
Ethical Issues Of Deception, Anonymity And Voluntary Participation In Social Research

Ethics, what are they? Ethics refers to the behaviour of conforming to the norms or standards of a group. Why is ethics important in criminological research? The reason is that researchers follow ethical procedures to prevent harm, physical or psychological occurring to the respondent or even the researchers themselves. Maxfield and Babbie (2015) state that ethical issues in criminal justice is especially challenging as the nature in which it is studied frequently examine illegal behaviour that individuals tend to keep private. Therefore, research if not conducted within the guidelines of ethics will result in harming individuals, communities and environments. Moreover, the three most important ethical issues explored in this work include voluntary participation, anonymity and deception.

The first ethical principle to be discussed is voluntary participation, as Israel and Hay (2006) point out respondents should have legal capacity to give permission, they should be able to exercise the power of free choice without the intervention of elements of force, fraud, deception, violence or other ulterior forms of constraint. Put simply, no one should be forced to participate, participants should be informed with a variety of information which includes the scope of the study, what they expect to find from the study and any issue that they should be aware of. After being told, participation in the study must be voluntary and subjects have the right to discontinue at any time and not be penalized for withdrawal or refusal to participate. However, researchers do conduct studies without voluntary participation, for instance when looking at activities of burglars, sexual victimization even discriminatory workings of criminal justice officers. Some believe this way of research must be conducted to truly uncover reliable answers as behaviour is observed in its natural form. The study conducted by Laud Humphrey (1970) 'Tearoom Trade' is an example of covert observation. Covert observation raised serious ethical issues, especially such studies like Laud Humphrey which still debated to this day. Covert observation violates all principles of voluntary participation, subjects are able to make a decision whether they would like to participate or refuse participation, whereas covert takes this power of freedom away and put this choice in control of the researcher without the subject's knowledge which is unfair and immoral, voluntary participation is an important issue regarding research in criminology as it prevents harm, psychological and even in some cases physical, both that could affect subjects and researchers.

Moving onto the next ethical issue concerning research participants is anonymity, in criminological research anonymity is when the identity of a subject is protected, neither the researcher or the readers of the findings can identify the response given to the subject, an

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example research methods that criminologists use anonymity are mail surveys as there's no identification number, names etc., are put on the questionnaire before they return to the researchers' hands. Confidentiality and anonymity are different, in criminological research confidentiality is when the identity of a subject is protected, but their difference from anonymity is that the researcher will be able to identify the response given to the subject how they gave the response. Anonymity can make it difficult to keep track of individuals that have completed and not completed a research, methods such as a questionnaire, but Babbie (2016) mentions paying this necessary price is worth it in certain situations, one particular study wanted to know about drug use among university students, however the researcher decided that they did not want to know the identity of any respondents.

The researcher believed that assuring complete anonymity would increase the chance of people participating and assure the accuracy of the results. Also, it prevents the researcher from getting into trouble with the authorities, as the researcher doesn't have any personal information to incriminate. Both of these are very important issues concerning research participants as without it, many unethical issues occur, the most important is the harm it could cause participants but also researchers, as the study above discussed, if respondents did provide their names and other personal information it could have incriminated people, also the researcher could receive backlash because they caused their research subjects to get into trouble, therefore if guidelines of ethics are not followed it causes harm emotionally, physically and psychologically. The last ethical issue concerning participants is deception, Maxfield & Babbie (2015) suggest that concealing the research purpose, concealing the truth is considered an ethical issue. However, some researchers argue that deception must occur, describing methods for studying such as "crack houses", hiding the role of the research when investigating drug dealers and users enable an association with them for obtaining illegal drugs, in this situation the researcher has two choices to engaging in the illegal act or declining, but most importantly it exposes the research to the violence that is associated with such places. As Inciardi (1993) states "the choice of committing illegal acts or becoming a victim of violence is really no choice at all", so the guidance that he shared was that researchers should avoid or not at all go undercover. Deception is a very important issue concerning research participants as the study above illustrated that it is difficult to handle the identity of a researcher, therefore it's beneficial and safe as a researcher to identify oneself to those they intend to study. Babbie (2016) suggests that deceiving people is unethical in criminological research. If deception is necessary then it must be justified by captivating scientific or administrative concerns, it's important to follow this ethical guideline of deception as it clearly indicated that violation of this issue resulting harm being inflicted.

To conclude, the main three ethical issues concerning participants discussed are voluntary participation, anonymity and deception. Voluntary participation refers to the free will exercised by the subject to choose whether they have decided to participate in the study. Anonymity in

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criminologist researcher means any information collected from subjects must stay confidential and the information should not be traced back to the subject. Criminologists agree anything that a researcher does to mislead a subject is deception, such as lying, incomplete data and leaving information out in briefing and debriefings. Overall it can be assured that if these ethical issues are violated it results in many problems, which causes harm to research subjects as well as the researchers themselves.

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