5 Ethical Considerations

“You will need to ensure that no harm occurs.”

The consideration of ethics in research, and in general business for that matter, is of growing importance. It is, therefore, critical that you understand the basics of ethical research and how this might affect your research project. This is especially important if your research involves interaction with businesses or members of the general community who serve as participants (i.e., respondents) in your research. You might interact with people in a number of ways, including in-depth interviews, focus groups, surveys, or even observing people’s behavior.

Though all researchers (student, professional, or academic) are well intentioned, there is sometimes the possibility that interactions with participants may inadvertently harm them in some unintended way. This could include the following:

- Psychological harm: For example, researching the use of nudity in advertising may show participants images that offend them.
- Financial harm: Researching unethical behavior within a given firm may provide management with information on individual employees that results in an individual being fired, or undertaking industry-based research may inadvertently share sensitive information with a firm’s competitors, resulting in financial harm to the organization.
- Social harm: Researching how lifestyle affects consumption may unintentionally disclose a person’s sexual orientation when that person wanted to keep this confidential.

It is your responsibility to consider whether any type of harm could occur as part of your research and you need to ensure that mechanisms are instituted to remove this potential harm. It is, therefore, essential that you carefully evaluate the potential for harm to arise and ensure that you (a) behave according to appropriate ethical standards; (b) consider how your research might negatively affect participants; and (c) protect yourself, your supervisors/teachers, and your institution from being placed in situations in
which individuals could make claims of inappropriate behavior, resulting in public criticism or even you being sued.

Unfortunately, there is an increasing amount of litigation in the world, and many universities appropriately have processes in place for vetting research to ensure that it is undertaken in an ethical fashion. This ensures that the participant is protected and also ensures that the students, staff, and university undertaking the research are protected. The process also generally enhances the quality of research as well, ensuring it is well designed and implemented.

In covering the topic of ethics, we are not trying to change your values, but rather we want to make you more aware of potential ethical issues that might arise when you undertake research. To do this, some questions will be asked that, if answered appropriately, will ensure that potential ethical problems are avoided. Thinking about these issues requires that you step out of your shoes as a researcher to consider the research process from the viewpoint of participants you are asking to assist you.

This chapter is designed to discuss a range of ethical issues. Many of these issues are broadly covered in the various business and marketing ethics texts (e.g., Smith & Quelch, 1992) as well as marketing research texts (e.g., Churchill, 2005). These texts tend to look at research ethics from a client-agency perspective; that is, where the researcher is working for a client. The following material will try to broaden this view by also considering general social research ethics (Homan, 1991), covering a range of data collection approaches, such as participant observation (Bulmer, 1982) and surveys/experiments (Sieber, 1982).

What Is Human Intervention?

In the context of this chapter, *human intervention* is defined as encompassing a broad range of activities, including interviews, review of corporate records, focus groups, experiments, oral histories, and surveys. It basically involves collecting information from people that is not in the public domain and that is generally given to you by the person, who then becomes a participant in your research. If your research involves accessing information that is readily and publicly available, such as a content analysis of magazines, meta-analysis, or literature review, it is unlikely that much of the material discussed within this chapter would apply, although some issues, such as academic fraud and plagiarism, apply to all types of research.

Some examples of student research that are less likely to involve human intervention include the following:

- Content analysis of information contained in advertisements;
- A multiple-regression study that uses data from publicly available databases, such as Predicast or Dow Jones; or
- An examination of a data set that was collected for another purpose, assuming that the participants had already given their prior permission for other researchers to access this data.
There are various ethical codes of conduct that regulate researchers’ behavior. These codes discuss many issues that potentially might arise in your research, as well as other issues associated with professional practice (Beauchamp & Bowie, 2004). For example, the American Marketing Association’s (AMA, 2009) statement of ethics touches on research-related issues and specifically states that members must “do no harm.” It also specifies other issues of particular interest to professional marketers, such as the issues relating to the development of safe new products or the prohibition of price-fixing activities, interacting with stakeholders, and so forth.

Ethical issues are also examined by the European Society for Opinion and Marketing Research’s (ESOMR, 2009) Code of Practice, which sets out researchers’ broad responsibilities. ESOMR provides codes in greater detail for a range of different research activities, ranging from broad-based activities such as a “Guide to Opinion Polls” to more specific guidelines on “Mystery Shopping” and “Interviewing Children” (ESOMAR, 2009). These codes are, of course, not static, and there are also specific detailed discussions of ethical practice relating to new technologies such as the Internet (AMA, 2009; ESOMR, 2009). We will briefly discuss the use of the Internet in research later in the section because its use does raise some new ethical issues.

Ethical guidelines are not limited to the marketing discipline, because psychologists also have detailed guidelines regulating research involving human intervention. The American Psychological Association (APA, 2009) has a detailed *Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct* that covers a diverse range of research issues, many of which also relate to business research. For example, there is a whole section dealing with privacy and confidentiality. Thus, no matter your specific discipline there will most likely be an appropriate ethical code of practice that will govern behavior, including research activities, within your area.

Most universities have also developed guidelines for conducting ethical research (Polonsky, 1998). In Australia, all universities have agreed to have all research comply with one set of ethical guidelines for all types of human intervention. These guidelines were developed by the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC, 2007b) and apply to all types of research. In addition to the guidelines, the NHMRC also produced the *Human Research Ethics Handbook*, “which is the primary guideline for ethics committees and researchers alike” (NHMRC, 2007a).

Within some universities, researchers, students, and staff must complete detailed applications that are reviewed by an independent ethics committee (sometimes called a human subjects committee or human research ethics committee) before research can be undertaken (Polonsky, 1998). These committees apply basic ethical principles to all research and seek to ensure that all ethical issues are considered and appropriately addressed. Although not all the issues in every code of practice will apply to your research, having an understanding of what is included in your specific discipline’s code of conduct as well as your
university’s ethical code of practice will give you some idea of the complexity of the issues that need to be addressed when planning your research project. Receiving ethical approval is a core part of the research process and needs to be integrated into your project planning. Issues associated with a university’s ethics process will be described in more detail later in this chapter.

Ethical Philosophies

Within the ethics discipline there are a number of different approaches for examining ethics and values. Two philosophical approaches that relate closely to the discussion of student research ethics are deontological and teleological philosophies. To assist you in getting a better understanding of where harm may arise, a number of approaches will be briefly discussed.

According to Skinner, Ferrell, and Dubinsky (1988), “deontological philosophies focus on the factors or means used to arrive at an ethical decision. These philosophies emphasize moral obligations or commitments that should be binding or necessary for proper conduct” (p. 213). To put it quite simply, a deontological approach means that you should not harm participants in any way, no matter what the potential benefit may be. On the other hand, “teleological philosophies emphasize the consequences that result from an action. In other words, they deal with the moral worth of the behavior as determined totally by the consequences of the behavior” (p. 213). This approach asks you to evaluate whether the benefits of your research would outweigh the cost to participants (or to society more widely); if so, the research would be considered acceptable.

A teleological approach is frequently used in medical research, where the research needs to weigh up the potential harm to participants versus the harm from them not participating. For example, when testing a new drug, it is determined that there is a 0.01% chance of some negative side effect occurring (which could include death), but the chances of getting the disease the drug is trying to prevent might be substantially higher, for example, 10.0%. Thus, the potential harm from the research is outweighed by the potential benefit of the research, especially if it assists in finding a cure for the illness. It is suggested that a teleological approach is generally inappropriate for your research, because you and other students would be unskilled in weighing up the associated costs and benefits and, possibly more important, the focus of student research is generally on learning the research process rather than on the sustentative outcomes of your research.

Alternative ethical perspectives have also been put forward in the ethics literature. For example, Kantian ethics suggest that “persons should be treated as ends and never purely as means” (Beauchamp & Bowie, 2004). Thus, any practice you might want to undertake that does not consider how the situation affects the individual would be unethical. This is a more stringent perspective than a deontological approach, as an individual would not
necessarily have to be harmed for a breach of the Kantian perspective to occur. Other ethical perspectives include common morality theory, rights theory, virtue ethics, feminist theories, and ethics of care, but these will not be discussed here because they are less frequently applied in research associated with business practices (see Beauchamp & Bowie, 2004, for a discussion of these). For our discussion of research ethics in relation to your project, a deontological approach will be adopted; that is, any practice that causes any harm to an individual must be avoided.

Ethical Issues to Consider

The goal of your research project is to facilitate your learning through a better understanding of research and how it influences practice. However, in undertaking your research, you will frequently be required to seek information from individuals who are not normally part of the educational process (e.g., average consumers, managers, employees, etc.). You will need to ensure that no harm occurs to these voluntary participants and that all participants have made the decision to assist you after receiving full information as to what is required and what, if any, potential negative consequences may arise from such participation. Those who choose not to participate must also be given the same information with which to make their decision not to be involved and should not be disadvantaged by not participating.

There are a diverse range of research methods and research contexts potentially available to you, and each carries its own specific ethical considerations, which makes it difficult to provide one global set of ethical issues. It would be impossible to construct a composite list of all potential problems. For example, Table 5.1 lists a set of potential ethical problems relating to researching consumers. This listing is not comprehensive, and similar lists could be developed in relation to research involving employees or managers.

There are six broad ethical areas that need to be considered in your research. In this chapter we discuss voluntary participation, informed consent, confidentiality and anonymity, the potential for harm, communicating the results, and more specific ethical issues. These six areas are interdependent, and, as such, the following discussions will overlap a bit. It should be emphasized that you need to check whether your university has processes or procedures that must be followed and that may differ from those described here, and these will possibly highlight other issues for consideration. It is also very important that you identify the relevant deadlines for presenting any required documentation to the ethics committee in your university because your research cannot really begin (i.e., you cannot collect data) without first receiving ethics approval. We have seen a number of student projects held up because students did not consider the ethics process in their planning.
The discussions in the following subsections are designed to ensure that you understand the ethical issues associated with each area, as well as to provide some processes for addressing the issues if they arise.

### Voluntary Participation

Participation in all research should be voluntary; there should be no coercion or deception (this latter issue will be discussed in the subsections titled “Informed Consent” and “Other, More Specific Ethical Issues”). For the most part, you should not be in a position to force or pressure respondents to participate, but there are some situations in which this could potentially occur. You should remember that participants are assisting you, and they should be invited to participate, with a clear understanding that they are under no obligation to do so and that there will be no negative consequences for them if they do not assist you in your research. Remember, participants are doing you a favor!

The potential for coercion varies depending on whom you are seeking assistance from. For example, if you are undertaking an intercept-type activity

---

### Table 5.1: Potential Ethical Problems Relating to Researching Consumers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethical Issue</th>
<th>Right Violated</th>
<th>Compensation Available</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Preserving participants’ anonymity</td>
<td>Right to privacy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exposing participants to mental stress</td>
<td>Right to safety</td>
<td>Right to be heard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of special equipment and techniques</td>
<td>Right to privacy</td>
<td>Right to redress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use to choose</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involving participants in research without their knowledge</td>
<td>Right to be informed</td>
<td>Right to redress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of deception</td>
<td>Right to be informed</td>
<td>Right to be heard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of coercion</td>
<td>Right to choose</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selling under the guise of research</td>
<td>Right to be informed</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Causing embarrassment, hindrance, or offense</td>
<td>Right to respect</td>
<td>Right to redress</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

involving surveying fellow students in the university parking lot, it is unlikely
that potential participants would feel unduly pressured by you asking for a few
minutes of their time. This assumes that you do not hound them until they
agree to participate. Yet even when you deal with peers, there is a slight poten-
tial for coercion to occur, as you might exaggerate the importance of partici-
pants’ assistance or of the study. For example, you might say something like,
“I need you to fill out this survey or I will fail subject X.” Such a statement
would be inappropriate, because it places unnecessary social pressure on
potential respondents.

In some circumstances, the target sample group might have unique charac-
teristics or needs, and if this were the case, they would require special treat-
ment. For example, consider the case in which a student was undertaking
research involving a group with limited English capabilities. In this situation,
respondents might not understand what they are being asked to do and,
equally important, might not understand that the activity is voluntary
(Davidson, 1995). Thus, you should ensure that any vulnerable groups are
protected, even from unintentional harm. One group that ethics committees
are generally very concerned about are children, as children may see
“requests” by adults to have some greater authority. This is why, if you do
want to research children, you will normally need to get their parents’ consent
first! This is important, and it does add another step in the research process
that needs to be considered when establishing timetables for your work.

The issue of voluntary consent can also arise when students undertake
research on employees within an organization. This might occur if you were
to ask a firm to allow you to research the organization’s activities and/or
employees, and it is especially of concern when you research your own
workplace.1 In these situations, it should be made clear to participants that
(a) the organization has allowed you to investigate the specified activities;
(b) any involvement is voluntary; (c) there is no penalty for not participat-
ing; and (d) whether specific information from the research will be given to
their employer.

Confidentiality and anonymity are potentially even more important
when you are researching other staff within your own organization. How
can you, who may be their manager, indicate to participants that they will
not be harmed if they do not participate in the study? They may still feel
压ured because you are their manager. One way to overcome this poten-
tial problem is to separate yourself from respondents, so that responses are
confidential or anonymous. For example, in a group project, it might be
possible for a member of the group who is not affiliated with the firm to
collect and code the data. It would then be impossible for you to know who
participated.

Another solution, in the case of survey research, might be to have the
organization distribute the surveys and then have employees return them
confidentially/anonymously to you. In this way, neither you nor the firm
can identify who participated. Other data collection techniques have other

---

1 Chapter 5 Ethical Considerations

---
approaches to addressing this issue. For example, if you want to conduct interviews with employees, the organization could write to employees and invite them to contact you or simply to show up at a predetermined appointment. However, if you work within the firm, you may still be able to identify the individual. As will be discussed in other subsections, knowing the people who participated is not necessarily problematic if the participants know this is the case in advance and agree, but it does still need to be considered and participants may need to still be protected.

Informed Consent

Another important issue in student research involving human intervention is to ensure that potential participants fully understand what they are being asked to do and that they are informed of any potentially negative consequences of such participation. The most effective way to address the informed consent issue is through the use of an information sheet that is provided to all those who are invited to participate. If possible, this should be on official university letterhead, as this not only has been shown to increase the response rate but also informs respondents that this is an official university activity. In situations in which there is a potential for participant harm to occur, participants should be given the invitation sufficiently in advance to enable them to carefully consider whether they will participate.

Exhibit 5.1 provides a sample information sheet, as well as a range of alternative information that could be included depending on the type of research involved. It is important that the information included be sufficiently clear so that your target group can understand what they are being asked to do. The level of complexity will vary based on the project and targeted respondent. For example, you may need to describe the study differently if you are examining CEOs than if the participants are high school students.

What should be included in the information letter (see Table 5.2)? The issues should be sufficiently clear for individuals to make an informed decision as to whether they want to participate. The letter should tell them who you are and why you are doing the project. For example, “I am an information science student at University X and I am undertaking a research project as part of a systems design course, being delivered by Professor Z.”

The letter should also tell participants what the project is about and the desired outcomes. For example, “This project is designed to examine human resource managers’ attitudes toward the outsourcing of recruitment, to see if they believe that these services are effective.” There should also be a brief discussion of how and why the participants were selected. For example, “For this study we are interested in the views of local accountants and have contacted the managers of all firms listed in the local yellow pages under Accountants.”

Once you have explained who you are, and broadly what you are doing and why, it is essential that you explain what you are asking them to do.
For example, “We would like you to complete the attached survey, which should take approximately 15 minutes to complete and is being administered with the permission of your firm. When finished, you can place the survey in the collection box in the lunchroom.” If information is being distributed back to an organization, it is important that this is clearly stated. For example, “We will be providing the finance manager with a copy of the final report and will be quoting individuals who have given us permission to do so.” In this way, individuals can hopefully identify the negative implications of participation, which should be explicitly stated if negative consequences exist. For example, “Though we will not quote individual respondents, given the focus of the research and small number of respondents, it may be possible that individuals could be identified by their comments.” A statement such as this clearly identifies that some harm could possibly arise depending on the topic. There are other situations in which respondents might need to be warned about the focus of the study. For example, “We will be showing participants copies of advertisements containing female nudity similar to those in magazines such as Cosmopolitan magazine. If you are offended by such advertisements, you may want to decline participation.” In this latter case, the students have explicitly tried to protect the respondent from potential harm.

The information sheet should also discuss how respondents would be provided feedback, if at all. It should also include contact details for your supervisor(s); we generally suggest that students do not give their own contact details. In some instances, it might need to include a complaints mechanism (i.e. how participants raise ethical issues of concern), although this will vary by institution and may or may not be required (see the bottom of Exhibit 5.1). Last, although not an ethical issue, students should remember to provide a deadline for responding, as this ensures they get the information requested in a timely fashion.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 5.2</th>
<th>Information Sheets</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Information sheets should include:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Who is doing the research</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Where you are from</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Why you are doing the research</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Who the supervisor is</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• How were they selected to participate</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• What do participants need to do and how long it will take</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Is there any potential for them to be harmed (or will they be disadvantaged if they do not participate)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Whether their confidentiality and anonymity will be protected</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• What happens to the data and any report</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• How they will be informed of the results</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Exhibit 5.1 Example of an Information Sheet

<Italic material should be filled in for the specific project.>

<UNIVERSITY LETTERHEAD>

<Supervisor’s/Lecturer’s Contact Details>

Dear Potential Participant,

As part of <SUBJECT X> 1 am/We are undertaking a research project titled <TITLE>. The project examines <1 or 2 sentences describing what the project is about and outcomes>. <Explain why they were chosen and how>.

We would like you to <1 or 2 sentences explaining what you want them to do>. This will take approximately <X minutes>. Your participation is completely voluntary [for employees of an organization it would be beneficial to inform them that organizational approval was obtained, but it is still a voluntary activity and that they can choose to participate or not] and there will be no negative consequences to you for not participating.

[If there are audio- or videotapes of interviews it might be appropriate to allow participants to review tapes or transcripts. If you use these, it is also beneficial to say:] During the interview, you will have the opportunity to edit the tape and/or stop the interview at any time. Prior to beginning the interview we will ask you to sign a consent form.

[If using a survey you can say:] Please return the survey to <Name of person collecting responses> by <Date>. Your completion and return of the survey is taken as an indication of your consent to participate.

[You can also say (more than one may be applicable):]

1. We will be providing <X> with a copy of the final report; however, data will be aggregated such that individuals cannot be identified.

2. We will be providing <X> with a copy of the report and will be quoting individual comments with your permission.

3. We will be providing a copy of the results to your organization, which will make the results available to you.

4. If you would like a summary of results, they will be available from our supervisor after <Date>.

Thank you for considering participating in this study. If you have any questions in relation to my/our study, please contact my/our supervisor at the above address.

[ALL students sign.]

[Your university may also require you to include a complaints mechanism, such as the following:] The university requires that all participants are informed that if they have any complaint concerning the manner in which research is conducted, they may direct it to the researcher, or if an independent person is preferred, they can contact <X at Phone and Address>.
Confidentiality and Anonymity

On the information sheet, you may have mentioned that you will keep respondents’ answers confidential and/or anonymous. These issues have been mentioned earlier, but they need to be discussed further, as many students confuse the two issues.

Anonymity requires that you do not know who the participants are. This could be achieved through random phone surveying or having an organization distribute a survey on behalf of the student(s) to all employees or customers. Confidentiality means that you know who the participants are, but that their identity will not be revealed in any way in the resulting report. As we mentioned earlier, confidentiality is very important, especially when you are examining situations in a firm in which you will give managers a copy of the report. It could also be important when undertaking an industry-based study with a final report to be distributed to all participants, who may be competitors.

You must consider how you will protect participants, and if there is any possibility that they will not be protected, this must be clearly stated to potential respondents in the accompanying information letters and consent forms (discussed in more detail later in this chapter). If individuals clearly know they will be identified and that the report will be distributed to managers or competitors, there is no ethical problem associated with responses not remaining confidential or anonymous, because respondents, who know this is the case, will have made an informed decision to participate.

There are several ways that anonymity and confidentiality can be protected. As mentioned earlier, if the researcher does not know who replies, individual confidentiality and anonymity are usually protected. However, it may be possible that individuals could still be identified based on the level of analysis. For example, how many 45-year-old female senior managers are there in the Finance Department in one organization? If the answer is one, then that individual could be identified if the analysis is too detailed. Therefore, you need to be careful as to how detailed and/or segmented your data are, and this needs to be explained in your information sheet.

Potential for Harm

There are a number of ways in which participants can be harmed: physical harm, psychological harm, emotional harm, embarrassment (i.e., social harm), and so on. It is important for you to identify any potential for harm and determine how this potential for harm can be overcome. Ideally, your research should have minimal, if any, potential for any harm to occur. This issue is frequently one of the most difficult for students to address, because it requires them to place themselves in the other person’s shoes. The question is not whether you believe harm could occur, but whether participants or potential participants believe that harm could occur.
There are topics in which it could be expected that some harm might arise. For example, what would happen if you were to examine sexual harassment in the workplace, which might identify respondents who are either presently being harassed or were harassed in the past? Ideally, projects that examine issues in which there is a high likelihood of participant harm should not proceed unless a supervisor is actively involved and ensures that processes are in place to address any harmed individuals. One possible way to address the harm in such a project would be to provide participants with information on counseling services or appropriate support bodies dealing with the issue. Such materials should be distributed to all respondents with the information sheet, so that those who need assistance can seek it. In this way, you will have at least provided a mechanism to assist any harmed individuals and thus undertaken a duty of care in regard to participants. While the research per se might not harm the individual, it may cause additional distress, and thus it is your responsibility to address the issue.

In other situations, there could be more direct harm to participants. For example, a study looking at staff drinking on the job could result in someone being fired if the study identified that they had a problem. As mentioned earlier, even showing participants advertisements used in the media may embarrass or offend some segments of the community. Thus, you must identify any potential harm to participants and seek to ensure that the potential is minimized within the study as well as that participants are clearly informed of the potential for harm.

Though not a mechanism for preventing harm, in cases involving interviews and/or focus groups it may also be beneficial to have respondents sign consent forms in addition to receiving an information sheet. This makes it clear that individuals have agreed to participate; however, given that individuals should always be given the right to withdraw at any time, this may provide less protection than anticipated (consent forms will be examined in more detail later under “Other, More Specific Ethical Issues”). The real answer to minimizing harm is to select topics and methods that preclude any harm arising.

Communicating Results

There are three broad issues that you need to be aware of when completing your research project report and communicating results with your lecturer, professor, or supervisor and with clients, should they exist: plagiarism, academic fraud, and misrepresenting results.

Plagiarism

The first issue of plagiarism relates to all student work; that is, you need to be very careful that you do not misrepresent someone else’s work as your own. The appropriate techniques for referencing others’ ideas are discussed in Chapter 7, “Literature Reviews.” There may be a temptation to “cut and
paste” others’ work to form new ideas. This is unfortunately very easy with
the use of electronic databases and information on the web. Do not be
tempted to simply copy paragraphs (or more) out of other documents. If you
do, make sure you cite this material appropriately. In most universities, pla-
giarism is a breach of the student code of conduct and can result in failing the
subject/class or even expulsion from the institution. Therefore, you need to be
very careful when using material from others to ensure that it is adequately
referenced. Remember: If you found the material, so can your lecturer or pro-
fessor. This is made even easier with tools such as Turnitin, which automati-
cally checks whether what you have written matches not only published
works, but material in other students’ assignments!

**Academic Fraud**

Once students begin undertaking research involving the collection, analy-
sis, and interpretation of data, there is also the possibility of what is known
as academic fraud, which in most cases is perceived by universities as being
as bad if not worse than plagiarism. Academic fraud involves the intentional
misrepresentation of what has been done. This includes making up data
and/or results, or purposefully putting forward conclusions that are not accu-
rate. Students may be inclined to commit academic fraud for a number of rea-
sons. For example, they may have difficulty accessing the correct people to
survey and so may be tempted to make up data. In other cases, students may
find that their results are inconclusive and think that they need to find some-
thing in order to receive a good grade.

The temptation to commit academic fraud should be resisted. As you need
to realize, most research projects have “hiccups,” and, in fact, many academ-
ic journal articles include a limitation section that identifies unforeseen
problems. Also, the outcomes of your project are generally less important
than your learning the research process.

To ensure that you will be able to get the data needed, take time to think
about the project in advance and come up with contingencies should prob-
lems arise. For example, one group of students wanted to undertake a tele-
phone survey of 18- to 25-year-old males by randomly calling people until
they obtained 100 responses. After they called 100 people, they found that
they received only one response. On looking at the census data, they found
that this group (18- to 25-year-old males) represented only 5% of the popu-
lation; thus if they were lucky, they would have had only five respondents
from their 100 calls. The group decided that they would rather survey male
students in this age category in the university cafeteria. As this example
shows, a data collection problem forced the students to modify the design and
refocus the question, which in this case was fine and still satisfied the assign-
ment’s requirements.

In regard to research results, you may become concerned if your findings
are inclusive or are inconsistent with existing literature. Many researchers
undertake studies that do not find the expected outcomes; unfortunately,
you will find fewer of these works published, because journals seldom want
to say that nothing interesting was found. For your research, however, this
should not be a problem, and in many cases there might be sound reasons
why no result was found. For example, the instrument may have been
imprecise, the sample problematic, the context of the study different, and
so forth. Furthermore, as was mentioned previously, in most cases student
projects are evaluated on the process rather than the outcomes, although
the criteria to be used to evaluate the research need to be clarified with your
individual instructor.

**Misrepresenting the Results**

The last issue, misrepresenting the results, is especially important for
students undertaking their project for a client. In many situations, you will be
so good at marketing your work that businesses may forget that these are
student projects, which frequently have substantial limitations. In the second
place, students are just that: students. You are learning about the application
of research to solve business problems and, as such, may make conclusions
and recommendations that are inconstant or incorrect based on what was
found. On occasion, some students (not you, of course) may purposefully
misrepresent their work to impress their business client. Academic supervi-
sors, on the other hand, will frequently identify these exaggerations and mark
the work down accordingly.

The problem of overclaiming is often difficult to overcome without the
assistance of your lecturer, professor, or supervisor, who, as an objective
expert, will be able to determine whether there are any substantial errors or
omissions in the report. If you do have a client, you should make sure that
any report to clients clearly specifies what was done and what limitations
exist. In addition, we recommend that your instructor provide some objective
feedback that is passed on to the client with any final report.

**Other, More Specific Ethical Issues**

The issues discussed so far have been applicable to a wide range of research
projects. There are, however, a number of ethical issues that may arise in spe-
cific situations or when using specific types of research techniques. A number
of these issues will be discussed in the following subsections; once again, these
are in no way comprehensive in terms of other ethical issues that could arise,
and these are meant only to be a guide.

**Conflicts of Interest**

This issue arises when you or one group member is an individual
employed in the industry you are researching and you do not inform all
respondents of this fact. While the research may be a good opportunity to gain competitive information, such action would be ethically inappropriate. It is always surprising how much competitively useful information a business will give student researchers. The easiest way to overcome this problem is not to place yourself or your group in this position to start with; that is, if you work in one firm in an industry, do not try to look at your competitors. However, if you do, it would be imperative that you make your dual status as researcher and competitor clear in the information sheet.

**Focus Group Participant Identification**

When conducting a focus group, the researcher is not the only one involved, as there are other participants in the focus group, and its dynamic nature is one of the benefits of its use (see Chapter 9 for a discussion of focus groups). However, this means that the information discovered within the group becomes common knowledge among all those in attendance. Therefore, it is important that members of the focus group sign appropriate consent forms in situations in which this information might be used against the person who said something or a third person who was discussed. The consent form could include a statement regarding participants keeping the information discussed confidential. This method is, of course, not foolproof, because it is unclear that any penalties for breaching the agreement could be imposed, but at least you are undertaking due diligence to protect participants and others.

**Deceit**

In some cases, telling respondents your true intent might modify their response or behavior. For example, if your group were undertaking an experiment to determine whether an interviewer’s attire or gender influenced respondents’ behavior, you would not want to tell respondents this, as it would most likely bias the results. For the most part, however, deceit should be avoided at all times. This is one of the situations in which researchers might be tempted to apply a teleological ethical view; that is, does the benefit of misleading the respondents outweigh any potential harm to them.

In some cases, the deceit may be minor; for example, in examining the impact of health labels on alcohol, respondents are told it is a study of factors affecting alcohol consumption. However, in other cases, such as the one related to collecting competitive data under the guise of student research, it is more substantial. Deceit should be used only if no other method of researching the issue is available and the students’ instructor is well aware of what is happening. In addition, at the conclusion of the intervention, for instance, at the end of the survey in the first example,
participants should be informed (i.e., debriefed) of the study's real purpose and be given the right to have their information withdrawn (i.e., not used). In extreme cases of deception, the debriefing may need to be more detailed and structured. On the whole, it is best that student researchers not undertake studies requiring excessive deceit.

**Observation**

Another ethical issue that may arise when undertaking projects involves the observation of participants. This becomes an ethical issue especially when you are observing people in a public or quasipublic place. For example, what if you want to examine how respondents behave in the ice cream section of a food store (i.e., how much time they spend there, what products they look at, etc.)? In this situation, it is likely that asking to observe people will modify their behavior, and therefore, researchers may not want to explicitly ask each person if he or she can be watched. One solution to this issue is to have notices placed at the entrance of the store indicating that researchers will be operating in this area at these times. Individuals not wishing to participate could then avoid this area at these times. Should you wish to videotape these encounters, it may also be advisable to seek permission using a consent form to use the information after the participant has been taped, even if a notice is used (if someone declines, you should erase this person’s data). Broader covert observation, such as hidden cameras in work areas without employee awareness (and possibly consent), should be avoided. This is usually not only inappropriate but often illegal as well.

**Permission From Organization/Location**

One ethical issue that students frequently overlook relates to getting written permission from the organization in which the research is being undertaken or the location in which the data are being collected. Students have been ejected from shopping malls simply because they did not have written permission to be there. In one case, the person who gave them oral permission had simply not passed this information on to those responsible for security. In another case, the students’ contact suddenly left the organization, and because the students did not have permission in writing, they were not allowed to proceed.

When getting written permission, it is also important that the person you talk with has the authority to give that permission and that your activities are organized well in advance. For example, one group had been planning for several months to examine employees in one organization, assuming that getting permission would be easy, and waited until the last minute. Unfortunately, they discovered that their request would have to go through
several levels within the organization and, therefore, would take more time than they had.

**Video-/Audio Taping**

In a number of situations, you may wish to audiotape or videotape the specific intervention. This can be done for a number of reasons, such as to ensure that no verbal information is missed during a focus group or interview. Alternatively, you may be attempting to capture nonverbal information, such as body language. Taping of participants was discussed earlier, but some of the ethical issues should be restated. It is essential that when taping participants, you clearly state in the information sheet and consent form that you will be doing so. You should also allow participants some ability to edit the tape, and as with all activities, allow participants to withdraw, even during the taping process. You should tell participants what will happen to the taped material after it has been analyzed, and in some cases it may be worthwhile to offer the tape to the participant. In most cases, the tapes will be erased after the data have been transcribed. We also recommend that you obtain consent forms from participants when taping activities. Though participants can withdraw at any time, this still provides some evidence that participants initially agreed to participate.

**Consent Forms**

Whenever interviewing (other than a researcher–administered survey), audio-/videotaping, or conducting a focus group, we strongly suggest that you not only use an information sheet but have the respondent sign a consent form as well. You should keep the consent form as an indication of informed consent by the respondent, should any question arise. However, you need to remember that a person who signs an informed consent form can still rescind that consent; that is, change his or her mind for any reason and at anytime, because the consent form is not a binding document. If this occurs, you must not use the information that person provided.

For the most part, the information contained in consent forms should be similar to the material in the information sheet, but there is more emphasis on what respondents are agreeing to do and that they understand any potential negative consequences, as described in the information sheet. Exhibit 5.2 provides an example of a consent form. Some specific information that should be included relates to whether the participant agrees to be quoted in the final report and what happens to any tapes of the interview or focus group that might exist. As discussed in the focus group section, there is also a clause related to keeping any information discussed during the focus group confidential, which is designed to protect the other participants in the focus group discussions.
The introduction of new technology has brought with it some new ethical issues. Each university may deal with these differently, so it is important to find out how the issues are viewed within your university. The first relates to the use of online panels (Couper, 2000). Research organizations establish a pool of people who have agreed to be invited to participate in research. For a fee, the organizations will distribute a survey to their members and those people who participate usually receive a small amount of compensation. The ethical issue arises in that (a) some ethics committees have concerns with people being “paid” for their participation, and (b) some ethics committees are concerned with people being recruited through third-party organizations. As online panels grow in use it is envisioned that the associated issues will be seen as less problematic, but it is important to know whether your university has a problem with this approach.

A related issue that has sometimes also arisen in terms of collecting data online relates to consent, especially when recruiting minors. The question is how researchers can be assured that the participants fully understand the
information and consent sheets. A response to such suggestions applies equally to postal surveys and thus again should generally disappear over time as a potential concern to ethics committees.

The final issue related to new technology is how does one view information communicated in an online environment. For example, say you want to look at a blog or chat site that discusses aspects of a given company or brand. Is this information publicly available or designed to expressly be an open and public communication forum? If this is the case, then there would be limited ethical issues associated with using these communications. However, if it is viewed that this information is private communication, it would possibly not be ethically appropriate to use the information without the participant’s approval. These issues are indeed complex and thus if you are considering using such forums as data in your research, you would be well advised to identify how your university views these issues, as it will eliminate any need to redesign your research if these forums are deemed to be out of bounds.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have discussed various potential ethical issues that you should carefully consider when planning your research, including the timelines for ethical clearance process. While the discussion in this chapter can be used as a guide, it is important that you determine what the applicable rules are at your university.

The objective of these guidelines is to ensure that potential respondents have full information before voluntarily participating in your research. In addition, you need to put yourself in the participant’s position to determine whether there is any reasonable possibility of harm arising. It is your responsibility to eliminate, or at least minimize, this possibility. Addressing the potential for harm might require a modification of the research design or of the specific questions asked. For this reason, it is important that this issue be considered when designing the study rather than after the project has substantially progressed.

PROJECT CHECKLIST

- Is there any human intervention in this project?
- What ethical issues must you consider?
- Are there any areas of “conflict of interest”?
- Does the project need ethics approval?
- Are consent forms or an information sheet needed?
CASE STUDY

The research project wants to discover the views of students regarding the establishment of an outlet of “Rick’s Chicken Salad Bar” on campus. You are planning on surveying students to find out what they think about the idea. Given you will be undertaking surveys, there is human intervention and thus you have to get ethics approval.

- What types of ethical issues might you need to consider?
- One of your group works for a competitor chain of restaurants. Does this raise any new ethical issues? How would you deal with them?

Chapter Questions

1. What are the alternative ethical perspectives discussed in the chapter and why might you apply one approach or the other?

2. Does your university have a committee to review the ethics of student research? When does it meet?

3. Discuss the types of human intervention you might want to use for your assignment and what ethical issues arise.

4. Discuss how you can ensure you do not inadvertently commit plagiarism or academic fraud.

5. Design an information sheet and consent form for your research project, taking into consideration the ethical issues that might arise.

Note

1. The instances of students researching their own workplace may increase as part-time and/or mature student enrollments increase.

References


