Transcript

Chapter 8: Ethics

It’s almost inevitable that if you’re undertaking empirical research you will need to complete an ethics review application. This is something that many students actually find rather challenging. But it requires three things: an ***understanding of ethics*** and ethical research practice; an ***awareness of how these ethical issues apply to your own project***; and ***knowledge of the requirements for completing your ethics review application***.

There are a number of ethical issues you need to be aware of. So, these include ensuring your research participants will not come to any form of harm as a result of being involved in the research. And this involves both psychological and physical harm. Furthermore, you’ll also need to make sure you’re safe when carrying out the research. Certain groups, such as children, may also be classified as vulnerable and particular measures may be needed when working with such groups or individuals. You also need to consider issues such as confidentiality, anonymity and privacy. And it’s common practice, for instance, to change participant’s names so they can’t be identified. Additional measures such as removing their location or name of their employer may also be necessary to make sure they can’t be identified. You also need to consider the storage of the data and how it links to the data protection act. It’s important to ensure participants understand the research and what it involves, so they can consent to taking part in it.

So I have briefly outlined some of the key ethical considerations. You then need to consider which are relevant to your own research project. For instance, it may be that your research doesn’t involve vulnerable participants and this doesn’t need discussing. However, many of the of the ethical issues I’ve spoken about are likely to apply to your project such as issues around confidentiality, anonymity and privacy, as well as the need for informed consent. Once you have an understanding of ethics and how they link to your research this will make the ethics review process much easier.

Now, different universities and research organisations will have different specifications regarding the ethics review process. In many cases it’s likely to involve completing some documentation. The ethical review documentation is I’ve just been discussing. For instance, it is likely to require you to specify how you’re going to store your data. Taking   
time to consider these issues and answer the questions in an appropriate depth will   
mean the ethics review process is less likely to be delayed with requests for further information. It is common for the documentation to be accompanied by both an information and an informed consent sheet. The information sheet involves making sure that participants are provided with all the information they need to decide whether or not to take part in the research. This consists of information about the study, including its methods, expected benefits of the study, and any risks involved in taking part in the research. It also includes information about the data storage, confidentiality and anonymity, and what to do if ethics procedures are not followed. The informed consent form is used to make sure that the process of informed consent is documented. This is usually in written format, including the participant’s signature, as it can act as a contract between you and them.

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