PART 2
Ethical themes
5 The privacy of respondents, and restrictions on the use of data

Anonymity

A cornerstone of research ethics is that respondents should be offered the opportunity to have their identity hidden in a research report. There are a number of advantages for both researcher and respondents in the use of anonymity, but respondents do not always wish to take advantage of a hidden identity. Before we examine the more usual situation where respondents choose anonymity, let us explore briefly the kinds of situations where respondents prefer their identity to be known.

An individual or an organization may prefer that their identity is given in a report because they see some advantage in the associated publicity. After all, people are interviewed in the media all the time, and they are often identified. We can perhaps think of situations in education and social science research where a respondent may wish to be identified. A headteacher who is an advocate of a particular model of pastoral care in their school might welcome the opportunity to be interviewed as part of a research project, because it might provide a forum for discussion of this educational theory. A large organization which has agreed to take part in a study of its personnel policy might be happy to be named, if it feels that its policy is worthy of wider dissemination. Such a decision may seem appropriate at the time it is made, but later it may cause both researcher and respondent some concern.

The respondent, either individual or organization, may begin to realize that the data being collected are not entirely complimentary. They may begin to wish that they had some control over the data collection and over the way the report is written. However, this would not normally be part of the original research agreement. From the researcher’s point of view, there may be related pressures. The researcher may be aware that some data do not portray a respondent in a flattering way, and may even come under pressure to exclude some data. The researcher may be concerned that when the research report is published, some respondents may claim that the
research methodology was flawed, and that the respondents have not been portrayed fairly.

These potential problems illustrate the advantages of anonymity. One possible solution in the case of respondents who express a wish to be identified in a research report is to draw up a written agreement which sets down some of the main responsibilities of the research relationship. When the research programme is first being discussed with respondents, it could be pointed out to them that if their identity is maintained, this does not alter the freedom of the researcher to conduct the research as planned, and to write the report in a manner which is objective in the view of the researcher. The agreement would need to set down very precisely the methodology to be used by the researcher, and the main assumptions behind the data analysis. Such an agreement might eliminate some sources of misunderstanding, but research produces complex situations, and it is not always easy to anticipate areas of difficulty. We can already begin to appreciate some advantages of the use of anonymity in research. Let us examine these advantages systematically.

One of the principal advantages of anonymity in the dissemination of research is that it encourages objectivity throughout the research process. In social science and educational research, both the researcher and the respondents are almost inevitably affected by the context in which the research takes place. If respondents are asked for their opinions about a medieval painting, say, there may be few implications in terms of offending people. The artist will not be alive, and it is unlikely that any descendants would be concerned about views on a painting from several centuries before. The respondents would feel relatively free to express their feelings in an objective manner, subject to any legal constraints on inappropriate language in a public place.

It could be a different situation, however, if respondents were asked for their views on the human resource policy of the large company where they were employed. They may have clear views on the policy, but if they thought that they would be identified, they may be cautious at revealing their true feelings. Promises of anonymity could make them feel sufficiently confident to be objective in their views. The anonymity frees them to express their true feelings.

From the perspective of the researcher, anonymity makes it easier to explore issues which might be slightly unpopular or which are regarded as sensitive. If the respondents are protected through anonymity, the researcher will feel more justified in being able to explore sensitive issues. The assumption will be that the respondents may be more willing to provide data in such circumstances.

Various methods can be used to anonymize a research report. One can remove all names and simply refer to respondents by numbers or letters, but this does tend to make the research account seem impersonal. It is difficult for the reader to relate to the individual respondents and what has been said, or to
make a connection between a particular viewpoint and a specific respondent. It is easier to achieve this if fictional names are used. There are a number of issues with the use of fictional names. It may be important in terms of the credibility of the account to employ names of the same gender as the real respondent. With respondents from different ethnic groups, appropriate names should be chosen. In the case of respondents from the Indian subcontinent, for example, there are some names which are characteristic of different regions of India, and some names which are characteristic of different religions, such as Hinduism, Sikhism and Islam. It is necessary for the authenticity of the research report to ensure that appropriate fictional names are selected, which may entail some research into the ethnic background and culture of the respondents in the sample.

In some research accounts there may be a tension between the attempt to achieve authenticity of names, and the desire to maintain anonymity. For example, when describing research in an organization in which there are very few men, the use of male fictional names may help to reveal their identities, and similarly where there are very few employees of a particular ethnicity. The very small number of participants of a particular group may make it difficult to maintain anonymity. Where this is the case, it may be preferable to employ numbers or letters to signify all respondents. It is a difficult decision, and the particular features of each situation will need to be considered.

Whether fictional names, letters or numbers are used to anonymize participants, it is often necessary during the writing of a research report or thesis for the researcher to maintain two parallel lists, one of the real names and one of the coded names. The researcher usually needs to do this in order to remember which participant is being discussed. Once the report or thesis has been completed, the coded list has to be destroyed. The real identities of the participants are then located only in the memory of the researcher, and these memories will fade in the fullness of time.

When research is undertaken in an organization such as a school, college or industrial company, it is often necessary to describe some features of that organization. If this is done with care, such descriptions, combined with a fictional name, should not reveal the identity of the institution. The description of an institution is often needed to clarify the social context in which the data have been gathered. In the case of a high school, it may be appropriate to describe the broad social class of the catchment area, to define the geographical area in which the school is located and to specify some features of school performance, for example in recent quality audits. In a comparable way, it may be necessary to describe some aspects of individual participants in relation to the organization in which they work. If one of the participants in a research study was the headteacher, it is almost certain to be relevant to mention this. Similarly, another participant may be the head of mathematics, or the sports coach. The full details of the post held by a participant
should normally be given if they are specifically relevant to the research report. Otherwise, it may be possible simply to describe someone as a head of department or as a subject teacher.

If the anonymizing is carried out carefully, there should be no reason why any respondent could be recognized. The only way in which this might occur is by means of the identity of the researcher. If it is a full-time researcher who has no other connection or affiliation with the institution where data have been collected, the identities of respondents will normally be secure. However, if the researcher is also a teacher or other employee at an institution, and if this is stated in the thesis or research report, there is a clear connection whereby someone might be able to identify at least some of the respondents. Normally, researchers do wish to be identified, in their capacity as the author of a thesis or academic journal article. Once the thesis is placed in a library, or the article published, it may be possible for key figures in the research report to be identified.

Suppose a respondent is identified as the head of music in a high school. If someone read the thesis and was acquainted with the researcher, they might be able to identify the school, even though it had been given a fictional name. Knowing the approximate date at which the research had been conducted, it could be possible to identify the person who had been the head of music at the time. Nevertheless, it would take a certain amount of effort and determination to uncover the identities of people. It would be more difficult to identify respondents who did not hold a particular post. If some of the respondents had been pupils at the school, it would be difficult to identify them with any degree of certainty. This would still be so even if they were identified as being members of a specific year group.

In summary, the use of fictional names should go some considerable way to helping to ensure anonymity. There are no absolute guarantees of anonymity, particularly in the case of people who hold named posts, but the important issue is that researchers recognize the importance of privacy for respondents and then do their best to ensure that privacy. They may not always be absolutely successful, but the strategies described here go a long way towards that aim.

Another advantage of anonymity is that it protects individuals who may be mentioned by research respondents. It would be unfair if individuals unconnected to the original research project are identified simply because they are included in the discussion by respondents. If the respondent actually names people, they could be given fictional names in the same way as respondents. If the researcher considered that there was any risk of their being identified, it may be necessary to edit the data in such a way as to ensure anonymity. In order to preserve the validity and objectivity of the data, it may be necessary to explain the action taken at some point in the report.

One final issue about the use of anonymity is that it should not be used as
a shield for making unfair or unjustifiable comments about people or organizations. When respondents are informed that as far as possible their identities will be hidden, they may feel liberated and uninhibited with their comments on the research issues. They should perhaps be cautioned that they should try at all times to be as objective and balanced as they can in what they say. If the researcher feels that some remarks are so unacceptable that they could not be included in the research report, a decision should perhaps be taken to exclude them, and an explanation provided in the report or thesis.

The editing of data raises complicated ethical questions. In the ethical dialogue in Box 5.1, the two researchers involved have collected some interview data from pupils in a high school, and debate whether some of it is appropriate to include in the official research report.

Researcher A is arguing that there should exist the potential for all data to be included in the final analysis of research. This argument depends to some extent upon the sampling method used for a research study. If a random sampling strategy has been employed, every member of the research population should in principle have the same chance of being included in the sample. Hence, one might argue that there are no grounds for omitting the data from a single respondent. However, in the case of a purposive sample, where more subjective criteria may have been used in selection, one might feel that the subjectivity employed provides at least some justification for an element of subjectivity in the selection of data. The separate but related issue is that of the degree of freedom one should give respondents to use uninhibited language. The ethical issue would appear to be that people do not generally have the right to use insulting or unpleasant language to describe another person, when they could convey the same attitudes or beliefs in more balanced, objective language. Arguably, researchers should seek to find a way to report the ideas intended, in as balanced a manner as possible. This seems reasonable even in the case where researchers have done their best to ensure anonymity.

Confidentiality

It may help in the discussion of confidentiality if we begin with a brief analysis of the conceptual territory covered by the term, and of the way in which it relates to anonymity. Perhaps the starting point for a discussion of confidentiality is the idea of privacy. At first glance it does seem reasonable that people should be entitled to privacy, but perhaps the idea requires further examination. In rather general, theoretical terms we may assume that the concept of privacy is concerned with our private details and information not being circulated to others, and that in this sense privacy is a right, akin to other human rights. What, however, do we mean by a right (see Box 5.2)?

It is an arguable contention that privacy is not a fundamental moral right,
Box 5.1 Ethical dialogue: the editing of data

A: This group of four pupils have had a real go at the school! They obviously hate everything about it. Hardly a teacher escapes, and they’ve really been quite harsh about the head.

B: Do you think he’s really that bad?

A: Well, as far as I can see there are no other pupils who have been anywhere near as critical and quite a lot are obviously happy at the school.

B: Maybe we should consider whether they are so atypical that we leave them out of the data.

A: I don’t really like excluding them from the data. After all, the selection of respondents was more or less random. We had no idea who we were getting in the sample.

B: Well, there is first the issue about whether this group is so exceptional that we should consider how much credence to give their data. But second, they have used very strong language about the head, and I’m not sure whether we ought to include such language in our report.

A: OK, I agree it’s a bit over the top. We could omit the sections with strong language, and just paraphrase what they said. Alternatively, we could just delete the offending words, and mark them with dashes. I still think we should include the data, in the sense that what they have to say may not be entirely typical, but it does indicate a particular point of view in the school.

B: I suppose so. We do know these pupils have been in some trouble in the past, and my guess is that they are using this research as an opportunity to get back at the school. I suppose what you’re saying is that even if that is true, it is still significant that there are such strong pupil attitudes in the school.

A: I think so, yes. I just think that all data should potentially be used. We obviously have to be selective, but that selectivity is perhaps more about reducing the scale of the data, rather than choosing deliberately to omit particular views.

B: OK, I’m happy if we make sure we omit the really offensive language; but I accept we need to represent the views in some way.

but a feature of our lives which is allowed us by others. Similarly, it may be that confidentiality is something which we are promised, and at the same time, as part of that promise, we may be informed of the key methods by which that confidentiality will be ensured. Anonymity is normally one of those key methods.

Discussion of confidentiality is part of the informed consent process. However, it is important that researchers are explicit about all the elements of the confidentiality promise. It is simply not sufficient that the researcher promises to the respondent to keep the data confidential. First, there should be
Box 5.2 Theoretical perspective: rights and obligations

It can be argued that as human beings we possess certain moral rights, such as freedom for instance, which accrue to us by virtue of our basic humanity. Such rights are not given to us by others, but belong to us. They may be taken away from us, either temporarily or permanently, but that does not in a sense remove those rights. One might argue that even though we may be falsely imprisoned, and in a practical sense be deprived of our freedom, that in no way invalidates the freedom we possess as a thinking, reasoning human being. We are still, even in these adverse circumstances, free to think what we will.

It may not be quite as clear, however, that we possess the right to privacy, in the same way that we possess a right to freedom. As fundamentally social animals, perhaps privacy is subtly different from freedom, and is rather more a feature of existence which may be given to us by others. Someone may promise us that they will leave us in solitude, and not distribute any information about us; arguably in such a case, they have an obligation to help maintain our privacy. It is, however, an arguable question whether we actually possessed that right to privacy in the first place (see Mackie 1977: 172).

an explicit statement about the people who will have access to the data provided by a particular respondent; it should be clear about the people who will be able to read and scrutinize the data provided. Second, the respondent should be informed about the plans for retaining the data, and for providing access to other researchers during that period. The respondent should have a clear and unambiguous understanding of those people who will see the information they will be asked to provide and they should be informed about the procedures to be used to try to ensure that the identities of respondents remain undisclosed. In the case of questionnaire data particularly, the researcher may have the intention of combining data, such that individual respondents are subsumed under the total aggregated data. This is an alternative technique to the use of fictional names, to try to ensure anonymity. It is, however, suitable for only certain types of data.

This type of detail about the proposed plans for confidentiality should normally be made clear to potential respondents before they are asked to give their informed consent to participation in the research. Only with this level of detail can they be regarded as fully informed. The statements about confidentiality should be regarded as a promise, and treated with all the seriousness which that implies from a moral point of view. One cannot of course predict the nature of the data that will be provided in any research study, and the requirements of the law should carry precedence over promises made in such situations. Such precedence will usually involve matters of apparent
criminal wrongdoing. (For discussions on anonymity and confidentiality, see Kvale 1996: 109–23; Aldridge and Levine 2001: 111.)

Trying to maintain the social ecology of a research setting

The social ecology of a setting refers to the sense of equilibrium which evolves between the different social actors in that setting. Generally people behave with some degree of regularity in a social setting, providing a feeling of reassurance to others, and a yardstick by which they can judge their own behaviour. In a school, for example, the staff know which colleagues arrive at work early. They also know which students arrive early, and which students are typically late. Some colleagues always perform administrative tasks promptly and others require several reminders. People tend to park their cars in the same places, and to make their cups of coffee at the same time. If you work in a college and are a course leader, you know the lecturers who will mark work and return it on time, and those who will delay until the last possible moment. You also usually know the students who will hand their assignments in on time, and those who will be always asking for extensions to the deadline. In short, although human interactions are never completely predictable, people do tend to develop patterns and consistencies in their behaviour.

Besides the routine aspects of life such as making cups of coffee, these consistencies also apply to our professional lives. As teaching colleagues get to know each other, they begin to learn the views and attitudes which others hold. They begin to be able to predict the views which people will take in meetings. They are able to some extent to predict the approach colleagues will take to new initiatives. If we are thinking of asking different colleagues if they would like to become involved in planning a new course, we may be able to predict their response with some degree of accuracy. All of these features contribute to the social ecology of the organizational setting.

Social ecology is never permanent, and is far from being totally predictable. As a form of equilibrium, it is in a state of continual flux. All kinds of factors can change the equilibrium. If the management of a college decides to restructure the staffing organization, this is likely to affect the equilibrium considerably. Even if a single new member of the teaching staff is appointed, the arrival of that new colleague will affect the social ecology. Certainly, a group of researchers or even a single researcher conducting a research study in a school or college may have a significant effect upon the social setting.

A researcher may disturb the social ecology of a school primarily because the staff and students cannot quite understand the role occupied by the researcher. The latter is not a teacher, not a quality standards inspector, not a governor, not a parent, nor any other category of person who normally comes to the school. Both the staff and the students are aware that the researcher is
gathering information, and that some of that information may come from them. They are aware that, to some extent, the manner in which they go about their daily lives will be subject to some scrutiny or observation. They assume that value judgements will be made about the way they do things, and this can lead to some level of anxiety. These feelings may be particularly relevant for the teaching staff, and may manifest themselves in a number of ways. Some teachers may be solicitous of the researcher, taking every opportunity to show examples of their teaching materials, and to invite the researcher into their classes. Others may be uncooperative and suspicious.

For a variety of reasons, some ethical and some concerned with the quality of the research data, it is desirable that the researcher disturbs the social ecology as little as possible. In research terms the researcher will probably want to collect data in as naturalistic a setting as possible. The less the school is disturbed by the research process the better. This will improve the validity of the research, in the sense that the data collected will more truly reflect the nature of the school as it really is, rather than having been amended by the research process. Equally well though, there is the ethical issue of the extent to which it is reasonable or fair to disturb the professional lives of teaching colleagues. There are many different positions one might adopt here. We might point out, as has already been argued, that there is no such thing as a completely stable social ecology, and hence the impact of a researcher will be no more significant than any other temporary visitor to the school. We could also adopt a form of consequentialist argument, in that we might argue that school-based research is designed to improve the quality of teaching and learning; although there may be some temporary impact on the school and teaching staff, this is justified by the long-term advantages. Nevertheless, there perhaps remains a feeling that whatever other justifications may be sought, it is unfair to disturb the professional lives of colleagues. Arguably, they are disturbed for all kinds of reasons, including quality inspections, and the intervention of researchers is simply adding to this burden.

There may be a compromise position. Teachers may find the impact of researchers intrusive and even stressful, especially when they do not fully understand the purpose and nature of their research. If this is so, perhaps the best strategy would be to try to inform the teachers and students about the research project as fully as possible, before the research commences. Informed consent may have been granted by the school governors and the headteacher, but it would arguably be unfair to expect that data could then be collected freely throughout the school. Before the research project started, it may be possible for the researcher to attend a staff meeting, and to explain the nature of the project to all the staff. Notices could be placed around the school explaining the research project to the students, and providing photographs and identities of the researchers who they will see in the school. It may be possible for the researchers to become involved in normal school life, as in the
role of a participant observer. This may help to gain the confidence of the teachers and the researcher may feel less of an intruder, but someone who is contributing to the life of the school. One might argue that such measures are undermining the very naturalism which they are designed to maintain. There is a fine balance here, between the researcher’s wish to avoid disturbing the social ecology, and the potential impact of the methods used to try to achieve that end.

**Observational studies in a public setting**

Research in a public setting is sometimes described as field research and sometimes as naturalistic research. A public setting is any social context to which members of the public routinely have access. Examples might include a railway station, a city centre, a large department store, a motorway, a public swimming pool, or parts of some educational institutions. Perhaps the most significant ethical problem when conducting research in such settings is the extent to which people are entitled to privacy. A related question is the establishment of a demarcation line between private and public settings.

Let us imagine an archetypal private setting, such as the boardroom of a large corporation. If we wished to conduct an ethnographic study of a meeting of the directors, we would expect to have to obtain the permission of those present, and to submit ourselves to detailed questioning on the purposes and likely dissemination of our research.

If we attended a public meeting to which people had been invited to listen to a marketing talk on a new product, this is a very different type of context. We might feel that we would be justified in keeping field notes, since the speaker had made a specific attempt to attract people to listen. In research terms, however, there may still remain a number of issues upon which to reflect. Even in a public meeting, it may not be entirely clear whether any type of data collection is appropriate, or whether only some may be ethically permissible. For instance, there may be ethical and indeed legal reasons why the taking of photographs or the use of a video camera might be inappropriate.

One of the basic dilemmas for the researcher who seeks to carry out naturalistic research is that ideally the setting should have complete ecological validity. In other words, the setting should be undisturbed by any extraneous event. Clearly, once the researcher asks the participants in the setting whether data can be collected, the ecological validity is compromised. If we momentarily set the ethical issues on one side, from a purely research viewpoint, the naturalistic research with the greatest validity involves a setting where the participants do not realize that they are being observed. However, ethical concerns may well require that participants are informed that the researcher wishes to maintain observational records.
A key factor in evaluating the ethical issues in this type of situation is the types of data which the researcher envisages collecting. Arguably the central factor is whether the data-collection method would enable participants to be identified later. This may be particularly significant if the data are stored for any time, and another researcher is able to gain access to them. Field notes or other forms of written observation would not normally enable participants to be identified, since it would be easy to use fictional identifiers. However, any form of visual data would clearly not ensure anonymity. If there were any possibility that participants might be identified from the data, it would be prudent to take the advice of a research ethics committee before commencing the research.

Sometimes, when planning research in a public setting, the intention is to gather data on a particular social group. Such a group might consist of higher education students, school students, shoppers within a particular category, or motorists. It may also involve research being conducted in a particular area of a city. Whenever this is the case, it is worth considering the extent to which this particular community has been involved in research before. Excessive research in a particular area of a city can have various consequences. Potential participants may become alienated from the research activity, and either refuse to cooperate, or provide only minimal data. Participants may become sensitized to being observed and may not act naturally. Alternatively, participants may become familiar with the types of questions asked by researchers and develop standard responses.

The study of social groups in a public setting thus raises a number of complicated ethical issues, particularly concerning the privacy of participants. Let us conclude this section by considering two case studies which create fairly typical ethical dilemmas (see Box 5.3).

Issues of privacy are involved in both studies. In the case of those soliciting money from the public, it could be argued that they have placed themselves in the public domain, and are deliberately seeking the attention of passers-by. To that degree one might argue that they have relinquished their right to privacy. Equally well, one could argue that there is no connection between the researchers and the observers, hence there is unlikely to be any way in which their identity could be disclosed in a research report. If we assume that the researchers are careful not to use descriptions which might identify people, the anonymity of the observers is almost certainly assured. On this basis one might argue that there is no requirement to inform the observers that they are being observed. Alternatively, one might wish to take the view that these are unfortunate members of society, and that most people would not wish to live this kind of life. Setting on one side the perhaps cynical view that some people may spend their money inappropriately, one might argue that one should try to extend every kind of consideration to people in such circumstances, and that this should include seeking their informed consent about the research.
Box 5.3 Ethical dilemma: research in a public setting

Two groups of researchers are considering observational studies in different contexts. One group is planning a study of begging in a large inner city. They intend to observe people who are soliciting money, and to make detailed field notes on the length of time they spend in a location, the types of locations that are frequented, the techniques used to solicit money, and to make an estimate from observations of the amount of money collected within a period of time.

The second group plan a study of the various teaching techniques used by university lecturers while they are delivering formal university lectures. The researchers are all students and have legitimate grounds for access to a variety of lectures in different subjects. They plan to keep detailed observational notes, and to maintain a record of the time devoted to different teaching approaches. They plan to compare different lecturers in terms of time devoted to question and answer, formal delivery of subject matter, use of visual aids, informal discussion and the use of handouts.

In the case of the university lecturers, it seems at least a possibility that if they were informed about the research, they may well adapt their style of lecture delivery to what they assumed might be expected. In other words, this would be a threat to the naturalism of the research. On the other hand, as people familiar with research activity, they may resist the temptation to deliberately change their delivery. One might argue that as lecturers they are used to being on public view, and also the probability that students will discuss their performance in lectures. Hence, as they are by virtue of their jobs being observed anyway, one might feel that there is no specific requirement to inform them of the research. It may be slightly more difficult to ensure the anonymity of lecturers. If the identity of the researchers is recorded in the research report, it may be possible, under certain circumstances, to identify the lecturers. This may be an argument for seeking informed consent. A further consideration is that a university lecture theatre is not a public location in the same way as a street in a city centre. The lecture theatre is a public space, but only to a restricted group of people. One might feel that it does not necessarily correspond to what one normally means by a public setting.

In summary, the conducting of observational research in a public setting may apparently justify the waiving of privacy rights and of the need for informed consent. However, a more careful consideration of the relevant factors suggests that these situations are complex, and that both ethical and legal concerns may indicate that some level of agreement from participants may be required. (For a discussion of ethical issues in field research, see Shaffir and Stebbins 1991: 16.)
Privacy in relation to institutions and organizations

Institutions and organizations, just as much as individuals, may be participants in research projects. They also have rights in terms of privacy, and it would be unfair to assume, simply because one is collecting data from a large organization, that some privacy entitlements may be waived. In order to explore the rights of organizations, it may be useful initially to distinguish between public companies whose principal function may be seen as providing a public service, and private companies on the other hand, whose prime purpose is to generate profits for shareholders. The differences in purpose may generate different ethical imperatives, and perhaps different entitlements in terms of privacy.

The situation with a public company whose principal function would appear to be to provide a public service may appear to be different from that of a private, commercial corporation. At first sight, one might argue that such organizations should, in principle, be completely open and accessible to researchers, allowing them to view databases and other sources of information. Even if this were the broad philosophical position, there would presumably still be exceptions, including the confidentiality requirements to protect data on named individuals. The broad ethical position with an organization which exists in principle to further the public good is that it should, by that fact, be prepared to make its procedures open to public scrutiny. There should generally be an expectation that researchers should receive as much help and assistance as possible, commensurate with the protection of named individuals.

In the case of private companies they may have both moral and legal rights to keep details of new product designs secret, and not to participate in any research programme which might jeopardize the confidentiality of such information. They may have similar rights in terms of requiring employees not to release any information which has commercial sensitivity. Private companies may maintain a variety of databases, and if approached by a legitimate research team, it is to be hoped that they would do their best to cooperate in making as many data available as possible. Indeed such collaboration, if publicized, may be commercially advantageous to them. Nevertheless, researchers have to accept that commercial companies are often in a competitive situation, and that they may genuinely feel that to cooperate in a specific research project may be potentially disadvantageous to them.

The distinction between public and private organizations may not always be as clear as one might suppose. Private companies may invest in public organizations, creating situations which are even more complex ethically. Organizations such as colleges and universities, which previously have been seen as being almost entirely within the public sector, may now be corporate
entities. As a more commercial culture pervades areas of life which previously were seen as being a public service, different value systems may evolve. It is important that researchers recognize that organizational cultures do evolve to reflect social, economic and political changes in society, and hence the response of organizations in terms of privacy and confidentiality issues will evolve also.

The storage of data

The fundamental difficulty with the storage of research data is that with the passage of time, it may be used for other research purposes, or non-researchers may gain access to it. Even though the original researcher who collected the data may have complied scrupulously with privacy requirements, there may be no guarantee that future users of the data will do so. It is therefore important that those who collect the data initially, and who store it, give careful thought to the uses to which it might be put. In any situation where data may be stored or archived it is desirable that peer review of the procedure takes place, and an appropriate ethics committee is consulted. Probably one of the most desirable elements in any storage procedure is that all individuals should be anonymized as effectively as possible. If data should be used for some other purpose, this then minimizes any adverse effects for individual respondents.

Generally speaking it is not necessary to store all of the raw data from a research study, once that study has been written up as a thesis or as a journal article. If the data are qualitative in nature, the norm is to use suitably anonymized extracts in the thesis to support the arguments and analysis, and not to make available the entire body of data, which is likely to be substantial in the case of a qualitative study. With quantitative data such as completed questionnaires, it is again the norm to present the summative analysis, and not to save all the primary data. It is often the custom to provide a copy of the uncompleted questionnaire in order to demonstrate the manner in which the data were collected. One might argue that there could be the necessity for another researcher to reanalyse the data in order to confirm the results, and that this is a justification for data storage. However, this could be achieved shortly after the first analysis, thus removing the necessity to store the data. It is possible for another researcher to replicate the research design and to collect more data in a comparable context. The archiving of data is thus something which should be contemplated only after careful thought, and after taking the advice of an appropriate peer review committee.
Further reading


6 Differences in the research context

Cultural differences

The participants in a research study will never be a uniform group, even when the size of the group is small, and the participants have been carefully selected. The members of the research sample will almost certainly possess some factors in common, to correspond with the main variables for the research. There will also be many ways in which they differ. Not only will they differ between themselves, but also they will almost certainly differ in a number of ways from the researcher. The differences, both between participants themselves, and between participants and the researcher, may involve dimensions such as values and attitudes, social customs, religious beliefs, ethnicity, gender, language, employment patterns and education. Such cultural differences are an almost inescapable feature of the research process and raise a number of ethical issues in research.

The cultural background of individual respondents almost inevitably affects the way in which they respond to requests for data during research. An example of a cultural factor is level of education. One respondent may have received a university education, while another respondent may have no experience of education beyond high school. The former will have a fairly good understanding of the research process and what the researchers are trying to achieve, while the latter may find the whole procedure rather perplexing. During the research, if they are both asked about the same issue, it is important that they are both able to reflect their personal views as accurately as possible. This is an ethical issue in the sense that the research should be designed in such a way that each respondent is able fully to comprehend what is being asked, and also to articulate accurately their values and attitudes about the issue in question. In a similar vein, if there are significant cultural differences between the researcher and the participants, these may militate against the researcher making valid interpretations of the data provided by the participants.
Research in a social setting often involves identifying subcultures; the interaction between subcultures may be significant in determining the characteristics of that social setting. Membership of a subculture and allegiance to that social group may have an important effect upon the way in which social members and research participants view the world. It may also affect the manner in which they respond to research questions and provide data. School-based research, and in particular research on classroom interactions, may be affected by student subcultures. In the ethical dialogue in Box 6.1, two researchers are discussing some research they have recently started on the attitudes to school work of a group of 14-year-old high school students. They feel that they have begun to discern the presence of several subcultures in the class, and that membership of these subcultures is a significant factor in student attitudes. Moreover, the presence of a dominant subculture appears to be having a significant effect upon the attitudes of those students who do not necessarily belong to that subculture (see Box 6.1).

Let us suppose for the moment that the researchers are correct in their analysis of the subcultures in the classroom. Where do the ethical issues lie in this research study? First, the students (and particularly the boys) in the hard-working group do not appear to be able to give voice to their true attitudes. They appear to be under the influence of the dominant group of students. In effect, they are not acting autonomously. The second ethical issue is that of the effect the research questioning may have upon them. One researcher at least is worried that asking them in detail about the pressure they might feel under could exacerbate this issue for them.

One possible attempt to resolve this issue would be to discuss the existence of subcultures in the class with the teaching staff of the school. They might be able to offer practical advice on the extent to which some of the students are influenced by the dominant group. This might enable judgements to be made about the form any further interviewing should take.

It is worth noting in the context of school subcultures that the preceding discussion concerned subcultures within a single classroom. The school as a whole will typically embrace a variety of other subcultures. The dominant ethos of the school, and a feature which could legitimately be described as the dominant ideology of the whole school, is one linked to academic success. Perhaps more than anything else, the public reputation of the school rests upon the successful reinforcement of that culture. To that extent, the hard-working students in the class are, in a sense, members of the school's dominant culture. There may be other significant cultures in the school, such as a sporting culture and also a culture involved with successful social interaction, including interaction with the local community of the school. It may be possible for a student to be socially successful in the school by being a significant member of both an academic and a sporting subculture.

Cultural differences in the research context can manifest themselves in a
Box 6.1 Ethical dialogue: the effect of subcultures on research

A: I don’t want to anticipate the outcome of this study, but it seems to me there are three main subcultures in this class. There is one group of students who are antagonistic to the values of the school, and do as little work as possible. There is another group of students who work hard, but who do this covertly, and pretend to accept the norms of the previous group. Finally, there is a smaller group of students who work hard, and who do this overtly. Is this your general feeling?

B: It is, and I would add a couple of things. The first group you mention is the dominant group. They exert a lot of power in the class. I would also divide your final group into two divisions. There is a group of girls who work hard, and who are tolerated, if not accepted, by the dominant group. On the other hand, the relatively small number of boys in this group suffer a degree of taunting by the dominant group.

A: We’ve obviously come to the same conclusion. My main problem so far is that when I talk to students in the third, hard-working group, the boys in particular are obviously very reluctant to discuss their views about studying. My hunch is that they are unduly influenced by the value system of the dominant group. They almost pretend that they are not interested in studying, and yet when you look at their work this is obviously not so.

B: OK, I accept that this may be so, but if they really were so influenced by the dominant group, why would they continue working hard? It is obvious that they do work hard, both at home and at school.

A: Well, maybe they are just caught in a situation of dissonance, where they continue to work hard, and know that they are doing so, but just do not want to admit it publicly or to people like us.

B: Perhaps we just need to explore this with more subtle questioning.

A: We can certainly try that, but I think we ought to be sensitive to the psychological situation these students are in. Some of them are having quite a hard time of it. They want to do well academically, and yet seem to be subject to quite strong pressure to do just the opposite. It’s a form of bullying really, and I would not like to subject them to what they might feel is a bit of an interrogation. It is just difficult to know whether it is best to discuss these things in the open, or to let them make whatever response they feel is appropriate.

variety of ways. Social members may interact using different linguistic codes, employing those codes, at least partly, to reinforce their membership of a particular social group. From a research viewpoint, it is important that researchers appreciate that participants may view the world from a variety of different perspectives. These perspectives may reflect to some degree the
subcultures to which they belong. The researcher should be aware that the subculture of respondents may influence the manner in which they provide data, and the content of those data.

Another way in which school students may not be able to reflect their true feelings in a research context is when they are unable to communicate with the researcher within the same cultural framework or linguistic code. This situation is exacerbated when the researcher is communicating exclusively within the dominant academic culture of the school, and the student has not acquired the skills to do so. This may involve a form of cultural deprivation on the part of the student, where the latter has not been sufficiently exposed, either in the home or elsewhere, to this type of communication style and value system. This is illustrated in the ethical dilemma described in Box 6.2.

### Box 6.2  Ethical dilemma: cultural deprivation

In a study of the aspirations of final year high school students to attend college and university, the researcher is concerned that a number of students do not appear to have an understanding of what is entailed by higher education. They do not appear to understand the nature of a degree course or the types of activities which it typically involves. Nor do they appear to appreciate the education or pragmatic advantages of a period of such study. Some students, however, appear to have a varying degree of understanding, gained either from older siblings, or from what they have been told by parents. The researcher is concerned that questions on aspirations towards higher education may have limited meaning and significance for students who have not gained any appreciation of the nature of university study.

The main ethical issue here is that some students do not appear to have an adequate cultural background to enable them to respond to the questions about higher education. One might argue that the researcher should explore techniques which might enable all students to respond in some way. One strategy might be to provide a short video film and talk on the experience of higher education to all students. This might not ensure that students all had the same knowledge base from which to answer questions, but should help most students to have at least something to say in response to the research questions.

However, there is a different perspective on this issue. Both this dilemma and the previous ethical dialogue raise the question of whether the researcher ought to try to amend a situation where some respondents are better able to respond to research questions than others. One might wish to argue that there is a certain inevitability about some participants being better informed than others, at responding to research questions. Further, one could argue that one
should not try to change such a situation, but rather accept it for the way it is. This type of issue illustrates the debate in ethics between naturalistic theories and non-naturalistic theories (see Box 6.3).

**Box 6.3  Theoretical perspective: naturalistic and non-naturalistic theories of ethics**

The distinction between these two types of theories centres upon the issue of whether it is possible to deduce ethical propositions from empirical statements. For example, one might start from the empirical observation that a student has failed to hand in an important piece of homework. The teacher may deduce from this that the student ought to be punished. In other words, a moral judgement has been developed from an empirical statement. Naturalists would support the idea that such an argument was possible. Non-naturalists would argue that there is no logical way in which moral statements may be deduced from empirical statements. The philosopher G.E. Moore famously described the attempt to deduce moral statements from non-moral ones as ‘naturalistic fallacy’. He summarized it as the attempt to derive an ‘ought’ from an ‘is’ (see Frankena 1967: 50–63).

Hence one could argue that in any sample of research participants, there will normally be individuals who are representative of different subcultures. If so, this is a matter which is subject to empirical verification. One might then argue that the participants should be provided with such information, to help them all be able to respond in some way to the research questions. This proposition adopts a value position and, as it stands, is an attempt to argue an ethical statement from an empirical one. Whether or not this is perceived as justifiable, depends at least partly upon whether you accept the argument of the naturalists or non-naturalists.

**Gender differences**

Gender is often treated as a variable in research designs and questionnaires will typically include a question to establish the gender of the respondent. In survey research involving the use of questionnaires, gender is often regarded as a causal or independent variable. In other words, fluctuations in a different variable are investigated in order to explore whether these changes may be affected by gender differences. A typical investigation might involve examining student scores in a mathematics test, in order to ascertain whether there were significant differences between male and female students.

However, whether or not gender is treated as a specific causal variable, it
remains a significant determinant of the way in which respondents provide
data, and in which researchers interpret data. Gender remains one of those
characteristics of the human condition, along with social class, age and eth-
nicity, which contribute greatly to the particular way in which we view the
world. An older person does not look out at the world in quite the same way as
a teenager. It is extremely difficult to shed the combined social experiences
of a number of decades, and view the world in exactly the way one did when
younger. In an analogous way it is important for social researchers to appreci-
ate the diverse and subtle ways in which human beings are progressively
socialized into belonging to a particular gender. Almost from the very point of
birth, individuals are conditioned into understanding and conceptualizing
the world as a member of a gender group. This socializing process affects the way
in which they interact with members of the same gender, members of the
opposite gender, and generally the way in which they understand the world.
Through gender are transmitted value systems and norms of behaviour. This is
not to assume that there is one set of norms of behaviour characteristic of each
gender. What it means to be a male or a female may differ considerably from
one social culture to another; this is not to refer to the culture in one country
or another, since gender-related value systems may vary enormously from
house to house on the same street in the same town.

As researchers it is important to remind ourselves of the all-embracing
manner in which the social world is gendered. When a research respondent is
asked a question, they will perceive the question and respond to it, partly at
least, as a member of a gender group. If we ask people what they think of the
state of health provision in the country, they will analyse that question at least
partly as a male or as a female. That analysis will almost certainly focus to a
considerable extent upon their own health concerns, and the extent to which
they feel those are likely to be met by current health provision.

However, it is not always easy for any individual to distinguish between a
gendered analysis of a situation, and an analysis which is gender-neutral. It is
possible for the gendered socialization process to make it difficult to recognize
when we are analysing an issue from a gendered viewpoint! Consider the
ethical dilemma described in Box 6.4.

The ethical dilemma here is a variant of the issue of data validity. It is a
question of trying as much as possible to ensure that the data provided by
respondents accurately reflect their views, or alternatively, that the researcher
does not make unwarranted and unnecessary assumptions. Let us assume that
the male headteacher in Box 6.4 actually is very assertive with the students.
There could be a variety of explanations for this. First, the headteacher as a
person could simply have inherited an assertive personality. Second, the head-
teacher could have been socialized as a child into a culture of male assertive-
ness and even aggression. Third, the headteacher may be responding to his
perception of the expectations of the students in terms of male behaviour.
Box 6.4 Ethical dilemma: gendered analysis

Two researchers, a woman and a man, are conducting research into the gendered nature of the high school headteacher role. They intend to interview a sample of female headteachers and male headteachers to explore the extent to which the post-holders are aware of the gendered nature of their roles. The researchers decide that it might be better if the male researcher interviews the female headteachers and the female researcher the male headteachers. They feel that this might help a sense of ethnographic strangeness being retained in the research situation. In other words, they feel that it may minimize any taken-for-granted assumptions being made by the researchers, if both interviewer and interviewee were of the same gender. The researchers are concerned whether they should specifically ask questions about gendered roles. If, for example, they were to ask a male headteacher whether he felt he had to appear assertive and even aggressive at times, in order to comply with the role expectations of the male students, that the question might implicitly suggest a particular answer. They wondered whether it might be a better strategy to try to infer gendered views directly from the data provided in response to other questions.

There may be other possibilities! The problem for the researcher is to try to ascertain the extent to which respondents are aware of these possibilities, and the extent to which they are able to analyse their own social responses.

The dilemma for the researchers is that if they ask a question which is too focused, they may be inviting a particular response from the headteachers. On the other hand, if they ask a more general question, it may be so undirected that the headteachers do not really appreciate the nature of the issue which they are raising.

A separate but related issue is that the extent to which individuals reflect upon the gendered nature of their work roles may be related to the number of their gender occupying such roles. For example, there are generally fewer female high school headteachers or principals than male headteachers. Males may thus conceptualize themselves as headteachers rather than male headteachers. Females may be much more aware of the nature of their gender in relation to their role, and hence may conceptualize themselves as female headteachers. The latter may be sensitive to the kinds of distinctive features which they as women can bring to the job, and to such issues as the ways in which they are perceived by staff and students.

If this analysis is correct, it may be that females in some roles in education may prefer certain types of inquiry methods to others. If they wish to be more reflective about the gendered nature of their role, qualitative, interpretative methods may give them greater opportunities to analyse this aspect of their role. The self-completion questionnaire, with its tendency for precisely defined,
focused questions may not give such opportunities. Males, on the other hand, may be satisfied to provide data in a more focused, less reflective form. Such a distinction may be appropriate in many cases, but, of course, is not generally applicable.

**Differences of ethnicity**

Ethnicity is a complex characteristic of people, and in a research context raises sophisticated issues. The difficulties start perhaps with gaining an adequate appreciation of the concept of ethnicity, and a working definition which enables researchers to treat it as a variable in a research study. Before considering ethical issues, let us analyse some features of the concept of ethnicity.

The relatively recent increase in use of the term is linked with dissatisfaction with the use of the term ‘race’ (see Fenton 1999: 66). The latter has become regarded as rather unsatisfactory through the difficulties inherent in defining human ‘races’ in the same way in which the term is used broadly in biological studies. Once it became clear that the genetic basis of the term in the context of human beings was problematic (Eriksen 1997: 34), there was a need for another term such as ethnicity. This term, while avoiding some of the unfortunate connotations of ‘race’, nevertheless embraces different elements of social culture and history, and for an adequate understanding requires considerable analysis.

Perhaps the most important element of ethnicity is that it is a characterizing term which is founded in the social life of groups of people. It is also an evolving characteristic. In other words, the elements which make up ethnicity do not necessarily remain the same, but are revised and revised again by the members of an ethnic group. For example, the history of a group of people may consist of certain historical ‘facts’ such as wars and migrations, but the understanding of those events may change. The way in which they are interpreted, and used to interpret the contemporary world, may alter a number of times.

Migrants from the Indian subcontinent to the United Kingdom since the Second World War experienced a number of major changes in British society which have had an impact upon subsequent generations. The migrant generation and subsequent generations also have had different experiences of their own ethnic background. The migrant generation may well have lived through the realities of the partition of the subcontinent into India and Pakistan, while this is merely a historical event to the descendants of these original migrants. In addition, the original migrant generation had experience of living in the subcontinent with a very different lifestyle from that in Britain.

Ethnicity is related to religious customs, to a moral belief system, and to political beliefs. It is also linked to the economic experiences of a group of
people. Early migrants from the Indian subcontinent were understandably concerned with establishing themselves economically, and with obtaining suitable housing. The early realities of life tended to consist of working in jobs which were regarded generally as less desirable by the indigenous population, and living in poorer quality urban housing. Thus the early experiences of these migrant groups were frequently ones involving urban deprivation, which could be considered as becoming part of the ethnicity of a number of groups.

Language is a central element in ethnicity, since it is through language that the key elements of ethnic identity are conveyed within the group, frequently along with such cohesive factors as religious scriptures and an understanding of historical events. Language and education frequently combine in sustaining an ethnic identity, and it is noticeable and understandable how ethnic groups from the Indian subcontinent have given considerable attention to attempts to encourage and sustain a competence in their own languages among the younger generations.

Language is an important element in research, since it is the medium through which data are provided and then analysed. It is also the medium through which an ethnic group conveys complex conceptual ideas which may be a distinctive feature of its own ethnicity. In research in a multiethnic community, where respondents may have different ethnic backgrounds, it is important that the researchers decide on a policy with regard to language. In a research study in which a team of researchers are investigating racial discrimination in employment in an inner-city, multiethnic community, the research team are unsure how to cope with the variety of languages among potential respondents. A variety of Asian languages are spoken in the community, and many members of the community speak only very limited English. Two researchers discuss the issue in Box 6.5.

Where there are language variations in the research population, it is important that respondents have the opportunity to express their true feelings, particularly about an issue as important as discrimination. The ideas and feelings which they wish to convey may be very complex and subtle, and they may be realistically conveyed only in their mother tongue. In terms of a research area involving the potential unfair treatment of people, there is an ethical issue that all respondents should have the opportunity to explain their personal experiences of the issue, and articulate the ways in which they feel the situation could be improved.

It is important that a mechanism be found to ensure that all respondents give their informed consent to take part in the research. This process clearly involves the research participants in understanding exactly what is involved in the research, and it is difficult to facilitate this process where there are any language differences between the researcher and respondent. It may be easier to convey the required information to a bilingual third party who can then communicate clearly with the respondents in their mother tongue.
### Box 6.5 Ethical dialogue: language issues in research

**A:** We could just recruit participants for the sample who spoke fluent English. It would not be difficult to find sufficient respondents.

**B:** There would be advantages to that. It would be easier for us to discuss the issues we were interested in, but it would be a very biased sample. I suspect most of the respondents would be younger people.

**A:** That’s probably true. It depends whether the advantages outweigh the disadvantages. I think really we ought to decide on our criteria for recruiting respondents, primarily in relation to the issue of employment. After all, that is the issue we are investigating. Some of those may speak little English, and we will just have to deal with that.

**B:** OK, so what will be our strategy? We could use interpreters; we could employ research assistants to go out into the community and collect the data for us; or we could try to make ourselves understood in a limited way.

**A:** I quite like the idea of research assistants from the ethnic minority groups. The advantage of that idea is that they could interview both the English speakers and the non-English speakers alike. This should give some sort of consistency to the process. They could even use the mother tongue language throughout, even with those who speak English.

**B:** Yes, then any conceptual misunderstandings would be possibly more evenly distributed.

**A:** If we gave the research assistants a good induction to the research process, it could be the most consistent method of collecting data, and improve the validity.

**B:** They might also give us useful advice about ways of asking questions to explore employment discrimination.

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**Religious differences**

When conducting research in the industrialized ‘West’, it is easy to forget the impact which religious belief can have on the worldviews of some groups. In many parts of North America and Europe it is some considerable time since there was a widespread integration of religious belief and the broad culture of society. This is generally not the case in Islamic societies, with regard to Hindus and Sikhs in India, and in a number of Buddhist societies. In such cases, religious practices and beliefs have a significant effect on daily life and in particular on the kind of worldview or general philosophy of life to which individual people adhere.

In the West, when we are collecting research data from respondents of a
range of religious beliefs, it is important to remember that the religious belief
may have an impact upon the way the particular data-collection instrument is
viewed. Issues about the nature of valid knowledge, the nature of that which is
morally acceptable, and questions about that which is acceptable in society,
may all be affected by religious belief. When conducting research in a multi-
ethnic and multi-religious society it is almost inevitable that religion will in
effect be a research variable. In a multi-religious area, any random sampling
procedure will almost certainly result in a multi-religious sample. Only in a
purposive sample where the researcher embarked on the process of selecting a
sample composed of just one religious group, would this not be so. Let us now
look briefly at some of the features of conducting research in multi-religious
societies, which may have implications for research ethics.

Although it may be platitudinous to say so, it is important to indicate that
different religions have different ethical perspectives. As research is often con-
cerned with values, attitudes and judgements about variables, it is reasonable
to assume that religious factors will affect the kinds of responses which are
given. More than that, it is worth remembering that many religious groups
make special efforts to sustain an understanding of religious history and belief
among the younger generations. Whether it is lessons in an understanding of
the Qur'an at a mosque, or lessons on the Panjabi language and Sikh religion at
the gurdwara (temple), many religious communities take a great pride in sus-
taining an understanding of religious belief and practice. (The provision of edu-
cation for Hindu children is discussed in Jackson and Nesbitt 1993: 147-65.)
This religious belief has a pivotal role in maintaining a sense of the collectivity
in many ethnic minority communities.

This leads us to a different issue, which is important in research terms, and
which is clearly an ethical issue. This is the question of the descriptors which
are employed for different religious and ethnic groups. In the case of religious
groups which trace their ethnicity to the Indian subcontinent, a variety of
descriptors are used including Asian, Indian, Pakistani or Bangladeshi. A
descriptor is important because it gives an indication of the ethnicity of the
people involved, and as such is a statement about the individuals who consti-
tute that ethnic group. Moreover, descriptors should focus upon the features of
that ethnic group which are central to its identity. The descriptor 'Asian' seems
inadequate through its very generality, unless the research is comparing parti-
cipants from entire continents. It would certainly be inadequate in any
research which was focusing upon country of origin or of religion, because it
embraces far too large an area, and too great a sense of potential diversity. The
other three descriptors mentioned would be satisfactory in any research pro-
ject which focused upon country of origin as being a significant variable. In
the case of religion as a variable, Pakistan and Bangladesh, as predominantly
Muslim countries, would be satisfactory descriptors. India, on the other hand,
embraces a diversity of religious belief, including Hinduism, Sikhism, Islam,
Zoroastrianism, Jainism and Christianity. Even within Hinduism, there are many variations and subcultures in different parts of India. It may therefore be more appropriate, and indeed important in research terms, to describe someone as a Hindu from rural Bihar, or a Hindu from central Bombay. The fundamental requirement of any descriptor is that it is sufficiently precise to be fair to the individual people to whom it is allocated, and also of relevance to the variables which form the general approach of the research.

Ethical systems vary between religions, and these may have a significant effect on the approaches of research respondents. It is difficult and in some ways unsatisfactory to generalize in terms of religions, but there would probably be some justification in arguing that religions of the Judeo-Christian tradition tend to be rather more absolutist in terms of ethics, than those which evolved within the Indian tradition. The Judeo-Christian tradition probably tends to emphasize codes of ethical conduct which it is argued should be applied to a variety of everyday circumstances. There is an attempt to define good and evil in fairly strict terms, and to expect adherence to such moral codes from members of the faith. Such codes of conduct are normally seen as having been derived from the Divine.

The Indian tradition of Hinduism and Buddhism is perhaps more relativistic. Although there are ethical codes, such as parts of the Noble Eightfold Path in Buddhism, these often take the form of general expressions of what is desirable. There is much less a sense of ‘sin’, since if a person acts in an unethical way, it is seen as something which will inevitably affect life in any future existence. In other words, it is seen in a much more personal way. It is viewed rather less as an infringement of a divine command, and more as an act which through karma and rebirth will have consequences for any future existence of the individual. Although this is a simplistic distinction, it does indicate a difference in ethical perspective, which inevitably will have an effect on the perception of research issues.

Where gender, religion and ethnicity are combined as variables in a research population, further complexities may arise. In the case of gender, it may be more reasonable to speak of the situation with regard to Asian women, rather than that of women in some of the different religions mentioned above. Thus, with a considerable caution about the difficulties of generalizing, it may be useful to make some tentative suggestions about the interaction of gender with religion and ethnicity, and the possible impact upon research. Although it may be argued that there is a difference in the social role of women in say the Parsi community of Bombay, compared with the social role of women in rural Pakistan, nevertheless, it is possible to make some broad suggestions about the role of women in Indian and Asian society.

There is a form of dichotomy between the theoretical social position of women in terms of religion, and that status which is accorded to women in a practical sense. Religion may sometimes suggest that women be treated in an
egalitarian manner which seems somewhat removed from the actuality of life in rural Asia. Quite apart from the impact of religion, other variables such as social class clearly have a major impact upon the status of women. It is therefore possible in a research programme in the United Kingdom that Asian women respondents may find it an unusual experience to be asked questions about their thoughts and attitudes. As discussed, much might depend upon whether they had lived in a city environment or in a rural environment, and on the nature of any employment experience.

Differences of religion among respondents may create both an interesting research context, and also one involving a variety of possible ethical issues.

**The collection of data when the researcher is of a different culture or gender from that of respondents**

It may frequently be the case that there is a gender difference between researcher and respondents, and in a multiethnic society, there may be differences of religion, ethnicity and culture. Let us consider a case study of two English researchers who are collecting data on the Hindu community in a large English city. One of the researchers receives an invitation from an Indian undergraduate at the local university to visit his grandfather at his home. The undergraduate explains that his grandfather has lived on his own since his wife died, and that he is always happy to receive visitors. Although he does not speak any English, the student offers to accompany the researcher and to act as interpreter. After the visit, the researcher explains to a colleague what happened on the visit, and they discuss ethical issues which had arisen (see Box 6.6).

One gets the impression here, rightly or wrongly, that the grandfather has tried to transpose the culture within which he grew up in India to the United Kingdom. He appears to have surrounded himself with a culture and way of life which have a great deal of significance for him. The researcher has a strong sense of the meeting of two cultures, and does not wish to have any adverse impact upon the life of the grandfather. It is at least questionable whether, in such a situation, a formal attempt at informed consent would really be meaningful. Probably if Kumar at least mentioned that the researcher was trying to find out about Hinduism, then that would be sufficient. There was probably a sense in which the visit was enriching for the grandfather, and this in itself is an ethical dimension of the research. He enjoyed showing his garden to the researcher, and arguably in such situations there is an interface between research and a useful social function.

This case study concerns a situation where the researcher is of a different religion and ethnicity from that of the respondent. There is another way in which there may be a difference of culture between researcher and respondent and that is as a result of educational and social class differences. Researchers
Box 6.6 Ethical dialogue: fieldwork in cross-cultural research

A: Well, I went with Kumar to his grandfather’s house. It was mid-morning and I got the impression that he would normally have gone to the temple by then. It is about a mile and a half away, and he always walks it several times a day. I think the older Hindus use it as a sort of social centre. They meet and chat, and they can make a drink there. When we went in, he was very nice to me. He’s obviously very literate, and reads a lot of mainly religious books. He made Kumar and me a drink of milky tea, which he brewed up in a saucepan in the kitchen. It was sweet and spicy – very nice. We sat in the living room and he took a book down off the bookshelf. Kumar said it was the Bhagavadgītā. The grandfather held the book and turned to me and said, ‘God – very good!’ We nodded and smiled at each other. On a shelf across the room was a kind of small shrine. There were small statues, joss sticks, and lots of gold trimmings and decoration. He told me through Kumar that he got up in the morning and said prayers to God, and made food offerings at the shrine. He then set off to walk to the Hindu temple. He seems to meet people there, but I think he leads a fairly monastic existence. He said he wanted to show me his vegetable garden. We went out to the back of the house, and he had this really well-prepared garden. He showed me his spinach, which he obviously grows a lot. While he was showing me this, he thumped his chest hard, and said, ‘Strong! Strong!’ Kumar said that he put spinach in a lot of his food, because he felt it was very good for his health.

B: The visit seems to have gone well.
A: It did. He said we could both go back any time. I had a real sense though of being in a different culture. It was just an ordinary house from the outside, but once inside I might have been a thousand miles away.

B: What do you mean exactly?
A: Well, he was part of a completely different culture. And being older, I think that culture was deeply rooted in him. Kumar understood it, but was not totally a part of it either. I think the grandfather was basically happy in his world, and I didn’t want to disturb him. Everything in that house meant a lot to him, and I did not want to do anything which was inappropriate.

B: Do you think he enjoyed you going?
A: Oh, I think so. I don’t think he gets many visitors, so it was good from that point of view. I felt I had to be careful not to raise any issues which might concern him.

B: Like what?
A: Well, perhaps experiences of discrimination, say. I wouldn’t have wanted to stir up perhaps unpleasant memories.
are usually well-educated people who are familiar with expressing themselves in quite sophisticated language, using complex ideas and concepts. Although some research involves collecting data from equally well-educated people, this is far from necessarily so. Although there may not always be a close connection between level of educational attainment, social class and economic status, in some cases researchers may exhibit differences of social class and economic status from the respondents. This may result in the researcher and the respondent finding it rather difficult to relate to each other. There may be a difficulty of communication arising through the use of rather formal language by the researcher, or lack of communication may arise through the use of colloquial language by some respondents. Research participants may find it difficult to understand the purpose of the research, and hence may be less able to make appropriate responses to questions. Some respondents may be intimidated to some extent by the research situation. They may view the researcher as representative of a large official organization such as a university, and may feel it is rather daunting to be asked questions by an academic.

From an ethical point of view, it is important that as far as possible the respondent does not feel intimidated by the research process. Attempts should be made to speak to them in a friendly, reassuring manner, and in a location where they are likely to feel at ease. They could be asked relatively straight-forward questions initially, to give them confidence, followed by questions on the more complex issues. It is possible that some respondents may perceive the research process as a kind of ‘test’ which is endeavours to find out how much they know about something. They should be reassured as much as possible that this is not at all the purpose, and that the research is interested only in their views, attitudes and experiences of the topic in question.

When the researcher is of a different culture from that of the respondents, it is important that neither the data-collection instrument nor the general dialogue between researcher and respondent indicate any view which holds the respondent’s culture to be less significant in any way from that of the researcher. The question of the comparative value of different cultures is a complex issue concerned with the nature of a multicultural or multiethnic society, and also that of ethnocentrism.

The question of a multicultural society raises the issue of the equality of different cultures and societies. For some it may be part of the concept of multiculturism and of multiethicity, that different cultures are in fact of equal worth. However, it is fairly easy to imagine a theoretical society in which the social systems are so undesirable that one would never want to live there. We would surely not wish to live in a society where the powerful used the populace as a source of slave labour; where those accused of minor crimes were tortured; and where long terms of imprisonment awaited those who uttered any criticism of the ruling elite. We may then think of somed actual cultures and societies, either historically or in the present day, in which some or all of
these characteristics pertained. We may then agree that all societies are not equal, at least in the sense that all of their customs are not as apparently desirable as each other.

However, much depends on what we mean by the equality of cultures. We may choose to interpret the word ‘equality’ as indicating that all cultures are deserving of equal consideration in terms of their worth and value. In other words, we do not automatically reject a culture or society as being inferior, without giving it due consideration and applying certain carefully evaluated criteria. We may then decide that according to certain criteria, and according to our application of them, one society is preferable to another. This perhaps allows that someone may argue that the criteria themselves are socially constructed, and hence that we cannot claim that they have absolute applicability and relevance. According to this argument, one person may rank several societies in one order, and another person may rank them in another order. However, there still remains the sense in which cultures are equal, in that all cultures are evaluated using rational criteria. They are perhaps treated equally in the process of their evaluation, using rationally derived criteria, rather than being ultimately regarded as equal. There remains a further debate about the nature of the criteria which might be used to compare cultures, but it is at least an important element of multiculturalism that members of one society do not make unwarranted assumptions about the qualities of another society. It is possible for members of one society to become so familiar with thinking about the world from their own cultural perspective, that they do not recognize the existence of alternative worldviews. Such a situation is that described by the term ethnocentrism.

It is almost inevitable that all cultures are ethnocentric to some extent. Each member of a society tends to use the conceptual framework of that society in terms of norms, values, customs and other elements of what we normally refer to as ‘culture’. This may result in their viewing the same issue in a different way from a member of a different culture. While one may look at an issue from one’s own cultural viewpoint, it is still logically possible to recognize that there are alternative views, and indeed to recognize that these views may have their own virtues. However, if one is operating from an ethnocentric perspective, one may simply not recognize that there are alternative worldviews and perspectives. Equally, one might acknowledge that there are other ways of looking at the world, but may in fact reject these perspectives as in some way less appropriate or unsuitable. Ethnocentrism as a concept is often of particular significance where there is a culture which is dominant in say economic and political terms, and has a tendency not to recognize the value of other cultures. At various points in history, there has arguably been a tendency for European cultures not always to recognize the value of other cultures, particularly when they did not have the same level of technological development as Europe. Such a view is sometimes described as Eurocentric.
It is important to be conscious of the possibility of implicit ethnocentrism, when the researcher is of a different culture to that of the respondents. In the next case study, two British researchers are conducting comparative research on teaching and learning styles in Britain and in several southern African countries. They conduct some preliminary interviews with African students studying in Britain, prior to a visit to southern Africa. They discuss some of the difficulties which arose during the interviews (see Box 6.7).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Box 6.7 Ethical dialogue: ethnocentrism in research</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>A:</strong> I thought the interviews went well, but there clearly are differences in terms of the style of teaching.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>B:</strong> You mean when the African students were talking about our ideas of student-centred learning and independent learning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>A:</strong> That's right. They generally seem to prefer to have lectures and to be given information.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>B:</strong> That does seem to be what they are saying to us so far. However, I don't want to make too many early assumptions. Also I want to be very careful about giving the impression that we think our teaching and learning approaches are better. I don't want them to feel at all that we are trying to persuade them to use student-centred approaches.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>A:</strong> No, of course not. After all, we use didactic approaches at times. It is just a matter of emphasis.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>B:</strong> I think we should perhaps try to avoid any sense of comparing the different teaching methods in use, because we could easily find ourselves in a position of implying that some methods are better than others. If we take the line that to some extent, teaching and learning styles can be related to the wider expectations of the particular society, and to the prevalent culture, we should be able to avoid that.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>A:</strong> I more or less agree. I think inevitably we will have to compare different methods, and what they can achieve, but I agree that we can explore the extent to which they are context dependent and culture dependent.</td>
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</table>

Researchers can easily give the impression to respondents that the learning methods they use personally, or the methods with which they are familiar in their own educational system, are the more desirable. It is easy to treat the current practices in Europe or North America as if they represent a form of received wisdom which the rest of the world should emulate. To adopt such a stance would generally be a form of ethnocentrism. It may be better to consider the advantages and disadvantages of different learning styles, and then, as the researchers suggest, to discuss the social context within which one
learning style is seen as more appropriate than another. The debate becomes less a question of trying to place different methods in a rank order.

A related issue occurs where the researcher wishes to treat ethnicity or cultural background as a variable, and selects a research sample composed of different ethnic groups. Some or all of these groups may have a different ethnicity or culture from that of the researcher. The major methodological issue is to determine a procedure for placing potential respondents into a particular ethnic category. This issue is similar, in many ways, to that of ethnic monitoring, whereby governments or other official agencies try to determine the numbers of different ethnic groups in the population.

In research terms, the researcher may have determined the overall research population, and know that this population contains individuals representing a variety of different ethnic groups. However, it is problematic for the researcher to attempt to place people in different groups, since the affiliations which people possess, and the way in which they perceive their own ethnicity, may differ considerably. The most appropriate technique may well be to use a system of self-allocation. The participants are provided with a list of ethnic categories and asked to allocate themselves to the category which they feel is most appropriate. It is usually necessary to include a fairly large number of categories, since it is important to meet the self-definitions of as many people as possible. The alternative strategy is to ask individuals to define and name categories themselves. The difficulty with this approach is that the result may be a very large number of categories, which then require reclassification. However, the fundamental ethical issue here is arguably that participants should have the right to place themselves within the ethnic grouping of their choice. The categorization should not be externally imposed by the researcher, because it is virtually impossible for a researcher to fully comprehend the basis upon which an individual conceptualizes their own culture and ethnicity. There are so many complex variables which contribute to our understanding of our own ethnicity, that any external classification will almost inevitably make assumptions, some of which are likely to be incorrect.

Perhaps to put this in a slightly different way, the manner in which people think of their ethnicity is connected with such concepts as personal freedom, autonomy and self-determination. Acknowledging that research participants should have the freedom to define their own ethnicity is arguably connected with respect for persons, which is a central element of the ethics of research. Ultimately, the way in which the research sample is defined can have an important effect upon the validity of the research data; perhaps more importantly, the procedures which are used should give participants the confidence that researchers are sensitive to the way in which they choose to define their own place in society.

Differences of gender between the researcher and respondent may sometimes create the necessity for special consideration during the data-collection
process. This may be especially so where the researcher is male and the respondent female, because the researcher is inevitably cast in a role where there is a varying element of power and authority. The researcher is the person with a detailed knowledge of the research programme, and it is the researcher who has organized the research setting and who is asking the questions. The gender-related elements of such a situation become even more significant where the researcher has an employment-related position of authority over the respondent, for example, if the researcher is a college head of department and the respondent is a lecturer in that department. The fundamental ethical issue is that there should be an atmosphere of equality between the researcher and respondent. Researchers should not feel that because of any element of the research situation, nor because of any influence brought to bear by the researcher, that they have to answer questions or to continue with the research process when otherwise they might have felt inclined to end the data collection. To put this another way, the researcher should not seek to exercise any control or influence over the respondent, nor in fact, be able to exercise such influence. It is the responsibility of the researcher to structure the research situation in such a way that the exercise of any control or influence is very improbable.

The location of the data collection is important. Particularly in the case of interview research it is preferable if the interview takes place in a room, the interior of which may be seen by people outside: the room should ideally have a glass-fronted door or a window looking out onto a corridor. The interview may then take place in a private and quiet environment, but also in a sense within the public domain. It may be preferable if the respondent sits nearer the door than the interviewer. These measures help to create a context in which the respondent may feel that they can terminate the interview at any time. There should also be no height difference between the chairs occupied by the interviewer and the respondent. If the interviewer’s chair were higher, this would simply reinforce any impression of the interviewer occupying a role of authority in the situation.

There may be situations where it is undesirable for a male researcher to interview a female respondent, even given the circumstances described previously. In some Asian cultures for example, it is inappropriate for women to be in the company of men who are beyond the immediate family. When there is any possibility that this may be the situation, the researcher should take advice from members of that cultural community, in order to ascertain what might be an appropriate arrangement for the research. One possibility is that a female researcher is briefed on the details of the inquiry, and then conducts the interview. Another possibility is that there is another female of the interviewee’s choosing present during the interview. Although these amendments to procedure do make it difficult to standardize the data-collection process, it is important that the respondents feel comfortable about the research process.
Indeed, it is a theme of research ethics which has been reiterated at various times in this discussion that the respondent should not feel ill at ease during the research process, and that every attempt should be made to create a reassuring and supportive environment.

**Issues specific to research in a health or social care context**

There are features of the process of conducting research in a health or social care context which are somewhat different from other situations. While they raise the same broad ethical principles, the context of the research participants is undoubtedly different. The principal difference arises because the research participants are usually in a situation in which they are receiving care. In a health context the participants may be receiving treatment for physical or psychological illness, while in a social care context, participants may be receiving care, guidance or assistance for a variety of factors in their life. The latter might include addiction, substance abuse, homelessness, family violence, separation or divorce, children truanting from school, or unemployment. Some of the individuals who find themselves in such a health or social care context may be characterized by not being able to function normally in society. Illness may prevent people from carrying out some of their normal activities, and some of the examples of social care contexts listed earlier may prevent people from functioning as they might wish in society.

In one sense, such people have a great deal to contribute in research terms. Through their situation they often have a unique insight into certain social conditions, and can provide data which can be useful to social planners. They can provide charitable organizations or government agencies with the kinds of personal data which help them to appreciate the social circumstances under which many fellow human beings have to exist. However, these people are often in unenviable circumstances. They may be suffering in a variety of ways, either from physical pain if ill, or from physical discomfort if living in adverse circumstances. Importantly, they may also be suffering psychologically from the consequences of feelings of failure in life. This might apply to a person who is having great difficulty finding a permanent home. No matter how they might be conscious of the circumstances which have led up to their situation, and perhaps to many of these circumstances being outside their control, they may still suffer from feelings of inadequacy.

The essential ethical dilemma is whether it is morally acceptable to approach people who are ill or who are living in adverse circumstances, and ask them to help with a research programme. Part of the problem is that people react to circumstances in different ways. While some people may welcome the opportunity to discuss their difficulties, and perhaps find it helpful, others may prefer to keep their problems to themselves. One cannot
generalize in such situations and develop a strategy that will be suitable for all people.

An important variable in such circumstances is the nature of the research. If a patient is suffering from a rare condition, and a specialist in that area asks if the patient would assist with some research, the patient may feel inclined to help on the grounds that it would be difficult for the researcher to find an alternative source of data, and that the research may help future sufferers. However, if the same patient was approached by a researcher investigating aspects of the hospital catering service, the patient might feel that this is an unnecessary intrusion. Different kinds of research will be perceived by people as having more or less significance and value. This assessment of the research will be an important factor in determining their willingness to be a participant in the research.

Not only will potential participants make judgements about being involved in the data collection, but also the researcher's peers and fellow professionals have an important role to play in forming judgements about the ethical probity of proposed research. They may make these judgements in an informal way, or they may be determined within the more formal confines of an ethics committee. Where it is the intention to collect data from hospital patients, it will normally be necessary to have the research proposal approved by the relevant ethics committee. With regard to research where the participants are in receipt of formal social care, there will normally be a procedure for ethics approval. It can also be helpful and instructive to consult colleagues informally, in order to obtain advice, before proceeding to, say, an ethics committee.

The identification of a research sample may be far from easy in the case of people who are receiving social care. Issues of the confidentiality of data may preclude professionals from divulging the names of people who are in a certain category of social care. Hence it may not be possible for the researcher to identify a random sample in the normal way from a larger research population. One way in which sampling can take place is through the process of one participant identifying another person known to them. In a study of people who engage in excessive consumption of alcohol, once the researcher has identified a first respondent, that person may be asked to nominate a second respondent. The second person could be asked whether or not they would be willing to participate, and this would enable them to consider their decision privately. Although this is clearly not a random sample, the system at least has the advantage that it generates respondents who are both willing to participate and also who are likely to be very well-informed respondents.

In general, much research in this area is concerned with the feelings of potential participants. The researcher is aware that the situation of many of the possible participants is far from ideal, and does not wish in any way to exacerbate those circumstances. It is often difficult to analyse the ethical issues involved in these areas of research, and sometimes the researcher may feel
Inclined to react rather spontaneously to a proposed research programme. For example, one researcher may propose to another that they embark on a project to interview people who have recently been made redundant. The second researcher may scarcely reflect upon the matter before saying, 'That's an awful suggestion!' or 'You can't do that!' Such exclamations proclaim a spontaneous, emotional reaction to the suggestion, and exemplify what is known as emotive ethics or the emotive theory of ethics (see Box 6.8).

**Box 6.8  Theoretical perspective: emotive ethics**

Many theories of ethics derive from a careful analysis of the nature of the proposed moral action and of the potential consequences of the action. The emotive theory of ethics, on the other hand, points to an important feature of ethical utterances, and that is the spontaneous expression of a reaction towards something. If we see a child trying to stamp on woodlice in the garden, we may say something such as 'That's not nice! Stop that!' Not only would we be expressing a reaction but also we would be indicating that the action should not be carried out. Although not the only form of ethical communication, emotive reactions of this sort are a common form of human ethical utterance (see Hudson 1970: 107).

The use of an emotive utterance can often convey ethical ideas in a succinct manner. For example, the first researcher who proposed the idea of interviewing people who had been made redundant is perhaps invited immediately to consider the feelings of people in this situation, and to reflect upon whether they would want to discuss the details of their circumstances so quickly after the event. An emotive approach to ethics is clearly not the only means for reacting to the ethics of this type of research, but it is an important form of communication.

**Further reading**

