be in agreement with the information of the investigation. Similarly as the articles, information cannot be the same presented in many “forums” (7). The idea is to generate knowledge; this is the reason for investigating.

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