

Clip 2: Ethical issues

I'm going to consider why ethical issues are important in relation to a conduct of social research. Now, there are a number of things as a social researcher that you need to consider in relation to ethics and I will briefly discuss some of those. But firstly, I want to cover why I think ethics are important.

I think there are moral reasons that we need to be aware of. You have an obligation to respondents, participants, funding bodies, research organisations and a broader stakeholder community and people who are going forward to do future research in that area. There are also moral reasons around misrepresentations, potential harm, discomfort, bias, misplaced loyalty and conflicts of interest or really important concepts within the notion of ethical behaviour. There are also instrumental reasons associated with risk management including social, economic and legal risks. And this kind of ethics review processes are part of ensuring that research is conducted in an appropriate and ethical manner. There are also some more pragmatic reasons, so for instance in developing your own ethical position, it can lead you to question your aims and objective, your motivations and indeed the way in which you set about realising all of these, your methods. So ethics are related to the methods you choose to employ and your own theory of knowledge and your own epistemological stands.

Now, ethics can take a number of forms as I mentioned earlier. So for instance, when you are dealing with a participant you need to think about issues such as informed consent and confidentiality. So, do they know what the study is going to involve? Are they aware of any potential consequences? Are they aware that their name is not going to be used potentially? And it's about thinking about avoiding deception and harm. So being clear, enabling people to withdraw from research if they feel uncomfortable or not answer particular questions, providing them with sufficient information about a project in order for them to make these informed decisions about whether they want to take part or indeed whether they want to continue. There can be real issues in terms of harm and social research. So for instance, various projects have led to challenges for people in terms of their employment. So for instance, if you are asking someone about their employer and how dynamics work within an organisation and names are used and that gets back to the employer, that can have potential implications on somebody.

There may be times when you discuss a sensitive topic as well. When you are discussing a sensitive topic you might need to think about particular ways of phrasing questions in an appropriate manner. You might need to think about ensuring that you provided support numbers for people. Furthermore, most universities or indeed most universities I'm aware of will have a specific ethics procedure. As an undergraduate student, a Masters student or a member of staff you'll have to undergo an ethics procedure if you want to undertake empirical research, where you have to address this questions. That review process is also informed by various ethical guidelines so for instance the British Psychological Association has specific guidelines about ethical research practice. It's also worth bearing in mind that maybe some forms of research that are more contentious in terms of ethics or research with particular kinds of people, so for instance, there may be issues about mental capacity or maybe children that need further discussion and consideration.

So as you can see from this brief outline provided ethics can play a really important role in terms of social research and is something that can't be ignored.