Ullica Segerstrale'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

The case of Marie's friendship research is an interesting and delicate one and well-suited as a case for social scientists. As the other commentator points out, there are several ethical problems involved, not least the question of internal vs. external confidentiality. The issue of both external and internal confidentiality enriches the case considerably; at the same time it makes it more complicated. The problem with internal confidentiality is the difficulty for researchers to camouflage adequately the identity of respondents in regard to their fellow respondents in the interview sample. Using pseudonyms, changing the town, changing the major, etc. for each interviewee will certainly help, but a researcher won't know about potential other identifying elements that can be picked up only by insiders (perhaps from excerpts of interviews used in publications).

At the same time, there is an important issue having to do with the *way* in which identities are being camouflaged. It would be good to know some more details about the nature of Marie's research on friendship formation. What is the hypothesis being tested — at least what type of hypothesis is involved here? Depending on the type of study involved, certain camouflage attempts may be more or less adequate. When Marie substitutes, say, the subject of a class where two people met and became friends, or the names of the specific streets, buildings, or floors where they lived, is it OK to substitute a history class with a chemistry class? That depends on the type of study involved.

Here is an example. One would assume that a study of friendship formation in a university setting would take into account the classical findings of Leon Festinger

and others when it comes to who makes friends with whom — the theory of "functional distance." This theory emphasizes the role of proximity and frequency of contact for friendship formation. All other things being equal, people tend to like those they come in contact with on a regular basis. Take the hypothetical example of substituting a class in chemistry with a class in history. This type of substitution might lead to loss of important information. In theory at least a chemistry class with its laboratory work should naturally provide a better place for making friends than a more sedentary history class. Also, in this type of study the actual physical locations (campus addresses) of participants are important for their estimated chances of "bumping into" one another on a regular basis. The challenge is how to make adequate substitution without losing the spatial information.

In summary, then, a study involving spatial factors in friendship formation is an example of research that might require less of potentially identifiable personal detail. If spatial elements are of primary interest, spatial considerations might rather safely guide the substitution process without loss of scientific information. The problem will depend on the nature of the study, and before we know the nature of the study, it will be hard to give more specific advice as to the balance of ethical concerns vs. the needs of research. It seems to me, however, that leaving the matter in the hand of Marie and her own cost-benefit calculations leaves the problem far too open.

We also need more information about another matter. One concern was whether Marie did the right thing in looking up students on the website. It is unclear if Marie was a graduate student at the same university in which she was doing friendship research, or another university. If she was doing research at "her" university, that would explain how she so easily could just register on the website. If not, how could she register at all as an outsider? In both cases, however, the network doesn't seem to be a place for people who want to protect confidential information. Marie could register without revealing much about herself while getting access to detailed information about potential friends. The network appears to be a quite open one, intended for people who "want" to be found by others. Probably one should not worry too much about Marie looking up people on the website.

In general, the numerous and diverse ethical problems involved in a case like this make me think that it is not enough to identify potential ethical issues in research. We need a set of additional guidelines as to how to organize and *prioritize* ethical concerns in situations with many ethical issues. Marie, just as any other researcher,

may get unduly confused and nervous if she tries to find a solution that takes into account all the different and conflicting ethical issues on an equal basis.

Marie may be complicating issues for herself by offering her interviewees copies of a published paper. However, transcripts and interview recordings would seem to be something that interviewees should have access to in principle. But the scholarly conclusions drawn by a researcher in a publication (also relating to the existing discourse on the subject) are not necessarily going to coincide with interviewees' own perceptions. This raises a larger issue about "truth" in research — should or should not the researcher's truth coincide with her subjects' truth? Can there be two or more different coexisting truths? Can the truths be contradictory? Berger and Kellner may be invoking a difficult standard when they, in a Weberian mode, say:

> Sociological concepts cannot be models of thought imposed from without (as positivists of all descriptions are wont to do), but rather must relate to the typifications that are already operative in the situation being studied. . . . Or, using Weberian language, sociological concepts must be meaning-adequate (sinnadequat) — that is, they must retain an intelligible connection with the meaningful intentions of the actors in the situation (Berger and Kellner, 1981, p. 40).

Personally, I believe that a successful study should have *some* kind of validation by the subjects whose world it purports to understand. This is the position I take in my own *Defenders of the Truth* (Segerstrale, 2000, chapter 18). But in some cases this may involve working with one's subjects to make them understand one's interpretation. And there may be cases where a convergence of researcher's and subject's truth is not possible or even desirable.

References

Berger, Peter and Hansfried Kellner. 1981. *Sociology Reinterpreted*. New York: Doubleday Anchor Books.

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