

# Ethics in Quantitative and Qualitative Research

## Context for Thinking about Ethics

It is expected that all ethical issues be resolved before research begins. Students living in particular regions should consult their country's guidelines. One example is the U.S. American Psychological Association (APA) guidelines, available from [www.apa.org](http://www.apa.org).

Many of the same ethical considerations apply to both experimental and nonexperimental research. I will discuss ethical issues critical to running experiments in Chapter 10. The issues discussed in this chapter are important for qualitative research and also apply to quantitative nonexperimental research.

## Discuss Ethical Considerations in Qualitative Research

Jane Lewis (2003) identifies four ethical concerns relevant to the unstructured features of qualitative research.

1. **Informed consent** from all participants is required.
2. **Anonymity** and **confidentiality** are guaranteed.
3. Participants are protected from potential harm.
4. Researchers are protected from potential harm.

I add three ethical issues specific to observation studies.

- a. Psychologists using participant-observation may not want participants to know about the study. This means that careful thought must go into the planning stages. Bill Gillham (2008) writes that the debate is complicated because of the difference between **covert observations** (people do not know they are being observed) and **overt observations** (people know they are being observed). In addition, some observations take place in open settings (public places) and some take place in closed settings (such as a classroom). Considering the ethics of an observation study requires knowledge of all four (covert, overt, open, closed). For example, a study could be overt and in a closed setting, such as Ehrmin's (2002). Or a study could be covert and in a closed setting, such as Rosenhan's (1973). The way a study is set up drives the discussion about getting or not getting informed consent.
- b. Gillham (2008) asks the question who owns the observations? Do participants in **ethnography** have the right to go back and challenge what is recorded and how their behavior is interpreted?
- c. Neuman (2006) raises two other ethical concerns for participant-observation studies. These are involvement with deviants and problems with "the powerful."

Let's examine these ethical issues one at a time, starting with informed consent. Generally, an **informed consent** form should include the following (APA, 2002; Lewis, 2003):

1. Purpose of the study
2. Everything the participant is required to do
3. Potential risks and benefits from participation
4. Any situation where participants might be identified or quoted
5. Voluntary participation
6. Any anticipated factors that might influence a person's decision to participate
7. Any possible consequences of leaving the study before its end
8. Any inducements for participation (such as payment)
9. How the data will be used
10. How to contact someone to find out the results of the study
11. Permission from parents for minors

The informed consent form should include a statement that data are **confidential** and the identity of the person is **anonymous**. Confidential

data include data from all stages of the study, including data collection and storage. The informed consent form should outline any conditions in which anonymity or confidentiality might not be honored. For example, if a participant in an interview reveals something potentially damaging, such as a plan to harm another person, should the researcher keep this confidential? One solution is to outline any conditions in which the person will not remain anonymous or the data will not remain confidential in the informed consent form.

The participant should be informed in the consent form of all expectations for the study, including any **potential harm**. Participants should feel comfortable with all aspects of the study and understand that they may withdraw at any time. Lewis (2003) says that interview research requires particular consideration. For example, a person may seem comfortable during the interview but later have regrets about revealing sensitive and/or personal information. Participants should have the opportunity to withdraw anything in the interview that makes them uncomfortable. In addition, participants may reveal something that is potentially harmful to themselves in interviews. Lewis recommends that an interviewer respond to these comments by encouraging the participant to seek appropriate help. If no disclaimer is made in the informed consent form, this is all an interviewer can do. Disclaimers protect both the researcher and the participant.

Fieldwork is potentially dangerous to the researcher, so it is important to consider **potential harm** again. Lewis (2003) recommends that if the study takes place in a public place, the researcher should have clear directions to the site and a clear plan for quickly leaving if necessary. If the study takes place in a private place, such as an interview in an individual's home, others should know where the researcher is at all times and when he or she is expected to return. Researchers should plan a strategy in advance for possible angry feelings that might be displayed during an interview. The researcher should respond to anger with empathy and perhaps move on to another question but must also know when to end the interview. Neuman (2006) adds that the researcher should not dress and act too much as an outsider, should create a safety zone of comfortable companions when conducting field research, and should perhaps even find a protector if the field research is in a dangerous place.

Participant-observation studies present some special ethical concerns. First, it might not be possible to get the informed consent of everyone observed. Participants may be those who come in and out of a courtyard over the course of a day. In addition, since one goal of participant-observation is to view people in their natural setting, getting informed consent can interfere with the study. For example, when Rosenhan (1973) conducted his participant-observation study, he decided not to tell the hospitals, con-

cerned that if they knew he was checking up on them, the staff would alter their normal behavior. Rosenhan's participant-observation study used **covert observation**. This is a contentious point. Some feel that conducting observation studies without the consent of participants is ethical as long as the researcher does not manipulate anything in the environment and participants cannot be identified in the report. Others feel that the deception is difficult to justify. Coolican (2004) points out that after participant-observers disclose and tell others about the study, many people cannot recall what they said, when they said it, and what they did during the project. Thus, some participants cannot withdraw their data even if they wish to do so. Researchers using participant-observation often conduct **overt observation**. In this case, the consent of participants is required. Ehrmin's (2002) study of women recovering from addictions used overt observation, and she had consent. Ehrmin also had to pay close attention to the anonymity and confidentiality rule, as some of her participants had broken the law. In contrast, Rosenhan (1973) used covert observation, and he did not get informed consent for the first part of his study. He had consent to conduct follow-up research but used deception, as he did not send any pseudopatients to the hospitals, even though he said he would.

Gillham (2008) writes that researchers must consider **who owns the observations**. For example, if the ownership is a partnership between the researcher and the observed group, then it is important to check out the quality of the observations and interpretations with some group members. Then participants have the right to challenge selections for recordings and the interpretations. Viewing the participants as partners in ownership strengthens the **credibility** and validity of the study.

One thing Ehrmin (2002) encountered was the ethical issue of observing and interviewing participants who had broken the law, what Neuman (2006) calls "**involvement with deviants**" (p. 413). Of the twelve women Ehrmin interviewed, eight used crack, one used cocaine, one used heroin, and one used combinations of alcohol and cocaine. In addition, these women may have had knowledge about crimes. Thus, the interviewees had broken the law and Ehrmin knew about it. Neuman writes that there are special considerations for researchers studying people who engage in illegal, immoral, or unethical activity. These researchers might know about illegal activity, might have information of interest to the police, and sometimes might engage in illegal activity in order to gain access to the study group. Neuman (2006) calls this having "**guilty knowledge**" (p. 413). The researcher has to balance gaining participant trust with keeping enough distance so that the researcher does not violate personal moral standards.

Last, Neuman (2006) discusses "**the powerful**." Many qualitative studies are done on those without power, such as Rosenthal's (1993) study of

data include data from all stages of the study, including data collection and storage. The informed consent form should outline any conditions in which anonymity or confidentiality might not be honored. For example, if a participant in an interview reveals something potentially damaging, such as a plan to harm another person, should the researcher keep this confidential? One solution is to outline any conditions in which the person will not remain anonymous or the data will not remain confidential in the informed consent form.

The participant should be informed in the consent form of all expectations for the study, including any **potential harm**. Participants should feel comfortable with all aspects of the study and understand that they may withdraw at any time. Lewis (2003) says that interview research requires particular consideration. For example, a person may seem comfortable during the interview but later have regrets about revealing sensitive and/or personal information. Participants should have the opportunity to withdraw anything in the interview that makes them uncomfortable. In addition, participants may reveal something that is potentially harmful to themselves in interviews. Lewis recommends that an interviewer respond to these comments by encouraging the participant to seek appropriate help. If no disclaimer is made in the informed consent form, this is all an interviewer can do. Disclaimers protect both the researcher and the participant.

Fieldwork is potentially dangerous to the researcher, so it is important to consider **potential harm** again. Lewis (2003) recommends that if the study takes place in a public place, the researcher should have clear directions to the site and a clear plan for quickly leaving if necessary. If the study takes place in a private place, such as an interview in an individual's home, others should know where the researcher is at all times and when he or she is expected to return. Researchers should plan a strategy in advance for possible angry feelings that might be displayed during an interview. The researcher should respond to anger with empathy and perhaps move on to another question but must also know when to end the interview. Neuman (2006) adds that the researcher should not dress and act too much as an outsider, should create a safety zone of comfortable companions when conducting field research, and should perhaps even find a protector if the field research is in a dangerous place.

Participant-observation studies present some special ethical concerns. First, it might not be possible to get the informed consent of everyone observed. Participants may be those who come in and out of a courtyard over the course of a day. In addition, since one goal of participant-observation is to view people in their natural setting, getting informed consent can interfere with the study. For example, when Rosenhan (1973) conducted his participant-observation study, he decided not to tell the hospitals, con-

cerned that if they knew he was checking up on them, the staff would alter their normal behavior. Rosenhan's participant-observation study used **covert observation**. This is a contentious point. Some feel that conducting observation studies without the consent of participants is ethical as long as the researcher does not manipulate anything in the environment and participants cannot be identified in the report. Others feel that the deception is difficult to justify. Coolican (2004) points out that after participant-observers disclose and tell others about the study, many people cannot recall what they said, when they said it, and what they did during the project. Thus, some participants cannot withdraw their data even if they wish to do so. Researchers using participant-observation often conduct **overt observation**. In this case, the consent of participants is required. Ehrmin's (2002) study of women recovering from addictions used overt observation, and she had consent. Ehrmin also had to pay close attention to the anonymity and confidentiality rule, as some of her participants had broken the law. In contrast, Rosenhan (1973) used covert observation, and he did not get informed consent for the first part of his study. He had consent to conduct follow-up research but used deception, as he did not send any pseudopatients to the hospitals, even though he said he would.

Gillham (2008) writes that researchers must consider **who owns the observations**. For example, if the ownership is a partnership between the researcher and the observed group, then it is important to check out the quality of the observations and interpretations with some group members. Then participants have the right to challenge selections for recordings and the interpretations. Viewing the participants as partners in ownership strengthens the **credibility** and validity of the study.

One thing Ehrmin (2002) encountered was the ethical issue of observing and interviewing participants who had broken the law, what Neuman (2006) calls "**involvement with deviants**" (p. 413). Of the twelve women Ehrmin interviewed, eight used crack, one used cocaine, one used heroin, and one used combinations of alcohol and cocaine. In addition, these women may have had knowledge about crimes. Thus, the interviewees had broken the law and Ehrmin knew about it. Neuman writes that there are special considerations for researchers studying people who engage in illegal, immoral, or unethical activity. These researchers might know about illegal activity, might have information of interest to the police, and sometimes might engage in illegal activity in order to gain access to the study group. Neuman (2006) calls this having "**guilty knowledge**" (p. 413). The researcher has to balance gaining participant trust with keeping enough distance so that the researcher does not violate personal moral standards.

Last, Neuman (2006) discusses "**the powerful**." Many qualitative studies are done on those without power, such as Rosenthal's (1993) study of

the homeless. Some qualitative studies investigate the opinions of workers with little power. Researchers sometimes encounter the "hierarchy of credibility." Such a hierarchy exists when people in powerful positions feel that they have the right to create the rules of society, such as with the homeless or in organizations. When giving a voice to groups that are not usually heard, researchers must be careful of accusations of bias from those with power. It is an ethical dilemma because the researcher wants to give specific groups a voice but must balance this intention with the knowledge that powerful persons who may have something to lose can block access to participants or even discredit the researcher.

# Triangulation

---

## Introduction to Triangulation

---

**Triangulation** is a way to make sure that there is enough evidence to make valid claims. Triangulation shows the richness and complexity of behavior by studying theories from more than one viewpoint. Psychologists have greater certainty about their findings if similar findings emerge from research using other methods, different samples, or different data sources.

Just remember that the concept of triangulation was first considered in relation to studies using quantitative methods.

*This chapter is devoted to triangulation for quantitative research, including experimentation.* The concept of triangulation is important for evaluating quantitative research, which makes up much of what students study. *Chapter 5 includes a discussion of triangulation in qualitative research.* Some unique issues arise when applying triangulation to qualitative research.

Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2000) define triangulation as "the use of two or more methods of data collection in the study of some aspect of human behavior" (p. 233). They identify six types of triangulation.

The first type is **method triangulation**. This means that a theory is investigated using a variety of experimental and nonexperimental methods. The multimethod approach stands in contrast to the single-method approaches of some historical theorists. Single-method verification is limited. The works of Freud, Skinner, and Piaget are examples. Some or even much of their work is outdated because of mistakes with single-method verification strategies (called being method bound). Freud incorrectly generalized his findings to all people from case studies of Victorian females with mental disorders. Skinner incorrectly made generalizations about complex human behavior from simple animal experiments. Piaget observed his three children and came up with a general theory of cognitive development. Modern psychology validates theory through a variety of re-

search strategies, including experiments, ethnographies, and correlation studies. Research about the causes of aggression and mental/physical health treatments are examples of topics with a lot of method triangulation. For some types of research questions, such as those asking for specific causes, psychologists believe that experiments must be done first and then the results validated through nonexperimental methods. For example, Albert Bandura (1973) writes that we cannot claim to know anything about the causes of aggression without first isolating potential causal variables in tightly controlled lab experiments. But the results of the experiments should be confirmed through other types of research, such as ethnographies studying aggression in the natural environment. Another example comes from researching the best mental and physical health treatments. Would it be ethical to give patients any treatment that has not been studied in a tightly controlled lab experiment to see if it is a valid cause of any changes that occur?

The second type is **time triangulation**. Sometimes research is gathered during one specific time period or certain topics are popular only for specific time periods. Time triangulation ensures that the time frame is not the reason for research results. Use of both **cross-sectional data** (data gathered at one time) and **longitudinal data** (data gathered over time) increases time triangulation. Examples of topics with high levels of time triangulation are aggression and language as a cognitive process.

The third type is **observer triangulation** (or investigator triangulation). Examples of topics with a high level of observer triangulation include narratives, special kinds of story that help children learn about their culture that are part of the research on language; the contributions of the MAOA gene to aggression; and the contribution of the serotonin transporter genes to depression. When research is **replicated** by an independent researcher, observer triangulation is increased.

The fourth type is **theory triangulation**. Theory triangulation is increased when two similar theories have support or when two or more theories are combined to create a more comprehensive theory. Lev Vygotsky's and Jerome Bruner's language theories are similar and are backed up by a large amount of research. The general aggression model (GAM) (Anderson & Bushman, 2002) combines social learning theory with other theories to create a more complex account of aggression.

The fifth type is **space triangulation**. If a theory is studied in only one culture, it lacks space triangulation. Culture is an important determinant of behavior. Look for cross-cultural verification of a theory. Cross-cultural psychology has made many concepts conceived and studied in the West relevant for everyone. Conformity and social identity theory are examples. Look to see if a concept has been studied cross culturally.

The sixth type is called **combined levels of triangulation**. The levels are individual, group, and the larger collective or the organizational level (called *society* in lay language). Sometimes research is incorrectly directed at only one level when the interpretation should span all levels. Social learning theory has a combined level of triangulation. For example, self-efficacy and education are studied on all three levels: individual student efficacy, teacher efficacy and its effects on the group, and the collective school level (Bandura, 1997).

Advantages of triangulation include the following:

1. Triangulation reduces experimenter bias.
2. Triangulation gives a broader and more complex causation model of behavior.
3. Triangulation reduces **method-bound theories**.
4. Triangulation reduces **culture-bound theories**, theories that are based on the observation of one culture. For example, some critics claim that the term *depression* is derived from observations of Western behavior and is not applicable to everyone.