

ETHICAL CHALLENGES IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIAL RESEARCH (EDITORIAL)

– Adrianna Surmiak, Sylwia Męcfal –

Abstract: The importance of ethics in social research has increased in recent years, something reflected, among other things, in the progressive codification and institutionalization of research ethics and the growing literature on this topic. We argue that despite increasing ethical regulation and ethical reflection in social research, ethical challenges also arise, i.e., difficult situations connected with selecting ethically appropriate behavior. The aim of this special issue is to invite social researchers to reflect upon and discuss ethical challenges in contemporary social research. The contributions in this issue concern vulnerability (one critically analyzing it, and another adapting the vulnerability concept to conducting research with people after a laryngectomy), the researcher and participant relationship, research ethics in multilingual world, and the ethicality of data representation where language plays a particular role in creating a form of activist research.

Keywords: ethical challenges; ethical problems; research ethics; social research; modern world

In contemporary social research, it is broadly accepted that ethical issues are important throughout the research process, regardless of the research perspective, method, data analysis or presentation of research results adopted. Although social research has always involved ethical reflection, the ethicality of research during the predominance of the positivist paradigm simply meant methodological correctness.¹ In recent years, attention to ethical issues in social research is much more broadly understood, as also avoiding harm to research participants, respecting their autonomy (e.g., requirement of informed consent), caring for their confidentiality and privacy, and looking for ways to reciprocity (e.g., by financial payment for research participants). Moreover, today many approaches go beyond adhering to the above-mentioned ethical standards. For example, in research based on the collaborative paradigm, ethical behavior also means including research participants in decision-making on the course of the research process and the presentation of the research results. In activist research, to give another example, the ethical behavior of researcher involves combining research with taking action towards the interests of the participants or their community and/or seeking some kind of change (social, political, educational, etc.).

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¹ Surmiak (2022a).

There are many reasons for the greater interest in ethical issues in contemporary social research, including the anti-positivist breakthrough and the debates it sparked,² the development of commercial social research,³ debates on human rights,⁴ and a general increase in reflexivity in modern societies.⁵ The causes and manifestations of increased ethical reflection in social research also include the codification and institutionalization of research ethics, which are being discussed particularly intensively in the literature of the social sciences.⁶ The codification of research ethics involves the creation of ethical codes and guidelines by professional social science associations as well as other entities (e.g., funders, groups of potential research participants) indicating principles of appropriate conduct in some research (e.g., in a given scientific discipline, with a specific group).⁷ In turn, the institutionalization of research ethics involves the establishment of ethics committees (or an institutional review board) to provide opinions on the ethicality of research projects involving people.⁸ Codes of ethics and ethics committees are intended, on the one hand, to help researchers make the best ethical research decisions and, on the other, to control their behavior during research. This puts social researchers in a situation where they also have to face a number of formalized requirements that may affect their research practice, e.g., influencing the manner in which they ensure the attainment of informed consent or confidentiality and anonymity in research.⁹ Some social scientists have criticized the expansion of this type of ethical regulations, especially ethics committees,¹⁰ while others see them as opportunities for conducting more ethical research and prevention or assistance in solving ethical problems.¹¹ However, despite these formal rules, social researchers still face various ethical challenges, i.e., difficult situations in terms of choosing ethically appropriate behavior. Some of them are related to the unpredictability and dynamics of social research, especially qualitative research, while others result from the context of research and the changing conditions of its conduct. The latter factor seems to be particularly significant in the context of contemporary ethical challenges in social research.

In our opinion, the ethical challenges for social researchers seem to be increasing in the modern world for several reasons. First, new circumstances affecting the conduct of research have emerged, such as the Covid-19 pandemic. Among other things, the pandemic increased the risk of infection during contact research (especially before vaccination), which influenced research strategies in various ways, such as suspending research, moving to the online sphere, changing research techniques etc.¹² In addition,

² E.g., Hammersley, Traianou (2012); Clifford, Marcus (1986).

³ Woroniecka (2014).

⁴ Cymbrowski, Rancew-Sikora (2016).

⁵ Kaźmierska (2018).

⁶ Ibidem.

⁷ See e.g., American Sociological Association (2018); European Commission (2021); South African San Institute (2017).

⁸ Surmiak (2022b).

⁹ E.g., Gibson et al. (2013); Van den Hoonaard (2001).

¹⁰ E.g., Haggerty (2004); Hammersley (2009).

¹¹ E.g., Jennings (2012); Hedgecoe (2008); in the context of the particular project which aimed to collect accounts of women war refugees from Ukraine in Poland see e.g., Łukianow, Wylegała (2023).

¹² Kalinowska et al. (2022).

it has affected the professional and private lives of both researchers and research participants. For instance, the pandemic caused many emotional challenges (fear for one's own health and that of loved ones, feelings of uncertainty and lack of control), challenges with maintaining confidentiality and privacy in the home space during lockdown, or with balancing caregiving functions and research tasks.¹³

Second, ethical challenges in social research are also related to the development of new technologies. For example, the use of GPS technology in research may entail the invasion of the privacy and confidentiality of research participants.¹⁴ In this context, the question also arises about the consequences of using the knowledge about mobility patterns and locations of specific social categories resulting from such research, especially that of so-called vulnerable groups. The development of new technologies is also important for the ethics of social research because it may involve the risk of discovering someone's identity, e.g., it is difficult to hide the identity of a person who boasts about participating in specific research on social media.¹⁵

Third, and directly connected to the two points above, ethical challenges are multiplying because we are also all living in a very particular social period: a combination of polycrises and which is governed by a general rule that makes the social world go round – social acceleration.¹⁶ Rosa assessed the extent to which the crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic changed the endogenous characteristics of the social system and its “dynamic stability” and emphasized that no such systemic change had occurred.¹⁷ The period of deceleration was short-lived and selective, as there was already a technological adaptation to the new mode of operation through online meetings in the pandemic. This resulted in an even greater acceleration (especially technological) for some, especially in the area of professional work. These accelerated circumstances make ethical reflection particularly important as both participants and researchers may experience a great amount of pressure and stress, and the issue of avoiding harm might be very complex and contextual.

In addition, collaboration between researchers from different countries and disciplines is becoming more common or broadening the scope of ethical care in social research by including new ethical subjects (e.g., animals, the air, and rivers). Such international cooperation, although providing considerable satisfaction and benefits, may also involve numerous ethical challenges. For example, different countries may have varying regulations and ethical approaches (both formal and informal), and therefore ethics committees in different countries can give contradictory guidance on how to conduct research ethically and conflicting requirements that a researcher (or group of researchers) must somehow reconcile.¹⁸

We invited submissions from researchers who were interested in how ethical issues affect contemporary research practices in social sciences. The contributions we received concern very widely discussed ethical problems like the concept of vulnerability, the re-

¹³ E.g., Hall et al. (2021); Lawrence (2022); Tremblay et al. (2021); cf. Surmiak et al. (2022).

¹⁴ Mathenjwa et al. (2022).

¹⁵ Saunders et al. (2015).

¹⁶ Rosa (2020).

¹⁷ Torres, Rosa (2021).

¹⁸ Israel, Hay (2006): 57; Schrag (2011).

searcher and participant relationship, as well as very particular ethical issues connected with language that we may face whilst conducting research in the international context or whilst conducting activist research and attempting to ethically represent the data.

In the opening article Anna Traianou and Martyn Hammersley examine the vulnerability concept through an ethical lens. The authors notice an ambiguity of the concept which may refer to participants not being able to provide informed consent, or may suggest that participants are more susceptible to the risk of harm. What is more, the authors underline the complexity of this term and its contextuality, which should raise questions of whether it is desirable for “vulnerability” to be a part of unifying institutionalized ethical regulations. Traianou and Hammersley show that vulnerability is an important concern in social research, one that should not be treated as an obvious rule and concept, may also concern researchers themselves who may be vulnerable to harm in the research process, and that in some cases vulnerability may be in conflict with the idea of the empowerment of the participants and may even prevent research from being completed, e.g., groups labeled as “vulnerable” might not be accessible to researchers. The ideas presented in this article may be eye-opening for researchers convinced that institutions like ethical review boards solve all the ethical problems which social researchers can be presented with.

An inspiring adaptation of the vulnerability concept may be found in the article “Beyond the participant-researcher division: co-creating ethical relationships through care and rapport in studies of post-laryngectomy communication” authored by Joanna Komorowska-Mach, Konrad Zieliński and Adrianna Wojdat. Using their own research experiences from a project on interpersonal communication after laryngectomy, the authors provide empirical support for a flexible, multidimensional, and relational understanding of key ethical concepts such as vulnerability and the researcher-participant relationship. They claim that their approach has shifted from institutionally imposed rigid categorizations and the somewhat stereotypical treatment of both the research group and the researcher-participant relationship to an emphasis on building relationships founded on mutual care and rapport. Practical examples of the implementation of their new approach are also described.

After broader and more universal ethical problems, the next two articles offer readers very specific approaches to the issue of ethical language in social research.

Gabriela Meier, Paulette van der Voet, and Tian Yan pay particular attention to language decisions that researchers must make at different stages of research process and their ethical implications. The authors go beyond the common considerations about communication problems with participants who use a different language than the leading research language. Through relevant literature and their practical research experience, they show how language decisions may potentially cause harm at every stage of the research process: from conceptualization, data collection, analysis, and interpretation to dissemination (also whilst managing the research project at these stages). The authors also propose a practical solution to these ethical language issues. They formulate a reflective framework which takes into consideration both the regulatory guidance issued by ethical bodies and the necessity of deeper awareness of ethical implications related to language decisions in a multilingual world.

The last article that we included in this issue is also a consideration on the role of language in research, which may create a particular form of activist research itself. The authors, Anne Ryen and Anne Beate Reinertsen, reflect on how to ethically represent the data in social research and how the language that we adopt as social researchers may include or exclude participants, readers, other scientists, and the researchers themselves in/from participation in the “analysis” of data, and then getting everyone “inside” the text: situating data-inquiries in immanence. The authors’ goal is to “enhance (self) reflexivity regarding knowledge production and research methodologies, to influence actual research practices through fostering a more inclusive, open, and collaborative approach to research that transcends traditional boundaries and embraces the fluid and hybrid nature of knowledge production.” Activist research in Ryen and Reinertsen’s understanding refers to using the language in such a way that it brings engaged people closer to the authors’ thinking about the data, it emphasizes the collaborative nature of the research process, it means being open to thinking differently by staying close to the data. Staying on top of the authors’ thinking is definitely challenging, but it is certainly worthwhile.

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