

Taking Informed Consent: Special Considerations for Qualitative Social Research in the South

'(V)oluntary informed consent [is] the condition in which participants understand and agree to their participation without any duress, prior to the research getting underway. Researchers must take the steps necessary to ensure that all participants in the research understand the process in which they are engaged, including why their participation is necessary, how it will be used and how and to whom it will be reported. The securing of participants' voluntary informed consent, before research gets underway, is considered the norm for the conduct of research' (British Educational Research Association, 2004: 6).

In the North, informed consent usually requires a written statement of the purposes of the research, including guarantees of anonymity and confidentiality, with a form that is signed by the research participant before the research starts. But this position has been criticised both in general and with respect to specific methods (especially qualitative research such as fieldwork), specific participants (especially those in dependency relationships such as small children, some elderly people and some people with severe learning difficulties and in specific settings (especially in the South).

General issues:

Sometimes guidelines encourage researchers to follow specific procedures that turn out to protect the interests of the researcher and not the participants. Researchers may persuade people to participate by minimising the information they provide and offering material or other rewards. Some researchers use informed consent as a way of satisfying themselves that they are behaving ethically and relieving them of their moral responsibility. As Homan argued, researchers may need formulations which emphasise moral precepts instead of this focus on procedures (Homan, 1992).

Specific Issues with Respect to Qualitative Social Research

The 'informed consent' model is largely derived from medical research practice, where you can specify very clearly at the outset of the research what is involved. Similar situations apply to much survey research, where researchers have a single interaction with a participant and administer a questionnaire in a standard fashion. In some qualitative projects, however, researchers themselves may be uncertain about what questions will be asked, how many times they will contact the research participant, how long interviews may take, and so on. Two examples:

- a. In action research, there is close collaboration between researcher and participant and the research evolves through time, which makes it hard for researchers to set out clearly at the outset what the participant is being asked to consent to (Williamson & Prosser, 2002).
- b. In fieldwork research, many people may be peripherally involved at different stages but in public spaces, such as shop-keepers, priests, or relatives and friends of key research participants. It would make little sense for each of them to be asked for written consent on first meeting, so what procedures are appropriate?

Specific Issues with Respect to Vulnerable Research Participants

Research is sometimes carried out "in contexts that make the securing of informed consent rather more of an aspiration than a reality, regardless of researchers' intentions. This may be due to inequalities in status between gatekeepers, researchers and 'the researched', for example, or attributable to the organisational constraints of specific institutional settings. This can result in the effective denial of the individual agency of potential participants and in their construction as incompetent rather than competent within the research process" (Heath et al., 2004: 3-4). One route to dealing with this problem has been to invoke 'third party' – parents, immediate family member, next of kin or institutional gatekeepers – as guarantors of the interests of vulnerable people.

These issues differ according to the purposes of the research and the particular characteristics of the 'vulnerable' participants. One example is of research in an emergent emancipatory paradigm involving people with learning difficulties. While it may be necessary to take consent from carers, sometimes it may also be important to challenge assumptions that people with learning difficulties cannot understand or make decisions for themselves.

Researchers also need to consider the different forms that refusal might take other than verbal dissent: researchers need to be sensitive to wandering off, falling asleep, consistently failing to keep appointments, or turning a back to the researcher as ways of doing this (Rodgers, 1999).

Specific Issues with Respect to Research in the South

The main issues discussed here are raised by (a) limited literacy and 'oral' cultures; (b) the unfamiliarity of social research; (c) the power differentials between researchers and participants; and (d) ideas of 'collective' rather than individual consent.

- (a) Depending on the circumstances, some suggest that in place of written consent forms, audiotaped, or videotaped oral consent might be appropriate. In some cultures, oral rather than written procedures are more comfortable even for literate participants. Whatever method is chosen, however, participants should be involved actively in determining the appropriate form of documenting their consent.
- (b) Some participants may have only a hazy understanding of social research, so great care must be taken in the language describing what is going to happen and the longer-term consequences (such as contributions to books or government policy change).
- (c) However much researchers may deny this, research participants may assume that there is some connection to the Government or other powerful groups, and that refusal may bring down some kind of punishment or exclusion – and that participation will bring some (unspecified) rewards. Honesty and openness about these issues throughout the research may be the only way to handle this, rather than through a single event of 'consent'.
- (d) In some settings, villages or neighbourhoods may take a collective decision, or allow chiefs or representatives to decide. Researchers must then decide whether this is sufficient, or if all people to be interviewed, for example, are entitled to a further discussion of the purposes of the research, and be provided with an opportunity to withdraw.

Conclusion

We suggest that one procedure does not fit all kinds of research, settings and participants. Good practice is (a) to be reflexive: to keep thinking about issues of consent and information to participants throughout any research project; (b) to involve critical friends to help you in thinking through how to ensure appropriate levels of consent for your particular methods, setting and participants.

Resources on Informed Consent can be found at:

http://www.sociology.soton.ac.uk/Proj/Informed_Consent/index.htm

Selected References

- British Educational Research Association (2004), 'Revised Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research', BERA <http://www.bera.ac.uk/publications/guides.php> Accessed on 18 September 2008.
- Heath, S., Charles, V., Crow, G. and Wiles, R. (2004), 'Informed Consent, Gatekeepers & Go-Betweens', *stream on 'The Ethics & Social Relations of Research' at the Sixth International Conference on Social Science Methodology*, Amsterdam
- Homan, R. (1992), 'The ethics of open methods', *British Journal of Sociology*, 43, 3, 321-332.
- Rodgers, J. (1999), 'Trying to get it right: undertaking research involving people with learning difficulties', *Disability and Society*, 14, 4, 1-33.
- Williamson, G. and Prosser, S. (2002), 'Action research: politics, ethics and participation', *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 40, 5, 587-593.

<http://manual.recoup.educ.cam.ac.uk>