

# **Author's Commentary on "Ethical Issues in Incorporating Online Information with Interview-Based Research"**

Commentary On

Ethical Issues in Incorporating Online Information with Interview-Based Research

This case highlights the role of ethics in incorporating online information with confidential data from personal interviews, using an emergent research design, and managing concerns over internal confidentiality. Some of the concerns raised in this case are issues that often arise in social science research, while others are fairly new issues that relate to technological changes.

New websites pop up each day, but the ethical guidelines surrounding them often lag far behind. Professional codes of ethics in many disciplines do not have specific policies for research using online data. This case raises a number of issues concerning new technologies. It is important that researchers are aware of the ethical principles of respect for persons, beneficence, and justice that are discussed in the Belmont Report (1979) and work to incorporate these principles into any research that they conduct and/or write about, regardless of whether there are specific guidelines that relate to the research they are conducting.

Another set of issues that are raised in this case surround internal confidentiality. Internal confidentiality involves participants in research being able to figure out the identity of, or other details about, other research participants. The issue of internal confidentiality is a concern with or without the online information, although the inclusion of the online information raises the stakes and makes it more likely that respondents may figure out the identities of other respondents — most likely their friends — even with the use of pseudonyms. Very few researchers discuss issues of internal confidentiality; one notable exception is that by Tolich (2004). More often, the focus is on protection against identification by individuals who are not participants in the research, which is referred to as external confidentiality. Although it is rarely discussed, internal confidentiality is important in

social science research. Two notable cases where internal confidentiality was breached include Carolyn Ellis' (1986) study of *Fisher Folk* and William Whyte's (1943) study of *Street Corner Society*. In both these cases, participants knew each other intimately and, therefore, could identify some of the other respondents in research publications, which, in turn, may have allowed them to find out confidential information about these people that they did not know before the study (Tolich 2004). This disrupts relationships among people, including respondents, the researcher, and other individuals who are part of the community. For example, when Carolyn Ellis returned to the field after publishing her results, she faced a cold reception from her respondents, who were previously very friendly and warm towards her, due to their concerns over internal confidentiality, and the interconnected issues surrounding their representation in research publications (Ellis 1995). As Marie's research focuses on intimate relationships (i.e., friendships), sometimes between research participants, maintaining internal confidentiality will be one of the challenges of writing up the results of this research in an ethical manner.

In order to publish research that maintains the rigor demanded by her discipline while also adhering to ethical principles she believes in, including respect for persons, beneficence, and justice, Marie must do a careful cost-benefit analysis to decide how to proceed. Should she privilege maintaining the accuracy of her data at the cost of respondents' privacy or confidentiality? Or should she privilege internal and external confidentiality over the accuracy of the data? How much can she paraphrase — or change, if she deems it necessary — the details of people's profiles on the Internet site without altering the results of her study and its validity? She has given each person — both those she interviewed as well as their friends and other individuals they mention — a pseudonym to protect their confidentiality. She also has changed other identifying information, such as names of clubs or organizations to which they belong as well as hometowns, to further protect her respondents' privacy. However, it is possible that Marie does not know exactly which details will identify her respondents to their friends. A related set of issues revolve around whether or not to identify the website. Should Marie identify the name and web address of the website where she got this Internet information so that other researchers can check the validity of her interpretations? Or should she not reveal the identity of the website as a further precaution in terms of confidentiality (both internal and external confidentiality)? Marie struggles with the cost-benefit analysis of preserving the accuracy of her data and her respondents' confidentiality and

privacy. There is no easy solution.

As discussed in the case, these issues become even trickier because Marie is using an emergent research design. Her research design was flexible to allow for shifts in data collection based on what she learned in the field. Most important to this case, the inclusion of the Internet data was a decision that occurred after her research was underway. In part 1 of the case, Marie wonders if she should view this online data and if there is an ethical difference in viewing Internet data for participants (such as Jane), for whom she has obtained informed consent, versus other students, for whom she does not have informed consent. A question that arises from this is when it is appropriate to obtain permission for this aspect of her research from the university's Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (IRB). Marie could have filed an amendment to her IRB proposal as soon as she suspected that she might want to use data from this website in her dissertation. Given that all of this was emerging as she was in the field and talking with students, she decided to wait until she had a better idea of what data she would like to incorporate into her research and a better idea of the ethical issues involved before filing the IRB amendment. While this approach seemed preferable to Marie, it seems possible that others would argue the opposite: that to protect the rights and confidentiality of her respondents, Marie had an obligation to seek IRB approval as soon as she thought she might want to use this data. One important point is that Marie did not publish or present on aspects of the projects that incorporated the Internet data until she had IRB approval for these activities. If she had, this would certainly be a breach of her obligations to her research participants and her university's IRB. Some ethical decisions are clearer cut than others.

The emergent research design allows Marie a good deal of flexibility in her methodological decisions, which opens up alternative solutions to these ethical dilemmas. In addition to the options discussed in Part 2 of the case and the questions that follow, there are other options available to Marie. She may incorporate the Internet data into her dissertation for methodological rather than substantive reasons. Marie could use the information on the website as a validity check on the information that she gathered during the interviews. To what extent do students' website postings match what they told her during the interview? If they do not match, what are some possible reasons and how should she deal with it? This is one way to make use of the rich data gathered from the website and tie it to the interview data without putting interview respondents at further risk of being

identified.

One final issue is that surrounding Marie's desire to incorporate feminist methodology in her research. Most germane to this case, feminist methodology seeks to reduce the distance between researcher and subject as well as to give back to research participants (Reinharz 1992). As discussed in the case, Marie offered each participant a copy of her transcript and interview recording as well as a copy of a published paper that comes out of the research; nearly all participants requested a copy of a published paper. In this case, Marie's desire to use feminist methodology and give back to her research participants complicates her ability to maintain internal confidentiality. It will require more time on her part if she decides to send different people different published papers. However, she will know to consider these confidentiality issues surrounding interpersonal relations in future research projects.

## References

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