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Social science research ethics

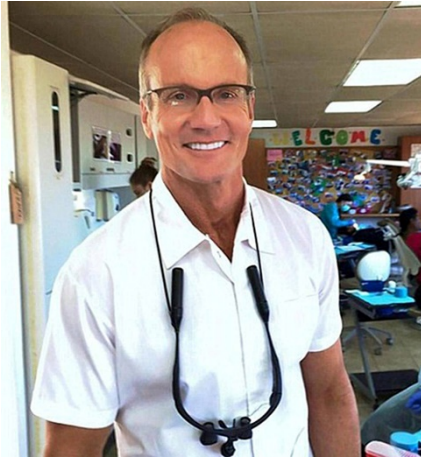
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University of Cambridge

Outline of the session

1. What is ethics?
2. Introduction to research ethics
3. Principles of ethical research (from the ESRC)
 1. Maximising benefits while minimising harm
 2. Respecting rights and dignity
 3. Voluntary and informed participation
 4. Integrity and transparency
 5. Clear responsibility and accountability
 6. Independence and avoidance of conflict of interest
4. Case study examples



What is ethics?



- A case study in environmental ethics
- Is it ok to shoot a lion?
- Money goes to conservation – greater good served
- Appropriate under consequentialism
- But is it just wrong to shoot a lion, regardless of wider impacts? Do the ends justify the means?
- Perhaps not appropriate under duty ethic framework
- Also – can we be sure greater good is served? Depends on how the funds are used



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Global Challenges Research Fund

Social research ethics

- All research should be conducted in line with ethical standards
- This is a moral duty of researchers
- It can also help to improve the quality of research data
- Social research comes with a set of particularly complex ethical issues. E.g.:
 - Can we always get informed consent?
 - What if research reveals illegal behaviour?
 - Is it ok to pay people to participate?
- Several basic principles can be applied
<https://esrc.ukri.org/funding/guidance-for-applicants/research-ethics/our-core-principles/>



1: Maximise benefits, minimise harms

- Where possible, research should aim to provide benefits to respondents and/or wider society
- Findings should be shared with respondents
- Recommendations made to decision makers identifying opportunities for positive change
- BUT: It is important not to exaggerate the potential for change as the result of research – it rarely happens!
- There are also various ways in which research can cause harm, which should be minimised
- Principle aim is to *do no harm* (if possible)



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1: Maximise benefits, minimise harms

- Physical harm
 - Working in dangerous places
 - Putting others in danger (e.g. reporting illegal activity?)
- Harm to psychological wellbeing
 - Stress caused by insensitive interactions
 - Deception, breaching confidentiality, breaching privacy
 - Wasting respondents time – extractive research
 - Need to be particularly careful with vulnerable participants
- Harm caused by failure to work within legal framework
 - Data protection, research permit process, etc.
- Harm to integrity of research in general



2: Respecting rights and dignity

- The “rights, dignity, interests, values and (where possible) the autonomy of research participants (including individuals, groups and communities) should be respected” (ESRC website)
- A process should be in place for receiving and dealing with any complaints in a fair manner



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3: Participation should be voluntary and informed

- Where possible, data should only be collected with:
 - Free (they are not compelled and feel able to say no)
 - Prior (they know before you start collecting data)
 - Informed (they know what you will do with them and data)
 - Consent (they give you approval to proceed) (**FPIC**)
- This might not always be possible. Whether such research is ethical is a judgement call based on the context
- It is important to consider confidentiality and anonymity as part of this process



3: Participation should be voluntary and informed

- Confidentiality is about how private information is managed and used
- Anonymity is a mechanism to protect confidentiality by making it impossible to connect data to an individual
- Easy to offer – hard to do! Removing names alone may not be enough – pseudo-anonymity
- Anonymity can severely limit what you can do
- In some cases people may wish to be identifiable
- Those speaking from a position of public office are not generally given anonymity



4: Integrity and transparency

- There should be a clear process in place for ensuring that research is conducted ethically at all stages
- This should include an ethical review process in which the researcher has to identify potential ethical issues and address them
- Research should only be permitted to go ahead if this is satisfactory
- This is a condition of most funding bodies (including GCRF) and for publication in most journals
- Does your institution have an ethical review process?



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5: Clear lines of responsibility and accountability

- It should be clear who is responsible for ensuring compliance with ethical principles
- Sometimes involves audits to check what is happening
- Responsibility of the researcher to update their ethics process if they change their research approach / methods at some stage



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6: Independence and avoiding conflict of interest

- Where possible research should not be influenced by personal, political or organisational interests
- E.g. funding from a corporation with a stake in the research topic
- Where there are conflicts of interest they should be disclosed openly and managed



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Case study 1:

- You are working in a site that has been studied many times previously by social scientists and respondents expect to be paid for their participation
- You are worried that payment will distort responses and the consent process
- But without it, you might get no data at all!
- What do you do?



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Case study 2:

- During an interview a respondent reveals to you that they are personally involved in illegal activity involving trade in an endangered species
- The respondent had given you consent to interview them and to use the data for your research
- You know that if you report the illegal behaviour the respondent is likely to be arrested
- You also know that if you don't do this the threatened species may go extinct
- What do you do?



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Case study 3:

- You are conducting research on an organisation that you have previously worked for. This involves observing meetings and other processes in order to understand how the organisation functions
- In the process of conducting the work people tell you things that are potentially harmful to the organisation. You have their consent, but you are worried they wouldn't have told you if it weren't for your existing relationship with them as a former colleague
- What do you do?



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Conclusions

- Conducting research in line with ethical standards is essential for social science scholarship
- There are various principles that should be followed
- Organisations should have a clear process in place to ensure compliance (but this is not always the case)
- It is not always clear cut. There can be difficult dilemmas and the need to exercise judgement. It is key to be reflexive and discuss concerns with others
- Overall, being an ethical researcher is the right thing to do *and* makes your work better



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