

# 5

## Ethics in business research

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### *Chapter outline*

<b>Introduction</b>	122
<b>Ethical principles</b>	128
Harm to participants	128
Lack of informed consent	132
Invasion of privacy	136
Deception	136
<b>Other ethical and legal considerations</b>	138
Data management	139
Copyright	140
Reciprocity and trust	141
Affiliation and conflicts of interest	142
<b>The difficulties of ethical decision-making</b>	143
<b>Checklist</b>	144
<b>Key points</b>	145
<b>Questions for review</b>	145

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## Chapter outline

Ethical issues arise at a variety of stages in business and management research. This chapter is concerned with the concerns about ethics that might arise in the course of conducting research. The professional bodies concerned with the social sciences have been keen to spell out the ethical issues that can arise, and some of their statements will be reviewed in this chapter. Ethical issues cannot be ignored, in that they relate directly to the integrity of a piece of research and of the disciplines that are involved. This chapter explores:

- some famous, even infamous, cases in which transgressions of ethical principles have occurred, though it is important not to take the view that ethical concerns arise only in relation to these extreme cases;
- different stances that can be and have been taken on ethics in business research;
- the significance and operation of four areas in which ethical concerns particularly arise: whether or not harm comes to participants; **informed consent**; invasion of privacy; and deception;
- some of the difficulties associated with ethical decision-making.

## Introduction

Discussions about the ethics of business and management research bring us into a realm in which the role of values in the research process becomes a topic of concern. Ethical issues revolve around such concerns as the following:

- How should we treat the people on whom we conduct research?
- Are there activities in which we should or should not engage in our relations with them?

Questions about ethics in business and management research also bring in the role of professional associations, such as the American Academy of Management (AoM) and the Market Research Society (MRS), which have formulated codes of ethics on behalf of their members. Statements of professional principles are frequently accessible from the Internet. Some useful codes of ethics for business and management researchers can be found at the following Internet addresses:

Academy of Management (AoM), *Code of Ethical Conduct*: [www.aonline.org/governanceandethics/aomrevisedcodeofethics.pdf](http://www.aonline.org/governanceandethics/aomrevisedcodeofethics.pdf) (accessed 23 July 2010)

Association of Business Schools/British Academy of Management/Higher Education Academy: Business Management Accountancy and Finance, *Ethics Guide* (2009): [www.the-abs.org.uk/?id=560](http://www.the-abs.org.uk/?id=560) (accessed 23 July 2010)

Market Research Society (MRS), *Code of Conduct and Guidelines*:

[www.mrs.org.uk/standards/codeconduct.htm](http://www.mrs.org.uk/standards/codeconduct.htm)

(accessed 23 July 2010)

(also includes specific MRS guidelines on qualitative and quantitative research, doing Internet and employee research).

However, it is also useful to look at the way that researchers within the social sciences more generally have dealt with ethical research issues—for example, the Social Research Association (SRA), the British Sociological Association (BSA), and the American Psychological Association. In this chapter, the codes of these professional associations will also be referred to on several occasions.

Social Research Association (SRA), *Ethical Guidelines*:

[www.the-sra.org.uk/guidelines.htm](http://www.the-sra.org.uk/guidelines.htm) (accessed 23 July 2010)

British Sociological Association (BSA), *Statement of Ethical Practice*:

[www.britisoc.co.uk/equality/Statement+Ethical+Practice.htm](http://www.britisoc.co.uk/equality/Statement+Ethical+Practice.htm) (accessed 23 July 2010)

American Sociological Association (ASA), *Code of Ethics*:

[www2.asanet.org/members/ecoderev.html](http://www2.asanet.org/members/ecoderev.html) (accessed 23 July 2010)

American Psychological Association (APA), *Ethical Principles and Code of Conduct*:

[www.apa.org/ethics](http://www.apa.org/ethics) (accessed 23 July 2010)

Writings about ethics in business and other social science research are frequently frustrating for four reasons.

1. Writers often differ quite widely from each other over ethical issues and questions. In other words, they differ over what is and is not ethically acceptable.
2. The main elements in the debates do not seem to move forward a great deal. The same kinds of points that were made in the 1960s were being rehashed in the late 1990s and at the start of the present century.
3. Debates about ethics have often accompanied well-known cases of alleged ethical transgression. Some of them, such as Dalton's (1959) covert ethnography of unofficial managerial activity, will also be encountered later on in this book (see Chapter 17). One of the central issues that Dalton addresses in his study is the unofficial use of company resources, including pilfering or corporate theft (see Research in focus 5.1). There is considerable debate as to whether it was ethical to obtain such data through the method of covert observation (see Key concept 5.2). There are also
4. Related to this last point is that these extreme and notorious cases of ethical violation tend to be associated with particular research methods—notably disguised observation and the use of deception in experiments. Again, the problem with this association of ethics with certain studies (and methods) is that it implies that ethical concerns reside only or even primarily in some methods but not others. As a result, the impression can be gleaned that other methods, such as questionnaires or overt ethnography, are immune from ethical problems. Moreover, as the recent popularization of television experiments suggests (see Research in focus 5.4), disguised observation is as popular today as it was when researchers like Milgram and Zimbardo carried out their classic studies.



## Research in focus 5.1

### A covert study of unofficial rewards

One of Dalton's (1959) central themes in his study of American managers and unofficial action revolves around the use of company materials and services as supplementary rewards for the variable contributions of individuals. He presents several cases, including the Milo carpenter, Ted Berger, who was rewarded for his loyalty by not being required to operate machines, instead making such things as baby beds, tables, and rocking horses—custom-built objects for various managers—in exchange for which he was given 'gifts'. Another case concerns staff who routinely filled their car fuel tank from the company garage and with this obtained free washing and waxing. Similarly, there is the case of Jim Speier, a factory foreman, who made use of machinery and materials to have constructed a rose arch, storm windows, and a set of wooden lawn sprinklers cut in the form of dancing girls and brightly painted!

Dalton's main strategy for preventing harm to his participants is to protect their anonymity, but the reader is left in no doubt as to the seriousness of consequences for individuals concerned if their identities were to have been discovered. As Dalton explains, these individuals 'gave information and aid that, if generally known, would have jeopardized their careers' (1959: 275). One of the key ethical issues in this study concerns the lack of informed consent, as participants were in no position to be able to judge whether or not to become involved in the research, as they were only vaguely aware of the nature of Dalton's interest. Furthermore, they were almost certainly unaware of the risk of harm that could result from the study in relation to their employment prospects. In his defence, Dalton adopts a situational stance (see Key concept 5.2), arguing that it is impossible to study unofficial action, other than by using covert methods that enable the researcher to get sufficiently close to the subject. As there has been very little study of this subject, it is difficult to see how we could compare Dalton's findings with those produced using overt methods, and therefore we have little choice but to take his word for this.



## Key concept 5.2

### Stances on ethics

Authors on social research ethics can be characterized in terms of the stances they take on the issue. The following stances can be distinguished:

- *Universalism*. A universalist stance takes the view that ethical precepts should never be broken. Infractions of ethical principles are wrong in a moral sense and are damaging to social research. This kind of stance can be seen in the writings of Erikson (1967), Dingwall (1980), and Bulmer (1982). Bulmer does, however, point to some forms of what appears to be disguised observation that may be acceptable. One is retrospective covert observation, which occurs when a researcher writes up his or her experiences in social settings in which he or she participated but not as a researcher. An example would be Van Maanen (1991b), who wrote up his experiences as a ride operator in Disneyland many years after he had been employed there in vacation jobs. Even a universalist like Erikson (1967: 372) recognizes that it 'would be absurd . . . to insist as a point of ethics that sociologists should always introduce themselves as investigators everywhere they go and should inform every person who figures in their thinking exactly what their research is all about'.
- *Situation ethics*. Goode (1996) has argued for deception to be considered on a case-by-case basis. In other words, he argues for what J. Fletcher (1966: 31) has called a 'situation ethics', or more specifically 'principled relativism', which can be contrasted with the universalist ethics of some writers. This argument has two ways of being represented:
  1. *The end justifies the means*. Some writers argue that, unless there is some breaking of ethical rules, we would never know about certain social phenomena. Dalton (1959) essentially argues for this position in relation to his study of managers and the differences between official and unofficial action. Without some kind of disguised observation, this important aspect of organizational life would not have been studied. This is usually linked to the second form of a situationist argument in relation to social research ethics.
  2. *No choice*. It is often suggested that we have no choice but to engage in dissimulation on occasions if we want to investigate the issues in which we are interested.
- *Ethical transgression is pervasive*. It is often observed that virtually all research involves elements that are at least ethically questionable. This occurs whenever participants are not given absolutely all the details on a piece of research, or when there is variation in the amount of knowledge about research. Punch (1994: 91), for example, observes that 'some dissimulation is intrinsic to social life and, therefore, to fieldwork'. He quotes Gans (1962: 44) in support of this point: 'If the researcher is completely honest with people about his activities, they will try to hide actions and attitudes they consider undesirable, and so will be dishonest. Consequently, the researcher must be dishonest to get honest data.'
- *Anything goes (more or less)*. The writers associated with arguments relating to situation ethics and a recognition of the pervasiveness of ethical transgressions are not arguing for an 'anything-goes' mentality, but for a certain amount of flexibility in ethical decision-making. However, Douglas (1976) has argued that the kinds of deception in which social researchers engage are trivial compared to those perpetrated by powerful institutions in modern society (such as the mass media, the police, and industry). His book is an inventory of tactics for deceiving people so that their trust is gained and they reveal themselves to the researcher. Very few researchers subscribe to this stance. Denzin (1968) comes close to an anything-goes stance when he suggests that social researchers are entitled to study anyone in any setting provided the work has a 'scientific' purpose, does not harm participants, and does not deliberately damage the discipline. The harm-to-participants criterion can also be seen in the cases reported in Research in focus 5.3.



## Research in focus 5.3

### Two infamous studies of obedience to authority

Milgram's (1963) electric-shock experiments and Haney, Banks, and Zimbardo's (1973) prison studies have come to be seen as infamous because of the ethical issues they raise. Both studies were concerned to measure the effects of group norms on the behaviour of the individual, and they have been widely applied in the field of organizational behaviour. Milgram was concerned with the processes whereby a person can be induced to cause extreme harm to another by virtue of being ordered to do so. To investigate this issue further, he devised a laboratory experiment. Volunteers were recruited to act out the role of teachers who punished learners (who were accomplices of the experimenter) by submitting them to electric shocks when they gave incorrect answers to questions.

The shocks were not, of course, real, but the teachers/volunteers were not aware of this. The level of electric shock was gradually increased with successive incorrect answers until the teacher/volunteer refused to administer more shocks. Learners had been trained to respond to the rising level of electric shock with simulated but appropriate howls of pain. In the room was a further accomplice of Milgram's, who cajoled the teacher/volunteer to continue to administer shocks, suggesting that it was part of the study's requirements to continue and that they were not causing permanent harm, in spite of the increasingly shrill cries of pain. However, in a later adaptation of the experiment, the teacher/volunteer was accompanied by a colleague who acted out the part of someone who refused to administer the shocks beyond a certain level. In this situation, the real subject continued to administer the shocks for a shorter period and then declined as the first teacher/volunteer had done. Milgram's study demonstrates the extent to which individuals display obedience to authority even if this involves causing considerable pain to others. It also shows how peer rebellion can be a powerful means of resisting the experimenter's authority.

Experiments conducted by Zimbardo and his graduate students from the Department of Psychology at Stanford University, California, involved creating a mock prison, in order to examine the roles played by prisoners and guards. Twenty-one male participants were selected from a group of seventy-five who responded to an advertisement in a local newspaper. Individuals were selected on the basis that they were mature, emotionally stable, middle class, well educated, and had no criminal record. Each was paid \$15 per day to participate in the study. A coin was flipped in order to decide if the participant was to play the role of prisoner or guard. There were ten prisoners and eleven guards. However, only a few days into the planned fourteen-day study, the experiment took an unexpected turn. The relationship between prisoners and guards deteriorated to such an extent that guards began to subject prisoners to psychological cruelty. Within the first few days several of the prisoners had been released, suffering from severe depression and mental breakdown. Only six days into the study the experiment was abandoned owing to the extreme symptoms experienced by the prisoners. Haney, Banks, and Zimbardo's study shows that individual behaviour is determined by social and environmental conditions to a far greater extent than is commonly assumed.

Both studies raise complex ethical issues, particularly in relation to the potential harm incurred by participants as a result of the experiments. It is worth noting that both studies were conducted over forty years ago, and it is extremely unlikely that either would be considered acceptable to a university human subjects committee or indeed to most social researchers today. However, in 2006 Burger (2009) conducted what he refers to as a 'partial replication' of the Milgram experiment. Burger hypothesized that there would be little or no difference between Milgram's findings and his own some forty-five years later. The replication is 'partial' for several reasons such as: participants did not proceed beyond the lowest simulated voltage level that Milgram used (150 volts; 79 per cent of Milgram's teachers went beyond this point); participants were intensively screened for emotional and psychological problems and excluded if there was evidence of such problems; people who had studied some psychology were excluded (because the Milgram studies are so well known); and participants of all adult ages were included, rather than up to the age of 50, as in the original studies. Burger also reckons that his sample was more ethnically diverse than Milgram's would have been. The replication had to be partial because, as Burger puts it, 'current standards for the ethical treatment of participants clearly place Milgram's studies out of bounds' (Burger 2009: 2). Burger found that the propensity for obedience was only slightly lower than forty-five years previously, though, as Miller (2009) observes, the adjustments Burger had to make probably render comparisons with Milgram's findings questionable.

Researchers' ethical qualms do not extend to television, however. In March 2010, newspapers reported a French documentary based on a supposed game show called Game of Death and broadcast on prime-time television. Eighty contestants signed contracts agreeing to inflict electric shocks on other participants. Shocks were administered when the other contestant failed to answer a question correctly. The shocks continued up to the highest voltage with the contestants being egged on by an audience and a presenter. Only sixteen contestants stopped before administering the highest shock level, which would have been fatal. As in the Milgram experiment, the participants receiving the shocks were actors who simulated howls of agony and the shocks themselves were, of course, also fake. An account of this programme, which refers to Milgram, can be found at: [news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/8573755.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/8573755.stm) (accessed 18 March 2010)

Also, the following is a CNN news item on the programme, which includes some brief footage as well as a brief commentary from Burger, who carried out the aforementioned partial replication: [www.cnn.com/video/data/2.0/video/bestoftv/2010/03/17/cb.game.show.death.cnn.html](http://www.cnn.com/video/data/2.0/video/bestoftv/2010/03/17/cb.game.show.death.cnn.html) (accessed 18 March 2010)



## Tips and skills

### Ethics committees

In addition to needing to be familiar with the codes of practice produced by several professional associations such as the Academy of Management, the Market Research Society, and the Social Research Association, you should be acquainted with the ethical guidelines of your university or college. Most higher education organizations have ethics committees that issue guidelines about ethical practice. These guidelines are often based on or influenced by the codes developed by professional associations. Universities' and colleges' guidelines will provide indications of what are considered ethically unacceptable practices. Sometimes, you will need to submit your proposed research to an ethics committee of your university or college. As part of this you may need to complete a form to show that you have considered potential ethical issues that might arise from your study (see Tips and skills 'A sample university ethics form'). Ethical guidelines and ethics committees are there to protect research participants, but they are also involved in protecting researchers and institutions from the possibility of adverse publicity or legal action being taken against them.



## Tips and skills

### A sample university ethics form

This form is intended to help researchers consider the ethical implications of research activity. Researchers are responsible for deciding, guided by University guidelines and professional disciplinary standards, whether a more extensive review is necessary.

Title of study:

Names of investigators:

Yes No (please tick)

1. Is the study funded (if yes, name the source)?
2. Is the research compromised by the source of funding?
3. Are there potential conflicts of interest in the financial or organizational arrangements?

- |   | Yes                      | No (please tick)         |
|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 4. Will confidentiality be maintained appropriately at all stages of enquiry: at collection, storage, analysis, and reporting?  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 5. Will human rights and dignities be actively respected?   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 6. Will highly personal, intimate, or other private or confidential information be sought?  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 7. Will there be any harm, discomfort, physical, or psychological risks?  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 8. Will participants be involved whose ability to give informed voluntary consent may be limited?   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 9. Will the study involve obtaining or processing personal data relating to living individuals (e.g. recording interviews with subjects even if the findings will subsequently be made anonymous)? ( <i>Note: if the answer to this question is 'yes' you will need to ensure that the provisions of the Data Protection Act (1988) are complied with. In particular you will need to ensure that subjects provide sufficient consent and that personal data will be properly stored for an appropriate period of time.</i> ) | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 10. Please provide a paragraph explaining any additional ethical issues that are relevant to the study. If none, explain why.   |                          |                          |

I confirm that the ethical issues pertaining to this study have been fully considered.

Signed (lead investigator): \_\_\_\_\_ Date:

On behalf of University Research Ethics Committee: \_\_\_\_\_ Date:



## Research in focus 5.4

### Ethical issues in the television series *The Experiment*

The BBC television series *The Experiment* (2002) was devised with the assistance of two British social psychologists, Professor Steve Haslam and Dr Steve Reicher. The aim was to create a laboratory experiment that replicated the prison experiments conducted by Zimbardo in 1971 (see Research in focus 5.3). Researchers and television producers were forced to confront a series of challenging ethical issues relating to the televising of the research. As Haslam and Reicher explained, 'problems stemmed from the difficulty of getting people to be fully aware of the consequences of being on television. For instance, there are many behaviours which are perfectly fair in the context of one relationship but which violate the norms of a different relationship. Where one puts the two together, it can be deeply embarrassing. For instance, would a teacher want their behaviour with their parents or their children to be shown to their students?' There were also difficulties related to media representations. 'There were many cases when papers misreported what one participant had said (or what we had said) and such comment had the capacity to cause concern to other participants.' However, the biggest ethical problem, according to the researchers, was 'What happens when participants do things they genuinely regret—or else learn things about themselves they would rather not know—and these are then broadcast widely?' Their 'solution was to try to involve the participants in the analysis so that they could agree that the resultant account was truthful, fair and had analytic integrity'. Clinical psychologists were involved in the selection of participants, alerting them to potential risks and assessing their ability to cope with them, and they were also available to talk through the concerns of research participants during the project. The study was overseen by an ethics committee that included a Holocaust survivor, a member of the Howard League, and an MP.

Despite the precautions taken, the decision was made to terminate the project earlier than expected because of concerns that participants' emotional and physical well-being was in danger of being compromised. The BBC was forced to delay transmission of the series when participants expressed concerns that they had been made to look stupid and psychologists voiced concerns that the scientific integrity of the programme had been compromised through the editing process.

Sources: M. Wells, 'BBC Halts "Prison Experiment"', *Guardian*, 24 Jan. 2002; M. Wells, 'BBC2 Delays "Unfair" Prison Experiment', *Guardian*, 10 April 2002; J. Crace, 'The Prison of TV', *Guardian*, 14 May 2002).

In this chapter, we will introduce the main issues and debates about ethics. We are not going to try to resolve them, because they are not readily capable of resolution. This is why the ethical debate has scarcely moved on since the 1960s. What is crucial is to be aware of the ethical principles involved and of the nature of the concerns about ethics in business research. It is only if researchers are aware of the issues involved that they can make informed decisions about the implications of certain choices. If nothing else, you should be aware of the possible opprobrium that will be coming your way if you make certain kinds of choice (see, for example Research in focus 5.4). Our chief concern lies with the ethical issues that arise in

relations between researchers and research participants in the course of an investigation. This focus by no means exhausts the range of ethical issues and dilemmas that arise, such as those that might arise in relation to the funding of business research or how findings are used by non-researchers. However, the ethical issues that arise in the course of doing research are the ones that are most likely to impinge on students. Writers on research ethics adopt different stances concerning the ethical issues that arise in connection with relationships between researchers and research participants. Key concept 5.2 outlines some of these stances.



## Ethical principles

Discussions about ethical principles in business research, and perhaps more specifically transgressions of them, tend to revolve around certain issues that recur in different guises. However, they have been usefully broken down by Diener and Crandall (1978) into four main areas:

- whether there is *harm to participants*;
- whether there is a *lack of informed consent*;
- whether there is an *invasion of privacy*;
- whether *deception* is involved.

We will look at each of these in turn, but it should be appreciated that these four principles overlap somewhat. For example, it is difficult to imagine how the principle of informed consent could be built into an investigation in which research participants were deceived. However, there is no doubt that these four areas form a useful classification of ethical principles in and for business research.

### Harm to participants

Research that is likely to harm participants is regarded by most people as unacceptable. But what is harm? Harm can entail a number of facets: physical harm; harm to participants' development or self-esteem; stress; harm to career prospects or future employment; and 'inducing subjects to perform reprehensible acts', as Diener and Crandall (1978: 19) put it. In several studies that we have encountered in this book, there has been real or potential harm to participants.

- In Dalton's (1959) study, his 'counselling' relationship with the female secretary in exchange for access to valuable personnel files (see Research in focus 17.2) was potentially harmful to her, both in terms of the personal relationship and in jeopardizing the security of her employment.
- In Haney, Banks, and Zimbardo's (1973) prison experiments (see Research in focus 5.3), several participants experienced severe emotional reactions, including mental breakdown.
- Many of the participants in the Milgram experiment (1963) on obedience to authority (see Research in focus 5.3) experienced high levels of stress and anxiety as a consequence of being incited to administer electric shocks. It could also be argued that Milgram's observers were 'inducing subjects to perform reprehensible acts'. Indeed, yet another series of studies in which Milgram was involved placed participants in positions where they were being influenced to steal (Milgram and Shotland 1973).

The AoM *Code of Ethical Conduct* states that it is the responsibility of the researcher to assess carefully the possibility of harm to research participants, and, to the extent that it can be, the possibility of harm should be minimized. Similar sentiments are expressed by the MRS's *Code of Conduct*, which advocates that 'the researcher must take all reasonable precautions to ensure that respondents are in no way directly harmed or adversely affected as a result of their participation in a marketing research project'. However, some commentators cast the scope of ethical consideration far wider, suggesting that it is also necessary



to consider non-participants in evaluating the risk of harm (see Thinking deeply 5.5). This is consistent with recent changes in social research guidelines that extend the definition of what constitutes an ethical issue (see pp. 137–8 for more discussion of these changes).

A further area of ethical consideration relates to the possibility of harm to the researcher, an issue that was introduced in Tips and skills ‘Safety in research’ (Chapter 3). In addition to the possibility of physical or emotional harm through exposure to a fieldwork setting, certain research methods, such as auto-ethnography (see

Key concept 27.13), may carry a greater risk of emotional or professional harm to the researcher because the researchers’ own personal self-disclosures constitute the basis for the analysis (Doloriert and Sambrook 2009). If this analysis is made public, a great deal of sensitive, personal information pertaining to the researcher is placed in the public domain. The anonymity of the researcher thus cannot be maintained. Doloriert and Sambrook (2009) argue that this is a particular concern for student researchers whose work will be examined by more experienced and more powerful senior researchers.



## Thinking deeply 5.5

### Harm to non-participants?

Gorard (2002) argues that, although much ethical guidance focuses on the responsibilities of the researcher in relation to research participants, there is also a need to consider the interests of non-participants in the research who constitute the majority, especially when research has practical implications in determining social policies such as those relating to health, housing, transport, and education. He argues that ‘most discussions of ethical considerations in research focus on possible harm to the research participants, to the exclusion of the possible harm done to future users of the evidence which research generates. They almost never consider the wasted resources, and worse, used in implementing treatments and policies that do not work’ (2002: 3).

The issue of harm to participants is further addressed in ethical codes by advocating care over maintaining the confidentiality of records and anonymity of accounts. This means that the identities and records of individuals and organizations should be maintained as confidential. For example, the AoM *Code of Ethical Conduct* recommends that issues relating to confidentiality and anonymity should be negotiated and agreed with potential research participants, and, ‘if confidentiality or anonymity is requested, this must be honored’. This injunction also means that care needs to be taken when findings are being published to ensure that individuals and organizations are not identified or identifiable, unless permission has been given for data to be passed on in a form that allows them to be identified. The MRS *Code of Conduct* states that, as a general rule, anonymity must be preserved. If a respondent’s identity is to be revealed, ‘(a) the respondent must first have been told to whom the information would be supplied and the purposes for which it will be used, and also (b) the researcher must ensure that the information will not be used for any non-research purpose and that the recipient of the information has agreed to conform to the requirements of the Code’.

In quantitative research, it is often easier to anonymize records and to report findings in a way that does not allow individuals to be identified. However, even in quantitative studies there are sometimes instances where it is virtually impossible to make a company anonymous. The use of pseudonyms is a common recourse, but it may not eliminate entirely the possibility of identification. For example, in the case of Hofstede’s (1984) research, although a company pseudonym was used throughout the published study, it was virtually impossible to conceal the company’s identity without completely distorting the original data, partly because IBM is such a large and well-known organization. Similarly, although W. Scott et al. (1956) did not actually name their case study organization, the details they provided in their analysis about the firm’s size, location, history, and activities made it clear to Bacon and Blyton (2001; see Research in focus 2.18), and to other researchers, exactly which large steelworks in North Wales they studied. Issues of anonymity are particularly complex in relation to visual data. Sometimes researchers who use visual data have to go to quite extreme lengths in order to protect the anonymity of their research participants (see Research in focus 5.7).



## Tips and skills

### Confidentiality agreements

As part of the process of negotiating access, it is becoming increasingly common for companies to ask their legal departments to prepare a Confidentiality agreement, which you may be asked to sign on your own behalf, or someone from your university may be asked to sign on behalf of the institution. The main purpose of this is to define what type of information you can have access to and to establish what information you are and are not able to disclose about the company. This usually involves agreeing that you will not pass on information to a third party, particularly that which pertains to commercially sensitive or valuable issues, such as new product development. In addition, there may be a clause that specifies that the company must have sight of the research once it has been written up, so that it can comment on the findings, particularly if they are going to be published. This legally binding agreement can thus grant a considerable amount of power to the company, and it has the potential to cause considerable difficulties if your research throws up issues that the company would rather were kept out of the public domain. If you are asked to sign a Confidentiality agreement, before signing it, take it to your supervisor to ask for advice and get it checked by someone who deals with legal issues on behalf of the university. It may be that there is some room for negotiation in relation to the exact wording of the agreement and the company may be reassured if there is an undertaking that the research will guarantee its anonymity.

The issues of confidentiality and anonymity raise particular difficulties for many forms of qualitative research, where particular care has to be taken with regard to the possible identification of persons, organizations, and places. Moreover, as Thinking deeply 5.6 illustrates, in some qualitative research projects research participants may not wish to remain anonymous. The consequences of failing to protect individual anonymity are illustrated by M. Parker (2000: 238; see Chapter 17), who describes how a quotation in his report about the managing director was traced to an ‘insufficiently anonymized source’, whose reputation was damaged as a result of the incident. As the MRS guidelines on employee research note:

Sample sizes in specialised areas may be very small to the point where employees themselves could be identified. If there is a reasonable risk of an employee being identified, due to the sample size of the population or sub-population being covered, the employee *must* be informed of this risk at the beginning of the interview and given the opportunity to withdraw.

The guidelines therefore recommend that researchers examine the results of subgroups only in situations where there are ten or more respondents involved.



## Thinking deeply 5.6

### The assumption of anonymity

Grinyer (2002) argues that, although protecting the anonymity of research participants is assumed to be an integral feature of ethical research, there may be certain circumstances where research participants do not wish to remain anonymous because making their identity explicit is an important way of retaining ownership of their stories. The legal requirements of the Data Protection Act mean there is also a legal requirement to protect anonymity, since the Act states that anonymization should be maintained wherever possible to increase the security of data processing. These guidelines are based on the assumption that research participants ‘not only deserve the protection of anonymity, but that they actively desire it’ (Grinyer 2002: 2). She argues that the allocation of pseudonyms to protect anonymity can cause unanticipated stress, since research participants sometimes feel that keeping their real names is an important recognition of their involvement in the research project. This, according to Grinyer, makes clear ‘how problematic it is to make judgments on behalf of others, however well intentioned’ (2002: 3). Grinyer recommends that this issue is dealt with on a case-by-case basis, through consultation with research participants throughout the research and publication process so that individuals have the freedom to make a more informed choice and are less likely to feel that they have lost ownership of their stories.



## Telling it like it is

### Ethical considerations in a student research project

Tom was encouraged by his university to consider the ethical implications of his study of well-being among call-centre workers. His main focus was on protecting the anonymity of interviewees so that managers could not trace back comments to specific individuals. 'Birkbeck are very concerned with encouraging an ethical approach to research and considering the implications of it. Given what I was doing, I didn't think there were huge ethical implications. I suppose my main concern was to make sure that I wasn't in any way harming the well-being of the people I was talking to and I suppose there was a vague possibility that, you know, we might have talked about very traumatic stuff in the interview, which might make them very stressed and so on, but I didn't think that was very likely. What was more likely was that they'd somehow feel that I'd kind of betrayed their confidentiality by feeding back to management what they were saying, even if it was in some sort of anonymized format. Because I only had a small sample size, you know, the boss could have said "Right, who said this? I want to see all of you in my office." So I wanted to set out as clearly as I could how I was going to use their data. What I did was when I transcribed my tapes I called them Interviewee A, Interviewee B, or whatever, and then I destroyed the tapes, so all I had was an anonymized interview. I did use quotes from interviews in my dissertation, but these were attributed to Interviewee A or Call handler B or whatever, but that report was confidential to Birkbeck. It didn't go to the organization that I did my research in.' In the report that went back to the organization Tom 'made sure that there was nothing in there that could be linked back to any individual. So it didn't say "A middle aged, Asian call handler said" because that could have been attributable back to individuals.'

However, Tom also became aware that employees could also be pursuing their own political agendas through the research process. 'Although I made it clear that I wasn't there to check up on call handlers on behalf of the management and that it was all confidential and I wasn't going to make recommendations which would be traceable back to any individual, there'd still be a question about to what extent people thought that it was safe to talk to me or that all sorts of stuff was going on. People were asking themselves: "Was it safe to talk to me?" Actually, I was possibly a mouthpiece for them to make comments back to management and they could say things that hopefully might get relayed onto management about working conditions or whatever.'



To hear more about Tom's research experiences, go to the Online Resource Centre that accompanies this book at: [www.oxfordtextbooks.co.uk/orc/brymanbrm3e/](http://www.oxfordtextbooks.co.uk/orc/brymanbrm3e/)

The issues of confidentiality and anonymity involve legal as well as ethical considerations. For example, in Cavendish's (1982) study of women factory workers on an assembly line, great care was taken by the researcher to invent names for all the women so that they could not be identified, to protect them from possible victimization by the company. However, Cavendish deliberately left the name of the firm unchanged in order to preserve the realism of the study and to provide 'concrete facts about the factory' (1982: vi). However, as Cavendish explains, this proved very naive: 'if the firm was named, here was a risk both to me and to the publisher that the firm might bring a libel action against us' (1982: vi). For this reason, after consultation with lawyers, she decided to rewrite the account prior to publication in order to make the firm unidentifiable. This involved changing not only the name

of the firm, but also its location, the details of the components manufactured, and the name of the trade union representing the women. In contrast, there are other instances where organizations do consent to be named in publications, for example in Pettigrew's (1985) study of changing culture at Imperial Chemical Industries.

The issues of confidentiality and anonymity also raise particular problems with regard to the secondary analysis of qualitative data (see Chapter 22), since it is very difficult, though by no means impossible, to present field notes and interview transcripts in a way that will prevent people and places from being identified. As Alderson (1998) has suggested, the difficulty is one of being able to ensure that the same safeguards concerning confidentiality can be guaranteed when secondary analysts examine such records as those provided by the original primary researcher.

One of the problems with the harm-to-participants principle is that it is not possible to identify in all circumstances whether or not harm is likely, though that fact should not be taken to mean that there is no point in seeking to protect them. For example, in the prison experiments conducted by Haney, Banks, and Zimbardo (see Research in focus 5.3) the extreme reactions of participants surprised the researchers. Arguably they did not anticipate this level of harm to be incurred when they planned the study. This is partly why the AoM *Code of Ethical Conduct* recommends third-party review as a means of protecting the interests of research participants, stating that ‘research plans involving human participants should be reviewed by an appropriate third party such as

a university human subjects committee or a **focus group** of potential participants’. In addition, the ASA *Code of Ethics* suggests that, if there is any prospect of harm to participants, informed consent, the focus of the next section, is essential: ‘Informed consent must be obtained when the risks of research are greater than the risks of everyday life. Where modest risk or harm is anticipated, informed consent must be obtained.’

### Lack of informed consent

The issue of informed consent is in many respects the area within business research ethics that is most hotly debated. The bulk of the discussion tends to focus on what



## Telling it like it is Maintaining anonymity in a small-scale research project

Karen devised an innovative way of keeping her research participants anonymous that still enabled her to reveal important details about a participant’s position within the organization. She said, ‘I didn’t put any names in the dissertation. It was very difficult to actually work out what I was going to do. With the questionnaire it was just a tick box so it was a lot easier, but with the actual interviews I wanted to use quotes and that type of thing. So it was a lot more difficult so in the appendix I had a table which was a profile of all the people that I questioned, but with no names on it. So it just had the department that they were from and their level in the organization—not the job title—and then some other information like the length of the time they’d been there in the organization because I used that in the analysis. I could cross-reference that with the quotes that I used and say “This person from the HR department or from another department said this.” So it maintained their anonymity.’

Chris agreed to protect the anonymity of the bank where he did his research and he sought informed consent from each of the interviewees who agreed to take part in the study, by giving the company and each of the people interviewed a pseudonym. ‘The individuals knew from the beginning what I was doing and why I was doing it. I asked them would they want me to keep their names anonymous or not. One person said she did want to be kept anonymous, two said they weren’t really bothered. So I thought if I’m going to do it with one, I’d best do it with the other two as well, which I did. I also had to get permission from the organization because I had information about the percentage of women at different levels of management within the organization, which I was freely given, but obviously I sought permission about actually putting that in my dissertation. They said they were fine about it as long as it’s sort of not going to be published.’

After having completed his degree, Chris was offered a job with the bank as a graduate management trainee. Since then he has become involved in diversity management within the company. Chris’s experience shows how the need to act ethically in a research project cannot be separated from one’s other roles, as his colleagues’ impressions of him now will have undoubtedly been influenced by the way in which he conducted the research project. More generally, the importance of ethics in building trust through the research relationship is something that Chris feels strongly about, as he explains: ‘It’s who you know and not what you know—and if you can get organizations to trust you and let you in, then you never know what that might lead to in the end.’



To hear more about Karen’s and Chris’s research experiences, go to the Online Resource Centre that accompanies this book at: [www.oxfordtextbooks.co.uk/orc/brmanbrm3e/](http://www.oxfordtextbooks.co.uk/orc/brmanbrm3e/)

is variously called disguised or covert observation. Such observation can involve covert participant observation (see Key concept 17.5), or simple or contrived observation (see, for example, Thinking deeply 11.9 and Research in focus 11.10), in which the researcher's true identity is unknown. The principle means that prospective research participants should be given as much information as might be needed to make an informed decision about whether or not they wish to participate in a study. Covert observation transgresses that principle, because participants are not given the opportunity to refuse to cooperate. They are involved whether they like it or not.

Lack of informed consent is a feature of Research in focus 5.1 and Research in focus 5.3. For example, in Dalton's research, informed consent is almost entirely absent. Dalton went to great lengths in order to keep the purpose of his research from participants, presumably to maximize his chances of obtaining specific information about such things as unofficial use of resources or pilfering. Even those who became key informants, or 'intimates', knew only of Dalton's general interest in 'personnel problems', and great care was taken not to arouse suspicion. Dalton describes his undercover role as similar in indirect actions to that of an espionage agent or spy, although he stresses that his interest was in scientific rather than criminal evidence. The principle of informed consent also entails the implication that, even when people know they are being asked to participate in research, they should be fully informed about the research process. As the AoM *Code of Ethical Conduct* suggests:

It is the duty of Academy members to preserve and protect the privacy, dignity, well being, and freedom of research participants. This duty requires both careful research design and informed consent from all participants... Informed consent means explaining to potential participants the purposes and nature of the research so they can freely choose whether or not to become involved. Such explanations include warning of possible harm and providing explicit opportunities to refuse to participate and to terminate participation at any time. Because students and employees are particularly subject to possible coercion, even when unintended, special care must be taken in obtaining their informed consent.

Similarly, the MRS *Code of Conduct* states that informed consent means that respondents should be told, normally at the beginning of the interview, if observation techniques or recording equipment are to be used. Thus, while Milgram's and Haney, Banks, and Zimbardo's experimental subjects (see Research in focus 5.3) were volunteers and therefore knew they were going to participate in research, there is a lack of informed consent, because they were not given full information about the nature of the research and its possible implications for them.

However, as Homan (1991: 73) has observed, implementing the principle of informed consent 'is easier said than done'. At least two major points stand out here.

- It is extremely difficult to present prospective participants with absolutely all the information that might be required to make an informed decision about their involvement. In fact, relatively minor transgressions probably pervade most business research, such as deliberately underestimating the amount of time that an interview is likely to take so that people are not put off being interviewed, and not giving absolutely all the details about one's research for fear of contaminating people's answers to questions.
- In ethnographic research, the researcher is likely to come into contact with a wide spectrum of people, and ensuring that absolutely everyone has the opportunity for informed consent is not practicable, because it would be extremely disruptive in everyday contexts. Also, even when all research participants in a certain setting are aware that the ethnographer is a researcher, it is doubtful whether they are all similarly (let alone identically) informed about the nature of the research. For example, in C. K. Lee's (1998) study of women factory workers in Hong Kong and China, she found it difficult to convey her 'version' of what she was doing to her co-workers. This was partly because the academic term 'thesis' did not make sense to them, so the women developed an alternative explanation, which involved the idea that Lee was writing a novel based on her experiences as a worker 'toiling side by side with "real" workers'. Lee explains: 'I had to settle for that definition too...' (1998: 173). This example aptly illustrates how it is not always possible for the researcher fully to explain the purposes and nature of the research, and so sometimes a compromise understanding is reached.

In spite of the widespread condemnation of violations of informed consent and the view that covert observation is especially vulnerable to accusations of unethical practice in this regard, studies such as Dalton's (1959) are still regarded as important in providing insight into subversive

or illegitimate organizational behaviour. The defence is usually of the 'end-justifies-the-means' kind, which is further discussed below. What is interesting in the context of this discussion is that some ethical codes essentially leave the door ajar for covert observation. The BSA *Statement of Ethical Practice* does suggest that researchers should 'as far as possible' seek to achieve informed consent, but it then goes even further in relation to **covert research**:

There are serious ethical dangers in the use of covert research but covert methods may avoid certain problems. For instance, difficulties arise when research participants change their behaviour because they know they are being studied. Researchers may also face problems when access to spheres of social life is closed to social scientists by powerful or secretive interests. However, covert methods violate the principles of informed consent and may invade the privacy of those being studied. Participant or non-participant observation in non-public spaces or experimental manipulation of research participants without their knowledge should be resorted to only where it is impossible to use other methods to obtain essential data. In such studies it is important to safeguard the anonymity of research participants. Ideally, where informed consent has not been obtained prior to the research it should be obtained post-hoc.

While this statement hardly condones the absence of informed consent associated with covert research, it is not unequivocally censorious either. It recognizes that covert research 'may avoid certain problems' and refers, without using the term, to the possibility of **reactivity** associated with overt observational methods. It also recognizes that covert methods can help to get over the difficulty of gaining access to certain kinds of setting. The passage entails an acknowledgement that informed consent is jeopardized, along with the privacy principle (see below), but implies that covert research can be used 'where it is impossible to use other methods to obtain essential data'. The difficulty here clearly is how a researcher is to decide whether or not it is in fact impossible to obtain data other than by covert work. We suspect that, by and large, covert observers typically make their judge-

ments in this connection on the basis of the *anticipated* difficulty of gaining access to a setting or of encountering reactivity problems, rather than as a response to difficulties they have actually experienced. For example, Dalton (1959) has written that it is impossible to get sufficiently close to unofficial managerial activities to access the meanings assigned to them by participants, other than through covert observation. The issue of the circumstances in which violations of ethical principles, like informed consent, are deemed acceptable will reappear in the discussion below.

The principle of informed consent is also bound up to some extent with the issue of harm to participants. Erikson (1967) has suggested that, if a researcher fails to seek informed consent and if participants are harmed as a result of the research, the investigator is more culpable than if there was no informed consent. For example, he writes: 'If we happen to harm people who have agreed to act as subjects, we can at least argue that they knew something of the risks involved . . .' (1967: 369). While this might seem like a recipe for seeking a salve for the researcher's conscience, it does point to an important issue—namely, that the business researcher is more likely to be vilified if participants are adversely affected when they were not willing accomplices than when they were. However, it is debatable whether that means that the researcher is any less culpable for that harm. Erikson implies that researchers are less culpable, but this is a potential area for disagreement.

The need to take precautions to ensure that respondents are in no way harmed as a result of their participation in research is of particular concern in situations involving vulnerable persons who may not be in a position to give their fully informed consent. An example of this might be marketing research that explores the effect of advertising on children. For example, Lawlor and Prothero (2007) conducted focus groups and individual interviews involving fifty-two children aged between 7 and 9 to explore their understanding of television advertisements. They carried out their data collection in two Irish primary schools during school hours. Consent to participate in the study was requested from the parents of the children, who expressed a preference that the interviews be conducted in the neutral setting of the school, rather than in the children's homes. Permission was also requested for the interviews to be tape recorded. In cases such as this one, extreme diligence must be exercised over the gaining of informed consent because of the greater vulnerability of children as research participants and the difficulties in ensuring that they fully understand the implications of their agreement to participate in research.



## Tips and skills

### A sample interview consent form

- I, the undersigned, have read and understood the Study Information Sheet provided.
- I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the Study.
- I understand that taking part in the Study will include being interviewed and audio recorded.
- I have been given adequate time to consider my decision and I agree to take part in the Study.
- I understand that my personal details such as name and employer address will not be revealed to people outside the project.
- I understand that my words may be quoted in publications, reports, web pages, and other research outputs, but my name will not be used.
- I agree to assign the copyright I hold in any material related to this project to [name of researcher].
- I understand that I can withdraw from the Study at any time and I will not be asked any questions about why I no longer want to take part.

Name of Participant: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

*[Based on examples from UK Data Archive (2009) and several UK universities.]*



## Tips and skills

### A sample study information sheet

Thank you very much for agreeing to participate in this study. This Information Sheet explains what the study is about and how we would like you to take part in it.

The purpose of the study is to [give a short explanation of the study].

In order to elicit your views, we would like you to come for an interview with one of the researchers involved in the study at the University of [University name]. If you agree to this, the interview will be audio recorded and will last approximately one hour. You will also be asked to keep a workplace diary for four weeks. For you to take part in this aspect of the study, the consent of your line manager will be required. Details of how to go about this will be given when you attend for interview.

The information provided by you in the interview and workplace diary will be used for research purposes. It will not be used in a manner that would allow identification of your individual responses.

At the end of the study, anonymized research data will be archived at the UK Data Archive in order to make it available to other researchers in line with current data-sharing practices.

The study has been considered by an Institutional Ethics Committee at the University of [University name] and has been given a favourable review.

All reasonable travel and subsistence expenses that you incur through taking part in the study will be reimbursed, but please keep all receipts.

Once again, we would like to thank you for agreeing to take part in this study. If you have any questions about the research at any stage, please do not hesitate to contact us.

[Researcher contact addresses, telephone, email addresses]

It is increasingly common for researchers to be advised by their universities, via their Research Ethics Committees, to gain written, rather than verbal, consent from research participants by asking them to fill out and sign a form, particularly if the research involves the collection of personal data (see the section later in this chapter on Data Management). This is typically accompanied by an information sheet, which explains what the research is about and how the researchers plan to use the data. If data are collected using audio or video recording equipment, informed consent can also be formally recorded in this way, by asking the participant for their informed consent at the start of the process, rather than by completing a form. However, some researchers have expressed concerns about what they see as a 'tick-box approach' to informed consent, saying that it encourages ethical issues to be seen as a one-off consideration, rather than as something that needs to be considered throughout the research process (Sin 2005). The form-filling method of gaining informed consent is particularly problematic in certain qualitative research designs, where data collection can extend over a period of time and involve methods such as participant observation (see Chapter 17) for which it would be inappropriate to ask research participants to sign a form. Also, the direction of qualitative studies can be somewhat less predictable than with quantitative ones, so it is difficult to be specific within forms about some issues.

## Invasion of privacy

This third area of ethical concern relates to the issue of the degree to which invasions of privacy can be condoned. The right to privacy is a tenet that many of us hold dear, and transgressions of that right in the name of research are not regarded as acceptable. The MRS guidance is clear: 'the objectives of any study do not give researchers a special right to intrude on a respondent's privacy nor to abandon normal respect for an individual's values'. Privacy is very much linked to the notion of informed consent, because, to the degree that informed consent is given on the basis of a detailed understanding of what the research participant's involvement is likely to entail, he or she in a sense acknowledges that the right to privacy has been surrendered for that limited domain. Of course, the research participant does not abrogate the right to privacy entirely by providing informed consent. As we have seen, when people agree to be interviewed, they will frequently refuse to answer certain questions on

whatever grounds they feel are justified. Often, these refusals will be based on a feeling that certain questions delve into private realms or cover topic areas that they find sensitive and they do not wish to make these public, regardless of the fact that the interview is conducted in private. However, the MRS acknowledges that, although there are some topics that can be judged sensitive to everyone, because of the nature of the subject, it is impossible for the researcher to know beforehand which topics may be sensitive to a particular individual. It therefore recommends that the researcher 'treat each case sensitively and individually, giving respondents a genuine opportunity to withdraw'.

Covert methods are usually deemed to be violations of the privacy principle on the grounds that participants are not being given the opportunity to refuse invasions of their privacy. Such methods also mean that they might reveal confidences or information that they would not have revealed if they had known about the status of the confidant as researcher. The issue of privacy is invariably linked to issues of anonymity and confidentiality in the research process, an area that has already been touched on in the context of the question of whether or not harm comes to participants. The BSA *Statement* forges this kind of connection: 'The anonymity and privacy of those who participate in the research process should be respected. Personal information concerning research participants should be kept confidential. In some cases it may be necessary to decide whether it is proper or appropriate to record certain kinds of sensitive information.' Invasion of privacy can also be a particular issue when dealing with certain kinds of data, such as photographs (see Research in focus 5.7).

Raising issues about ensuring anonymity and confidentiality in relation to the recording of information and the maintenance of records relates to all methods of business research. In other words, while covert research may pose certain kinds of problem regarding the invasion of privacy, other methods of business research are implicated in possible difficulties in connection with anonymity and confidentiality.

## Deception

Deception occurs when researchers represent their research as something other than what it is. The obedience-to-authority study by Milgram referred to in Research in focus 5.3 involves deception, because participants are led to believe they are administering real electric shocks.





## Research in focus 5.7

### Invasion of privacy in visual research

As S. Warren (2002: 240) notes, 'the very act of holding a camera up to one's eye and pointing it at someone is an obvious and potentially intrusive activity which cannot be "disguised" in the same way as making field-notes in a journal or even tape-recording an interview'. Ethical issues of anonymity and confidentiality are thus potentially more problematic because of the instant recognizability of photographic images. Legal issues can also be more complex, especially those pertaining to copyright ownership (Pink 2001). As a precaution, in her study of organizational aesthetics (see Research in focus 16.13), Warren did not use any photographs that revealed distinguishing organizational features, such as logos. She also used digital image manipulation software to obscure the faces of the few people in the photographs in order to protect their anonymity.

Another example of the consequences of the ethical sensitivity of using photographs in research is found in Bolton, Pole, and Mizen's (2001) research into child employment (see Research in focus 16.13), where the researchers gave the young people involved in the study a disposable camera for them to take photographs of their place of work. Several of the young people chose to opt out of the photographic part of the study because they were worried that taking photographs might jeopardize their employment, while others, who had wanted to participate in the photographic study, found that when they took the camera into work they were able to take only one or two shots before being asked not to take photographs by their employer. The researchers conclude: 'in these situations it is the absence of photographs that begins to tell us something about the work experiences of the children by providing an insight into the power relations that govern their employment' (2001: 512).

Another less extreme example is provided by Holliday (1995) in her ethnographic study of small firms (see Research in focus 5.8). In pretending to be a student interested in small firms in order to get information about a competitor's product, Holliday was clearly engaged in an element of deception. The AoM *Code of Ethical Conduct* states:

Deception should be minimized, and, when necessary, the degree and effects must be mitigated as much as possible. Researchers should carefully weigh the gains achieved against the cost in human dignity. To the extent that concealment or deception is necessary, the researcher must provide a full and accurate explanation to participants at the conclusion of the study, including counselling, if appropriate.

Deception in various degrees is probably quite widespread in much research, because researchers often want

to limit participants' understanding of what the research is about so that they respond more naturally to the experimental treatment. Indeed, some ethical codes appear to condone the strictly bounded use of deception, in order to preserve the naturalness of the data. For example, in the section on informed consent it was mentioned that the MSR *Code of Conduct* states that respondents should be told at the *beginning* of an interview if observation techniques or recording equipment are to be used. However, if it is felt that this knowledge might bias the respondent's subsequent behaviour, the respondent may be told about the recording at the *end* of the interview. They should then be given the opportunity to see or hear the relevant section of the record, and, if they so wish, 'the record or relevant section of it must be destroyed or deleted'.

The ethical objection to deception seems to turn on two points. First, it is not a nice thing to do. While the SRA *Guidelines* recognizes that deception is widespread in social interaction, it is hardly desirable. Secondly, there is the question of professional self-interest. If business researchers became known as snoopers who deceived people as a matter of professional course, the image of our work would be adversely affected and we might experience difficulty in gaining financial support and the



## Research in focus 5.8

### An example of an ethical fieldwork dilemma

Holliday (1995: 17–18) describes an ethical dilemma that she faced during her fieldwork.

I arranged to visit a small electronics company owned by a friend of a colleague. The night before I was due to visit the company my temperature soared to 103 degrees and I went down with 'flu. However, I felt that I could not break the arrangement at such short notice, so I decided to go to the factory anyway . . . I got to the factory at 10 am. Eventually Raj, the owner-manager, arrived. We had spent 10 minutes touring the factory when he asked me if I could drive. I said that I could, so he asked me if I would drive him to another factory about fifteen miles south . . . Business and lunch over we walked back to the car (to my great relief—at last I could go home) . . . As we pulled out of the car park, Raj turned to me and said, 'I'd just like to pop down to an exhibition in Birmingham—is that okay?' My heart sank, but I didn't have the strength to protest, so off to Birmingham we went.

During the journey down, Raj told me about a crisis which had occurred very recently within his company. Another small firm had ordered a very substantial piece of equipment from him, which had required a huge amount of development work. Once the item was supplied the company which placed the order promptly declared itself bankrupt and refused to pay . . . By the time we reached Birmingham my sense of injustice was well and truly inflamed . . . 'So', Raj continued, 'this company has a display of *our product* here today and I want to get their brochure on it. The trouble is they'll know me, so you'll have to get it. We'll split up at the door and I'll meet you in an hour. Tell them you're a customer or something . . .' I couldn't believe it. I was being asked to commit industrial espionage in my first few hours of fieldwork . . .

I got the brochure pretending to be a student—from Southampton, interested in researching small firms. I even got an invitation to the factory to come and research them. Then I passed the intelligence to Raj and began the long drive back. I arrived home at 8.30 pm exhausted and feverish, and with a very guilty conscience.

cooperation of future prospective research participants. As the SRA *Guidelines* puts it:

It remains the duty of social researchers and their collaborators, however, not to pursue methods of inquiry that are likely to infringe human values and sensibilities. To do so, whatever the methodological advantages, would be to endanger the reputation of social research and the mutual trust between social researchers and society which is a prerequisite for much research.

One of the chief problems with the discussion of this aspect of ethics is that deception is, as some writers observe, widespread in business research (see the stance Ethical transgression is pervasive in Key concept 5.2). As the example from C. K. Lee's (1998) research illustrates, it is rarely feasible or desirable to provide participants with a totally complete account of what your research is about. Bulmer (1982), whose stance is predominantly that of a universalist in ethics terms (see Key concept 5.2), nonetheless recognizes that there are bound to be instances such as this and deems them justifiable. However, it is very difficult to know where the line should be drawn here.



## Other ethical and legal considerations

However, in addition to the four main ethical principles identified by Diener and Crandall (1978), there are other ethical considerations that need to be taken into account in planning a research project that have been made more

prominent as the result of recent changes within the social science research community. These relate to work carried out by research funding bodies such as the ESRC and the European Union, which have been active in

recent years in developing ethical frameworks that apply to all social science researchers, including those in the field of business and management. The ESRC *Research Ethics Framework* is the result of discussion and consultation with the social science community and other key stakeholders. Although the guidelines apply specifically to research projects funded by these organizations, which will eventually have to show that they have met the requirements set out in the framework in order to receive funding, it is likely that they will also in due course affect awareness of all university social science researchers about ethical matters. These codes and the discussions surrounding their development can be found at:

[www.respectproject.org/main/index.php](http://www.respectproject.org/main/index.php) (accessed 23 July 2010)

[www.esrcsocietytoday.ac.uk/ESRCInfoCentre/opportunities/research\\_ethics\\_framework](http://www.esrcsocietytoday.ac.uk/ESRCInfoCentre/opportunities/research_ethics_framework) (accessed 23 July 2010)

Another example of the heightened awareness of ethical issues in university-based research relates to the development of the Missenden Code, which aims to address the challenges posed by the increased commercialization of research and shifts in the source of research funding. This code is also available on the Internet at:

[www.missendencentre.co.uk/Ethics\\_report.pdf](http://www.missendencentre.co.uk/Ethics_report.pdf) (accessed 23 July 2010)

However, rather than being intended as a replacement for the ethics codes developed by professional associations such as those described earlier in this chapter, these frameworks are intended to supplement existing codes and to encourage their further development. Because of this, it is worthwhile reviewing here the main areas that they cover in addition to the four main ethical principles that we have already discussed. These relate to:

- the impact of data protection legislation;
- the role of reciprocity in determining the relationship between the researcher and research participants;
- the need to declare sources of funding and support that may affect the affiliations of the researcher, causing conflicts of interest.

A further issue that you may encounter if you intend to conduct research in a National Health Service organization, such as a hospital, or a local authority social care organization is that it will come within the terms of reference of the *Research Governance Framework for Health and Social Care* issued by the Department of Health in 2005. This document can be found at:

[www.dh.gov.uk/en/Publicationsandstatistics/Publications/PublicationsPolicyAndGuidance/DH\\_4108962](http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/Publicationsandstatistics/Publications/PublicationsPolicyAndGuidance/DH_4108962) (accessed 23 July 2010)

This document includes recommendations about ethics and ethics-related issues. In the views of many commentators, the *Framework* considerably expands the range of issues covered by ethical considerations. For example, in paragraph 2.3.1, it is suggested that: 'Research which duplicates other work unnecessarily or which is not of sufficient quality to contribute something useful to existing knowledge is in itself unethical.' Such a position enlarges the scope of ethical considerations well beyond the kinds of issues addressed by Diener and Crandall (1978). Further information on the ethics of research in the NHS can also be found at:

[www.nres.npsa.nhs.uk](http://www.nres.npsa.nhs.uk) (accessed 23 July 2010)

## Data management

The routine collection and storing of digital data and the practices of data sharing raise new concerns about confidentiality and other ethical issues. They raise questions about the extent to which information can legitimately be used for research purposes that may be different from the original reason for collecting the data. This issue focuses on who owns the data and under what circumstances people are entitled to use it. In obtaining informed consent from research participants, any long-term preservation and sharing plans should be made explicit, so these decisions need to be made at the outset of a project. A good source of advice on the management and sharing of data is the UK Data Archive (2009), which states:

The ease with which digital data can be stored, disseminated and made accessible to secondary users via the internet means that many institutions embrace the sharing of research data to increase the impact and visibility of their research. (UK Data Archive 2009: 3)

As this statement highlights, it is increasingly common for researchers to be encouraged to make their data available to the wider scientific community so that maximum potential benefit may be gained from it. This raises issues relating to data security, the extent to which data need to be protected from unauthorized access or usage, particularly if they contain personal information relating to individuals, such as individuals' names, addresses, occupations, or

photographs. The specific piece of legislation that determines the extent to which personal data may be used for research purposes in the UK is the 1998 Data Protection Act. Common techniques for enhancing security include separating personal identifiers from expressions of opinion and storing them separately. The physical as well as technical security of data should be attended to—for example, by keeping filing cabinets and offices containing data locked and having password-protected databases.

There is a further category in the Data Protection Act that relates to sensitive personal data, such as information about a data subject's political or religious beliefs, ethnic origin, or whether he or she belongs to a trade union. This type of data is more rigorously protected, and there is greater onus on the researcher to obtain explicit, usually written, consent from data subjects for the processing of this type of personal data. However, the Act does provide for certain exemptions in the case of personal data that are collected for research purposes—namely, that, where personal data are processed for research that is not likely to cause damage or distress to any of the data subjects concerned, they may be kept and further processed at a later stage for other purposes. Additionally, as long as the results of the research are not published in any form that identifies any particular data subject, respondents do not have right of access to the data.

Because the legislation surrounding data protection varies from country to country, the RESPECT project set out to identify some common principles for European researchers to bear in mind when dealing with data-protection issues. This involved a group of legal specialists who reviewed the existing EU legislation and came up with a common set of guidelines for researchers to follow in dealing with this issue. These guidelines, which are extremely detailed and run for over eighty pages, can be viewed in full at the following address:

[www.respectproject.org/data/415data.pdf](http://www.respectproject.org/data/415data.pdf) (accessed 23 July 2010)

The length and detail of this report highlights the complexity of this issue, for which researchers may be advised to take legal advice. However, it is worth highlighting three of the recommendations that the authors of the report make. These include:

- that researchers draft an outline of the processing operations (this is not limited to electronic processing) involved in their use of the data *before* they start to process it, so they can assess the legality of their usage in advance, rather than perform the operations and then find out afterwards whether or not they are

permitted to use the data in this way. This point highlights the potential seriousness of using data unlawfully, for which criminal or administrative sanctions may be applied;

- that researchers should decide who is the controller of the data and thus responsible for its usage, and on the basis of this determine which national legislation applies to their study. This is a particular issue in situations involving a group of researchers working together on a research project but based in different countries. This decision also depends on where the data processing will be carried out;
- that prior to the processing the researcher should define who will be the data subjects and take precautions to respect their rights in relation to the data.

## Copyright

A further issue affected by legal considerations is copyright. Copyright is an intellectual property right that protects the owner of copyright from unauthorized copying. Most research publications, reports, and books, as well as raw data such as spreadsheets and interview transcripts, are protected by copyright. For employed researchers, the first owner of copyright is usually the employer. However, many universities waive this right in relation to research data and publications and give it to the researcher. Some researchers use Creative Commons licences, which allow the creators of works to waive some of their rights in order to allow their work to be used more freely. The UK Data Archive provides a very helpful explanation of the situation regarding copyright:

In the case of interviews, the interviewee holds the copyright in the spoken word. If a transcription is a substantial reproduction of the words spoken, the speaker will own copyright in the words and the transcriber will have separate copyright of the transcription. (UK Data Archive 2009: 23)

The important thing to remember is that, if you want to share your data with other researchers, you will need to get copyright clearance from the interviewee for this at the time of the interview. There are also particular copyright issues pertaining to the use of visual data. For example, in order to reproduce a photograph in publication, consent may be required from the subject in the photograph as well the person who took it, who is usually the

first owner of copyright; in such cases copyright is jointly shared.

## Reciprocity and trust

We have argued elsewhere (Bell and Bryman 2007, Bell and Wray Bliss 2007) that ethics codes increasingly emphasize the importance of openness and honesty in communicating information about the research to all interested parties. Although this issue is related to the ethical principles of informed consent and avoiding deception discussed above, it goes further than these existing principles in placing the responsibility on researchers for taking action that helps to overcome the power inequalities between themselves and research participants, and for ensuring that

the research has benefits for them both. For example, the ESRC *Research Ethics Framework* makes frequent mention of the need to communicate benefits to research participants. At its most advanced, this incorporates the concept of reciprocity, the idea that the research should be of mutual benefit to researcher and participants and that some form of collaboration or active participation should be built into the research project from the outset. This encourages a view of the research relationship as a mutually beneficial exchange between researcher and participants who see each other as moral beings and enforce on each other adherence to a set of agreed-upon moral norms (Wax 1982). It also resonates with developments in qualitative research that have sought to reconceptualize researcher–subject relationships (see Chapter 16).



## Telling it like it is Seeking to establish reciprocity by sharing research findings

One of the ways in which students can establish a degree of reciprocity within a small-scale research project is through agreeing to share their findings with research participants by sending them a report based on the dissertation project or a copy of the dissertation. As Karen explained: ‘There were a lot of people while I was doing the research who said, “Oh, I’d love to see what your findings are and what your conclusions are” and that sort of thing. ‘Cos it brings up a lot of issues sort of even more broadly than just recruitment as to, you know, “Well, is it a good idea that we’re doing this sort of thing?” and “What is it doing to the whole organizational culture?”’ So there were lots of people who were very interested in it. So I sent them a copy [of the dissertation once I had] finished it. I don’t know what they’ll do with it! [chuckles] Whether anybody’ll actually sit down and read all fifty pages of it I don’t know.’

In Tom’s study of call centres he agreed to produce a report for the organization as a condition of his access arrangements. However, it was not entirely clear from the start whether or not this report was principally for management or call-centre employees. ‘There [was] an interesting question about who was I working for. Was I reporting back to the management or to the work force or to both? I kind of fudged it and said I was reporting back to both of them and I came back and I tried to produce an even-handed report which would say, “Here are some things that you could think about doing which might be useful.” My job was made a lot easier because I got the sense that relationships between the management and the work force were pretty good. If I’d gone in and found a lot more antagonism or a much more difficult relationship, it would have been much more difficult to think how I was going to pitch that. I could easily have fallen into a trap on that and I didn’t think about it very carefully beforehand. As it was, it turned out okay, and the circumstances meant that it wasn’t a contentious issue.’

The decision to share findings with research participants also raises particular ethical issues relating to the protection of anonymity, since it is especially important that individuals cannot be identified if decisions might be made by the organization based on the information collected through your research (see Chapter 16 for some examples of this). If you have agreed to provide feedback findings from your research to people within the organization, especially if these are people with decision-making authority, you need to be very clear in explaining this when seeking the fully informed consent of individuals involved in the study.

On the other hand, sharing your findings with research participants can also help to make the research process a more open exchange, because it helps to take account of the power relations between the researcher and the

people being studied (see the section on researcher–subject relationships in Chapter 16 for further discussion of this). This is particularly so if you share your findings during the research rather than at the end of it, so that research participants have the opportunity to question and add to your interpretations of the data. The views of research participants in response to your initial findings can then be written into the dissertation project. This helps to overcome the tendency towards interpretative omnipotence—a common feature of academic writing (see Chapter 27). However, these practices are more common in qualitative than quantitative research, because the former is less concerned with the possibility that this might introduce bias into the study.



To hear more about Karen's and Tom's research experiences, go to the Online Resource Centre that accompanies this book at: [www.oxfordtextbooks.co.uk/orc/brymanbrm3e/](http://www.oxfordtextbooks.co.uk/orc/brymanbrm3e/)

## Affiliation and conflicts of interest

In all areas of scientific study, it is recognized that affiliations, particularly those related to funding, have the potential to influence the way that research issues are defined and findings presented. The Missenden Code aims to address the challenges posed by the increased commercialization in universities and shifts in the source of research funding. The code, which was set up following a number of high-profile ethical controversies (see Thinking deeply 5.9), recommends that universities set up ethics committees to monitor the sources of sponsorship and funding, and to ensure that the source of funding is acknowledged in any publication. The code claims that ethical implications arise when research is financially underwritten by a source that has a vested interest in the results. However, this does not mean that it

is automatically biased, rather that it may be perceived to be biased, for example, by the media, and therefore it is able to be discredited. Moreover, no research is truly independent. Even if it is not in receipt of funding from commercial sources, it is clear that the money must come from somewhere, such as a government source, which will also have interests in funding certain kinds of research and coming up with particular findings. Similarly, in many postgraduate MBA student research projects, the study forms part of a dissertation for a degree that is at least partly funded by the student's employer. Therefore, the main thing for researchers to be conscious of is the possibility that questions about funding have the potential to affect the credibility of the research and that they should be explicit and open about the resources that enabled their research in any publication.



### Thinking deeply 5.9

## A funding controversy in a university business school

In December 2000, Nottingham University accepted £3.8 million from British American Tobacco to set up the International Centre for Corporate Social Responsibility within Nottingham University Business School. This prompted the professor leading one of Nottingham's top research teams working in the field of cancer research to leave, taking fifteen of his staff with him. Cancer Research UK, which was funding medical research at the university, subsequently withdrew its £1.5 million grant and launched a new code of conduct that recommended research support not be provided to any university faculty that is in receipt of tobacco industry funding. However, Nottingham University insisted that it had been following these guidelines, because the money that funded the International Centre for Corporate Social Responsibility was kept completely separate from any area of research funded by Cancer Research UK. The case prompted a heated exchange among academics, one letter angrily commenting that it must only be a matter of time before someone founded a Pinochet Centre for the study of human rights. Because the tobacco industry has a history of subverting scientific research that does not support its commercial interests, as portrayed in the feature film *The Insider*, it was seen as unacceptable by some that Nottingham University should accept financial support from this source.

(C. Clark, 'Letter: Stub out BAT Cash', 8 Dec. 2000; T. Tysome, 'Tobacco Link Causes Cancer Team to Leave', 23 March 2001, *Times Higher Education Supplement*.)



## Tips and skills

### ESRC recommendations for ethical review of student research projects

In line with Kent et al.'s (2002) prediction that recent developments within the social sciences will mean that ethical oversight regimes will be less 'light touch' in orientation than current structures, the new ESRC *Research Ethics Framework* has a section entitled 'Arrangements should be made for research students', which deals specifically with undergraduate and postgraduate students. It states:

- 1.13.1 The ESRC wants social scientists to engage with ethical issues from the start of their research careers. . . .
- 1.13.2 Universities and research organizations should establish procedures specifically for reviewing research projects undertaken by undergraduate students and students on taught postgraduate courses. Student research poses particular challenges in relation to ethical review because of the large numbers, short timescales and limited scope of the projects involved . . . It should be made clear to potential research participants that the study is a student project.
- 1.13.3 While the same high ethical standards should be expected in student research, the process of ethical review may be more appropriately managed at department level and overseen by research supervisors. This does not lessen the requirement for universities to ensure that students are not exposed to undue risk in conducting their research. (ESRC, *Research Ethics Framework* 2010: 16)

A case could be made for considering student research through a particular form of expedited review. Undergraduate and taught postgraduate research might be reviewed by multidisciplinary committees with a proportion of the members from outside the school or faculty but within the University. As student projects are not externally funded individually, there is less of a conflict of interests within the University.



## The difficulties of ethical decision-making

The difficulty of drawing the line between ethical and unethical practices can be revealed in several ways. The issue of some members of social settings being aware of the researcher's status and the nature of his or her investigation has been mentioned on several occasions. Manuals about interviewing are full of advice about how to entice interviewees to open up about themselves. Researchers using Likert scales reword items to identify 'yeasayers' and 'naysayers'. Interviewers frequently err on the low side when asked how long an interview will take. Women may use their identity as women to influence female interviewees in in-depth interviews to probe into their lives and reveal inner thoughts and feelings, albeit with a commitment to feminist research (Oakley 1981; Finch 1984; Freeman 2000). Qualitative research is frequently very open-ended, and, as a result, research questions are either loose or not specified, so that it is

doubtful whether or not ethnographers in particular are able to inform others accurately about the nature of their research. Perhaps, too, some interviewees find the questions we ask unsettling or find the cut and thrust of a focus group discussion stressful, especially if they inadvertently reveal more than they might have intended.

There are, in other words, many ways in which there is the potential for deception and, relatedly, lack of informed consent in business research. These instances are, of course, a far cry from the deceptions perpetrated in the research summarized in Research in focus 5.1 and Research in focus 5.3, but they point to the difficulty of arriving at ethically informed decisions. Ethical codes give advice on patently inappropriate practices, though sometimes leaving some room for manoeuvre, as we have seen, but provide less guidance on marginal areas of ethical decision-making. Indeed, guidelines may even be used by

research participants against the researcher when they seek to limit the boundaries of a fieldworker's investigation (Punch 1994). Finally, computer technology, and in particular the use of the Internet as a data collection method, has introduced new ethical challenges for researchers that will be discussed in Chapter 26.

This might lead business researchers to regard ethical issues as a series of obstacles that need to be overcome so that they can get on with their study. There is no doubt that the level of ethical scrutiny business researchers face in relation to their activities has increased in recent years, and the burden of responsibility for demonstrating that ethical issues have been satisfactorily addressed has been placed firmly on the shoulders of researchers. Some

universities require even undergraduate and postgraduate student research projects to go through an ethical approval process, and the prospect of having one's research scrutinized by an ethics committee can seem daunting for a new researcher. Moreover, these requirements can encourage a bureaucratic compliance-based approach whereby, once ethical approval has been obtained, the researcher tends to assume that ethical considerations can be set to one side as having been dealt with. However, nothing could be farther from the truth; we believe it is vitally important for qualitative and quantitative researchers continually to revisit ethical issues throughout their study and to see them as an integral part of the research process.



## Checklist

### Ethical issues to consider

- Have you read and incorporated into your research the principles associated with at least one of the major professional associations mentioned in this book?
- Have you read and incorporated the requirements for doing ethical research in your institution?
- Have you found out whether or not all proposed research needs to be submitted to the body in your institution that is responsible for the oversight of ethical issues?
- If only certain types of research need to be submitted, have you checked to see whether or not your proposed research is likely to require clearance?
- Have you checked to ensure that there is no prospect of any harm coming to participants?
- Does your research conform to the principle of informed consent, so that research participants understand:
  - what the research is about?
  - the purposes of the research?
  - who is sponsoring it?
  - the nature of their involvement in the research?
  - how long their participation is going to take?
  - that their participation is voluntary?
  - that they can withdraw from participation in the research at any time?
  - what is going to happen to the data (e.g. how are the data going to be kept)?
- Are you confident that the privacy of the people involved in your research will not be violated?
- Do you appreciate that you should not divulge information or views to your research participants that other research participants have given you?
- Have you taken steps to ensure that your research participants will not be deceived about the research and its purposes?



- Have you taken steps to ensure that the confidentiality of data relating to your research participants will be maintained?
- Once the data have been collected, have you taken steps to ensure that the names of your research participants and the location of your research (such as the name of the organization(s) in which it took place) are not identifiable?
- Does your strategy for keeping your data in electronic form comply with data-protection legislation?
- Once your research has been completed, have you met obligations that were a requirement of doing the research (for example, submitting a report to an organization that allowed you access)?



## Key points

- This chapter has been concerned with a limited range of issues concerning ethics in business research, in that it has concentrated on ethical concerns that might arise in the context of collecting and analysing data. Our concern has mainly been with relations between researchers and research participants. Other ethical issues can arise in the course of business research.
- While the codes and guidelines of professional associations provide some guidance, their potency is ambiguous, and they often leave the door open for some autonomy with regard to ethical issues.
- The main areas of ethical concern relate to: harm to participants; lack of informed consent; invasion of privacy; and deception.
- Covert observation and certain notorious studies have been particular focuses of concern.
- The boundaries between ethical and unethical practices are not clear cut.
- Writers on social research ethics have adopted several different stances in relation to the issue.
- While the rights of research participants are the chief focus of ethical principles, concerns about professional self-interest are also of concern.



## Questions for review

- Why are ethical issues important in relation to the conduct of business research?
- Outline the different stances on ethics in social research.

### *Ethical principles*

- Does 'harm to participants' refer to physical harm alone?
- What are some difficulties with following this ethical principle?
- Why is the issue of informed consent so hotly debated?
- What are some of the difficulties of following this ethical principle?
- Why is the privacy principle important?
- What principles concerning the use of personal data are expressed in the 1998 Data Protection Act?
- Why does deception matter?
- How helpful are studies like Milgram's, Zimbardo's, and Dalton's in terms of understanding the operation of ethical principles in business research?

*The difficulties of ethical decision-making*

- How easy is it to conduct ethical research?
  - Read one of the ethical guidelines referred to in this chapter. How effective is it in guarding against ethical transgressions?
  - Were the actions taken by Holliday (1995) and described in Research in focus 5.8 ethical? (Explain your viewpoint using the framework provided in this chapter.) Would you have behaved differently in these circumstances? If so, how?
- 

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*Visit the interactive Research Guide that accompanies this book to complete an exercise in Ethics in Business Research.*

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