



Potentially Problematic Research Scenarios

Conducting research with students, subordinates, patients, congregants, etc.: Are you confusing your roles?

Conducting research in one's actual work setting offers a number of attractive advantages. Such action research can lead to directly applicable findings, thus maximizing the power of the research to facilitate practical problem solving. However, any research environment in which there is a naturally occurring power differential between the researcher and the potential research participant poses additional risks of harm and exploitation.

This type of power differential is especially evident in situations where a person in an authority role (teacher, principal, treatment provider, supervisor, clergy, etc.) attempts to take on a second role (researcher) with those over whom she/he exercises authority. The resulting confusion of roles calls into question whether the potential participant can exercise informed consent.

Whenever individuals think they will incur significant rewards or any kind of sanction as a result of their decision about participating in research, they cannot give informed consent. Informed consent must be voluntary and free of any coercion. Further, there is the possibility participants may skew their responses in a direction they think will please the researcher out of fear of repercussions. Hence, the credibility of interview or focus group data may be suspect.

At the same time, there is the perceived danger that the researcher may violate the privacy of the participant by using information gleaned from the research in her/his role as a teacher, supervisor, etc. An example may help illustrate some of these ethical pitfalls.

Let's assume that high school principal, Dr. Jones, wants to determine if her students' self-esteem is associated with their academic achievement. She decides that she will simply interview her 18-year-old seniors in her school office to establish their level of self-esteem, and then search their academic records to compile their grades in their junior and senior years. Dr. Jones has noticed that her students seem to like speaking with her and she is confident the Seniors will consent to participate when she approaches them.

Clearly, a student in this scenario may be afraid to say no to Dr. Jones' request because Dr. Jones, as the school principal, could retaliate against the student in some way. Further, the student may have a psychological reaction to the school principal asking personal questions in the confines of her office, wondering what the principal was going to do with that information.

Or the student may fear he/she will be seen going into the principal's office by other students and later ridiculed by them for some reason. Finally, the student may feel compelled to respond in such a manner as to give the principal the answers she appears to be looking for, not wanting to be perceived as a trouble maker.

Researchers can consider taking several steps to minimize the risk of harm to participants in these situations:

1. Remove yourself from the interview/focus group data collection process.

A suitable IRB-qualified associate, not working in the setting and not exercising authority over the potential participants, could be enlisted to conduct interviews and focus groups. The researcher could then invite potential participants to join the study in an email, explaining in the invitation and the attached adult consent form that an associate will conduct the interviews/focus groups and that confidentiality will be safeguarded by having transcripts coded with pseudonyms.

Of course, in the event the research involves minors, parental consent would be obtained before the minor was approached for assent.

2. Use anonymous questionnaires when possible.

Very often, interviews are not necessary because the desired information can be more effectively elicited in an anonymous questionnaire format. In our example, Dr. Jones might be able to use a standardized self-report instrument to assess self-esteem and avoid the interview process completely, although she might need to develop an alternative way of getting academic scores.

3. If researcher participation in the interview/focus group data collection process is necessary, implement clear measures to separate your researcher role from your work role.

For example, use only CSE email and avoid using your work title in communicating with potential participants. Further, in any invitation to participate and in any consent form, make it very clear to potential participants that participation is in fact completely voluntary, that they are absolutely free to decline to participate, and that no significant rewards or sanctions of any kind will be contingent on their decision.

Since this third option poses a greater potential risk to participants, the researcher will bear the burden of explaining why being personally involved in the interview/focus group data collection process is a better option than the other two listed above.

In returning to our example of Dr. Jones, it should be clear that her best strategy is to work toward creating a firm boundary separating her role as principal from her role as researcher. If potential participants are truly free to decline participation, and if they are confident information revealed in the research will not be used against them, they are certainly less likely to be harmed by their experience in the study.