

Unit 6: RESEARCH ETHICS AND PLAGIARISM

RESEARCH ETHICS

Introduction

Research, however novel its discoveries, is only of any value if it is carried out honestly. We cannot trust the results of a research project if we suspect that the researchers have not acted with integrity. Although it might be easy enough to take short cuts or even to cheat, it really is not worth it. Not only will your research be discredited when you are found out, but you will suffer severe penalties and humiliation. It is a simple matter to follow the clear guidelines in citation that will prevent you being accused of passing off other people's work as your own – called plagiarism. In fact, to refer to or quote other people's work is seen as a virtue, and demonstrates that you have read widely about your subject and are knowledgeable about the most important people and their ideas.

Working with human participants in your research always raises ethical issues about how you treat them. People should be treated with respect, which has many implications for how exactly how you deal with them before, during and after the research. Educational and professional organizations who oversee research projects have strict ethical guidelines that must be followed. However, the issues can become quite complicated, with no clear-cut solutions. It is therefore important that you consult with others, especially advisers appointed for that purpose.

Even if you are not using human participants in your research, there is still the question of honesty in the way you collect, analyse and interpret data. By explaining exactly how you arrived at your conclusions you can avoid accusations of cover-ups or false reasoning. There are two aspects of ethical issues in research:

1. The individual values of the researcher relating to honesty and frankness and personal integrity.
2. The researcher's treatment of other people involved in the research, relating to informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity and courtesy.

Although the principles underpinning ethical practice are fairly straightforward and easy to understand, their application can be quite difficult in certain situations. Not all decisions can be clear-cut in the realm of human relations.

ORGANIZATIONS AND ETHICS COMMITTEES

All organizations that are involved in research involving human participants have set up a code of practice for their researchers. To see typical examples of these types of guidelines, you can refer to the web page produced by the British Educational Research Association (www.bera.ac.uk/guidelines.htm) or the British Sociological Association statement of ethical practice (www.britisoc.co.uk/index). Universities will have their own codes of practice. The role of ethics committees is to oversee the research carried out in their organizations in relation to ethical issues. It is they who formulate the research ethics code of conduct and monitor its application in the research carried out by members of their organizations. Applying for ethics approval inevitably involves filling in forms.

Honesty in your work

Honesty is essential, not only to enable straightforward, above-board communication, but to engender a level of trust and credibility in the outcomes of the research. This applies to all researchers, no matter what subject they are investigating. Although honesty must be maintained in all aspects of the research work, it is worth focusing here on several of the most important issues.

Intellectual ownership and plagiarism

Unless otherwise stated, what you write will be regarded as your own work; the ideas will be considered your own unless you say to the contrary. The worst offence against honesty in this respect is called plagiarism: directly copying someone else's work into your report, thesis etc. and letting it be assumed that it is your own. Using the thoughts, ideas and works of others without acknowledging their source,

even if you paraphrased into your own words, is unethical. Equally serious is claiming sole authorship of work which is in fact the result of collaboration or amanuensis ('ghosting').

Acknowledgement and Citation

Obviously, in no field of research can you rely entirely on your own ideas, concepts and theories. You can avoid accusations of plagiarism by acknowledging the sources of these features and their originators within your own text. This is called citation. Although there are several well established citation methods, they all consist of brief annotations or numbers placed within the text that identify the cited material, and a list of references at the end of the text that give the full publication details of the source material. These methods of reference cater for direct quotations or ideas etc. from the work of others gathered from a wide variety of sources (such as books, journals, conferences, talks, interviews, TV programmes etc.), and should be meticulously used. You should also indicate the assistance of others and any collaboration with others, usually in the form of a written acknowledgement at the beginning or end of the report.

Responsibility and Accountability of the researcher

Apart from correct attribution, honesty is essential in the substance of what you write. You do have responsibilities to fellow researchers, respondents, the public and the academic community. Accurate descriptions are required of what you have done, how you have done it, the information you obtained, the techniques you used, the analysis you carried out, and the results of experiments – a myriad of details concerning every part of your work.

Data and Interpretations

Although it is difficult, and some maintain that it is impossible, to be free from bias, distorting your data or results knowingly is a serious lapse of honesty. Scientific objectivity should be maintained as much as possible. If you can see any reason for a possibility of bias in any aspect of the research, it should be acknowledged and explained. If the study involves personal judgements and assessments, the basis for these should be given. Silently rejecting or ignoring evidence which happens to be contrary to one's beliefs, or being too selective in the data used and in presenting the results of the analysis constitutes a

breach of integrity. The sources of financial support for the research activities should be mentioned, and pressure and sponsorship from sources which might influence the impartiality of the research outcomes should be avoided.

Where do you stand?

The theoretical perspective, or epistemology, of the researcher should be made clear at the outset of the research so that the 'ground rules' or assumptions that underpin the research can be understood by the readers, and in some instances, the subjects of the research. One of the principal functions of doing background research is to explore just this aspect, and to come to decisions on theory that will form the basis of your research approach. The theoretical approach will influence the type of data collection and analysis used. These methods are not ethically neutral so they will raise ethical issues.

SITUATIONS THAT RAISE ETHICAL ISSUES

Social research, and other forms of research which study people and their relationships to each other and to the world, need to be particularly sensitive about issues of ethical behaviour. As this kind of research often impinges on the sensibilities and rights of other people, researchers must be aware of necessary ethical standards which should be observed to avoid any harm which might be caused by carrying out or publishing the results of the research project.

1. Research aims
2. Use of Language
3. Presentation pattern
4. Dealing with participants

CARRYING OUT THE RESEARCH

Potential Harm and Gain

The principle behind ethical research is to cause no harm and, if possible, to produce some gain for the participants in the project and the wider field. Therefore the researcher should assess the potential of the chosen research methods and their outcomes for causing harm or gain. This involves recognizing what the risks might be and choosing methods that minimize these risks, and avoiding making any revelations that could in any way be harmful to the reputation, dignity or privacy of the subjects.

Recording Data

There is a danger of simplifying transcripts when writing up data from interviews and open questions. When you clean up and organize the data, you can start to impose your own interpretation, ignoring vocal inflections, repetitions, asides, and subtleties of humour, thereby losing some the meanings. Further distortion can be introduced by being governed by one's own particular assumptions.

Participant Involvement

Questions about rapport are raised if your research entails close communication between you, the researcher, and the participants. Will those involved understand the motivation for your actions and do these conform to your own practice? You should not take familiarity so far as to deceive in order to extract information that the participant might later regret giving. Neither should you raise unrealistic expectations in order to ingratiate yourself.

Sensitive Material

Information can be thrown up that is of a sensitive nature which, if revealed, could do damage to the participants or to other people. Every case will have to be judged individually, but if this information is relevant to the research, it must be presented in such a way that individuals are not damaged by assuring confidentiality and anonymity. In cases of, for example, unfairness, victimization or bullying, it is unwise

to get personally involved, but it may be possible to give advice to the participant about who to contact for help, such as a school tutor, trade union or ombudsman.

Honesty, Deception and covert methods

Honesty is a basic tenet of ethically sound research so any type of deception and use of covert methods should be ruled out. Although you might argue that certain information of benefit to society can only be gained by these methods due to obstruction by people or organizations that are not willing to risk being scrutinised, how can you be sure of the benign consequences of the actions? The risks involved make the use of deception and covert methods extremely questionable and in some cases even dangerous.

Storing and Transmitting Data

The Data Protection Act 1998 in the UK and equivalent regulations elsewhere cover the conditions regarding collections of personal data in whatever form and at whatever scale. They spell out the rights of the subjects and responsibilities of the compilers and holders of the data. The data that you have collected may well contain confidential details about people and/or organizations. It is therefore important to devise a storage system that is safe and only accessible to you. If you need to transmit data, take measures that the method of transmission is secure and not open to unauthorized access.

Checking Data and Drafts

It is appropriate to pass the drafts of your research report on to colleagues or supervisors for comment, but only with the provision that the content is kept confidential, particularly as it is not ready for publication and dissemination at this stage. The intellectual independence of the findings of the report could be undermined if you allow sponsors to make comments on a draft and they demand changes to be made to conclusions that are contrary to their interests. It is not practical to let respondents read and edit large amounts of primary data.

Dissemination

Dissemination of your results in the form of conference or journal papers, a website or other types of publication inevitably involves reducing the length of the material, and perhaps changing the style of the writing. You must therefore be careful that the publication remains true to the original and avoid oversimplification, bias towards particular results or even impression.

Disposing of records

A suitable time and method should be decided for disposing of the records at the end of the research project. Ideally, the matter will have been agreed with the participants as a part of their informed consent, so the decision will have been made much earlier. The basic policy is to ensure that all the data is anonymous and non-attributable. This can be done by removing all labels and titles that could lead to identification. Better still, data should be disposed of in such a way as to be completely indecipherable. This might entail shredding documents, formatting discs and erasing tapes.

PLAGIARISM

Introduction

The issue of plagiarism is not new; however increased ease of access to electronic material via the web is always a concern among the academic community. Although there is no direct evidence that student electronically cut and paste material into assignments, or purchase essays from „cheat sites“, the potential for these kinds of problems exists. It is perhaps worth noting that good practice in dealing with plagiarism is also good practice in terms of learning, teaching and assessment more generally. Setting the same assessment questions year after year, allowing for little individual input and resorting to unseen examinations are not conducive to real deep learning but, unfortunately, characterise many students' experiences. Further, it isn't good enough to say that students "shouldn't do it", whatever 'it' is, and institutions have a legal and moral responsibility to ensure that it doesn't happen or is dealt with

appropriately if it does. For a comprehensive approach to plagiarism Carroll and Appleton's "Plagiarism: A Good Practice Guide" is an excellent start.

What is plagiarism?

It is difficult to give a simple, widely applicable definition as different disciplines and institutions may have varying traditions and conventions and what might be considered 'common knowledge' and thus not need referencing by an expert in a subject is different from the novice first-year student. However, a widely shared understanding is that plagiarism occurs when someone tries to pass off someone else's work, thoughts or ideas as their own, whether deliberately or unintentionally, without appropriate acknowledgement. It is important to recognise that plagiarism does not just apply to written work - whether essays, reports, dissertations or laboratory results - but can also apply to plans, projects, designs, music, presentations or other work presented for assessment.

Why is it a problem?

It's cheating! Or, to put it more formally, it is a form of academic misconduct or dishonesty - along with cheating, collusion and fabrication. However, it is seen as being particularly pernicious because it undermines the whole basis of scholarly academic values, and undermines academic standards and the credibility of awards. Plagiarism also de-motivates students who see their efforts as being undermined by the unfair advantage gained by others. Tutors who fail to deal with it make this situation even worse but some institutions' procedures and regulations may be so onerous and draconian that no action is taken or local arrangements are developed - leading to possible inconsistent and unfair treatment. Whilst plagiarism is not new, the ready availability of material on the internet and the explosion of information in some areas have raised perceptions that students are making extensive use of 'copy and paste'. Large classes and teams of markers also make it harder to detect plagiarism and collusion. A final issue is that, with the growing diversity of students in higher education - whether by age, educational background, disability or national origin (including international students on exchange programmes) they may have different understandings of what plagiarism is and not understand what conventions apply and why.

How do we avoid plagiarism?

Many students claim to understand plagiarism but then do not know how to avoid it. They need proper, timely training and information. Information skills, referencing and time management are amongst the areas which need to be addressed, ideally by the use of examples, case studies and exercises and within the context of their own subject. Students should be provided with clear guidelines on what is acceptable and the institution's procedures and regulations for dealing with cheating. Telling them about it during induction is probably the worst time as they are already suffering from information overload. It needs to be built into assessment briefs, course (not university) handbooks, on the student intranet, and linked to study skills materials and support. In the wider context, information literacy needs to be inculcated at an early age or coping strategies (e.g. overreliance on Google) become deeply ingrained.

Lecturers should look to design the opportunity to use, or reward from, plagiarism out of their assessment. Assignments should be changed each year - and not just the trivial changing of names which students easily spot! Ideally each student should experience the assessment as being unique to themselves with the task being individualised through their application and use of knowledge and skills. Assignments based primarily on facts and "tell me everything you know about . . ." are more likely to be available on the growing number of essay sites on the internet. Rather than just assess the final product, consider building in stages where you can monitor progress, give feedback and check on the authenticity of the students' work - without necessarily giving marks at each stage. As well as pointing out the need to avoid plagiarising on assignment briefs, have students sign a declaration that it is their own work when handing in. Having regulated hand-in and hand-back procedures also reduces the likelihood of students acquiring others' work and copying it. Students often feel that an "honour system" is the most likely to deter many forms of misbehaviour.

There is probably the need for a lot of staff development in most higher education institutions around assessment and how to design out opportunities and rewards for plagiarism.

Detection

Although it is clear from projects and reports that electronic detection will not solve the problem, it does help staff to identify plagiarism, thus allowing them to concentrate on the issue of prevention. An excellent publication from the Centre at the University of Luton describes the current state of software development in this area and compares the effectiveness of five products including the “Turnitin” material produced. All are commercial products. The survey is too large to cover in detail but here are some of the conclusions.

- The review from an academic user perspective confirmed the functions of electronic detection service/software as limited to detecting instances of material cut and pasted from the Internet, instances of collusion and reliance on capture techniques for detecting text books and paper-mill submissions.
- The survey identified the main sources of plagiarised material encountered by academics as coming from textbooks and theses. Work cut and pasted from the internet was ranked second as a source.
- The most common trigger that arouses academics' suspicions of plagiarism in assignments is a change of writing style within text and differences in syntactic structure and in the use of terminology.
- Most academics do not use any dedicated electronic detection software or services, although most responded that they are aware of electronic detection software/services. It was noted that there is not a single service or software tool that will detect all sources of plagiarised material encountered by academics.

However, whilst the use of, or threat of using, electronic detection systems may deter students, these should be seen as part of an overall approach to plagiarism and not the solution.

Taking action

If you discover or suspect plagiarism you must deal with it; it is cheating! It is important to have clear procedures and regulations and be fair, consistent and transparent. In particular, disciplinary procedures for dealing with plagiarism and other acts of academic misconduct should be separated from the credit awarding procedures of Examination Boards. Plagiarism was traditionally detected and dealt with within Arts Faculties but institutions, rather than individual tutors, courses or Faculties/Departments should have a clear policy for dealing with plagiarism, a tariff of responses and clear criteria against which to judge the action to be taken. These criteria might include the degree of intent, the level of study and background of the student, whether this was the first occurrence, and the extent of the plagiarism. It is important to keep good records, particularly on modular courses where no one person may have a good picture of what an individual student is doing. There is some concern that penalties for student plagiarism are inconsistent between institutions has instigated a report studying this issue.
