

12

What's All This About Ethics?

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Ethics is about moral principles and rules of conduct. What have these got to do with writing a dissertation? Quite a lot actually; they focus on your behaviour towards other people and their work. You are not producing your dissertation in a vacuum. You definitely will be basing your information and ideas on work done by other people, and you may well be interacting with other people in a more personal way during your study. It is therefore important to avoid unfairly usurping other people's work and knowledge, invading their privacy or hurting their feelings.

12.1 Acknowledging other people's work

An important part of a dissertation study is to find out what has already been written by other people on the chosen subject. You will be expected to collect and report on facts and ideas from a wide range of sources, so there is no need to feel that everything you write has to be 'original'. Even the greatest thinkers have 'stood on the shoulders of giants' in order to make their discoveries. Jean Renoir (1952), the French film producer, expressed his views on this very strongly when he talked in a filmed interview about his 1930s film *Une Partie de Campagne*, which he based on a story by Guy de Maupassant:

Maupassant's story offered me an ideal framework on which to embroider. This notion of using a framework begs the question of plagiarism – something I whole-heartedly

approve of. To achieve a new Renaissance, the State should encourage plagiarism. Anyone guilty of plagiarism should be awarded the Legion of Honour! I'm not joking: plagiarism served the world's great writers as well. Shakespeare reworked stories from Italian authors, amongst others, Corneille took *Le Cid* from Guillén de Castro, Molière ransacked the classics; and all were right to do so.

This obviously has to be taken with a pinch of salt! There is, however, real truth in the view that other people's work can be an inspiration and guide to ones' own. The point is that the sources of work on which you base your writing must be acknowledged. Renoir made sure of this in the title of his film: *Une Partie de Campagne – de Guy de Maupassant*. In order to maintain an honest approach, there must therefore be a clear distinction between your and other people's ideas and writings.

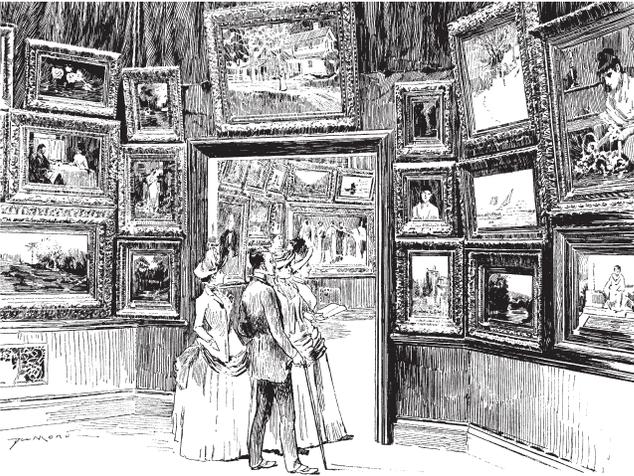


FIGURE 12.1 Other people's work can be an inspiration

Your university or college will have strict regulations covering the issues of plagiarism and syndication, and you should make yourself familiar with these. These extracts from the Oxford Brookes University Student Conduct Regulations provide a typical example:

Candidates must ensure that coursework submitted for assessment in fulfilment of course requirements is genuinely their own and is not plagiarised (borrowed, without specific acknowledgement, or stolen from other published or unpublished work).

Quotations should be clearly identified and attributed, preferably by the use of one of the standard conventions for referencing. Assessed work should not be produced jointly unless the written instructions specify this. Such co-operation is cheating and any commonality of text is plagiarism.

The penalties which a module/subject leader may impose for plagiarism are:

- 1 a formal written warning; or
- 2 a reduction of marks for the piece of work; or
- 3 no marks for the piece of work; or
- 4 a 'fail' grade for the module concerned.

You may think that you could easily get away with copying some chunks of text from the Internet; after all, there are millions of pages to choose from. However, the source can easily be tracked down by typing a string of four or five words from the text into a search engine like Google. The penalties for transgressing college regulations, even inadvertently, are heavy; so how can problems be avoided?

The solution lies in a good system of referencing and acknowledgement. Credit will be given for evidence of wide reading of relevant texts, so there is no need to be shy of quoting your sources. There are two ways of incorporating the work of others into your text: the first is by direct quotation, and the second by paraphrase. These can be referenced in several widely recognized systems, for example the Harvard system.

Generally, all systems identify the sources in an abbreviated form within the text to pinpoint the relevant sections, and cross-reference these to a full description in a list at the end of the chapter or dissertation, or in some cases in a footnote at the bottom of the page. You should decide on one system and then use it consistently. There might be advice given in your course description as to which system is preferred.

For a full account of the practical aspects of how to do your referencing, refer to Chapter 17.

How much referenced material should you use? This depends on the nature of your dissertation. Obviously, if you are making a commentary on someone's writings, or comparing the published works of several people, it will be appropriate to have numerous references. In other cases, say a report on a fieldwork project, only a few may be sufficient to set out the background to the study. You may be able to get advice on this issue from your tutor.

Where does the boundary lie between paraphrasing (which requires referencing) and your own writing based on the ideas of others (which does not)? This is a matter of judgement. Substitution of a few words, reordering sentences, or cutting out a sentence here and there, are not enough to make it your own work. A sound method of avoiding accusations of plagiarism is to carefully read the source material, and then put it away out of sight. Rely on your memory and own words to describe and interpret the ideas.

Here is a brief example in two parts to demonstrate skills in paraphrasing, using a quotation from Leedy's book *Practical Research* (1989).

First the quotation – a word-for-word copy of a section of his text. Note the citation at the end.

Any research endeavour that employs human subjects may raise questions of propriety, create misunderstandings, or ask subjects to go beyond demands consistent with pure research objectivity. A statement signed by the subject, indicating a willingness to co-operate in the research and acknowledging that the purpose and procedure of the research project have been explained, may well be a safeguard for both researcher and subject. Such a statement should contain a clause indicating that if, at any time during the research procedure, the individual should not wish to continue to be associated with the research effort, he or she shall have the right to withdraw. If this situation occurs, the subject should notify the researcher in a written memorandum, in which is set forth the specific reason or reasons for the decision to withdraw. (Leedy, 1989, p. 96)

In the first example I have made a summary in my own words of the main points, which are attributed to the author. I kept the text in front of me so that I could make an accurate account. The length was reduced to a couple of sentences, and again there is the citation.

Leedy (1989, p. 96) states that research using human subjects may raise issues of propriety, misunderstandings and objectivity. To mitigate problems, a signed statement should be obtained from the subject indicating agreement to participate in the project, and containing the option for him or her to opt out of the research exercise on production of a written explanation of the reasons for withdrawal.

In the following example I put the text aside and wrote a commentary in my own words on the content, i.e. my interpretation of the issues raised. The source does not need to be cited in this case.

Using a signed agreement between researcher and subjects will help to reduce any misunderstandings and misgivings on the part of participants in research projects. An opt-out clause should be included to enable participants to terminate the agreement during the course of the project.

If your dissertation were to be published, there are strict limitations as to how much direct quotation or illustrative material you are allowed to use without asking permission from the original author or copyright holder. For example, all poetry or song lyrics, as well as illustrations and figures, need permission, as does the quotation of more than about 400 words from a single prose work. However, for an unpublished student academic work like yours, these limits do not apply. Even more reason, then, to acknowledge your sources, in gratitude that you do not need to go through the process of gaining permissions!



FIGURE 12.2 Getting information from other people

12.2 Respect for other people

Many dissertation subjects require the getting of information from people, whether they are experts or members of the general public. This data collection may be in the form of interviews or questionnaires, but could also be types of experiments. Whenever dealing with other people, you must be sensitive to issues of privacy, fairness, consent, safety, confidentiality of information, impartiality etc. This is actually quite a complex subject, and it requires real thought about how your plans for getting information or opinions from people can be carried out in a way that complies with all these ethical issues.

Here are some of the main aspects to check.

INFORM PEOPLE

Participants have a right to know why you are asking them questions and to what use you will put the information that they give you. Explain briefly before interviewing and add an explanatory introduction to questionnaires. If you will be conducting some kind of test or experiment, you should explain what methods you will use.

- *Example* You are stopping people in the street to ask them where they have walked from and where they are going. Explain that you are conducting a college study to assess the pattern of pedestrian movements in the town centre.

ASK PERMISSION AND ALLOW REFUSAL TO PARTICIPATE

Do not assume that everyone is willing to help you in your research. Once they are informed about the project they should be clearly given the choice to take part or not. A more formal agreement like the one suggested in the previous section will be appropriate for extended projects or those of a sensitive or intimate nature.

- *Example* You want to test people's skills in balancing on a tightrope, depending on the tension of the rope. You will need to explain exactly what you wish them to do, safety measures taken, clothing and footwear required, time and place of the experiment, who will be observing, and other data required (e.g. age, weight, size etc.) This will enable the possible participants to judge if they want to take part.

RESPECT PRIVACY THROUGH ANONYMITY

Most surveys rely on the collection of data, the sources of which do not need to be personally identified. In fact, people are far more likely to give honest replies to questions if they remain anonymous. You should check that the way data are collected and stored ensures anonymity – omit names and addresses etc. Treat data as numbers wherever possible.

- *Example* You are distributing a questionnaire to households about vandalism and intimidation on a housing estate, asking questions about the levels and sources of the problems. To ensure anonymity, the questionnaires must not contain anything that may identify the respondent, e.g. even a family profile might do this. Delivery and collection of the questionnaires should also be considered to ensure that the information cannot get into the wrong hands.

ATTRIBUTION

If anonymity is not desired or even possible, e.g. when obtaining particular views of named influential people, the information collected must be accurately attributed to the source. Agreement must be obtained that the opinions/information given can be used in your dissertation.

- *Example* You are interviewing a leader of a trade union organization and the manager of a firm about an industrial dispute relating to a pension scheme. There must be no confusion in your account of the interviews about who said what. Ask before the interviews if you will be allowed to quote them in your dissertation.

OBTAIN AUTHORIZATION

It is good practice to send a draft of the parts of your work containing the views or information given by named sources to those concerned, asking them to check that your statements are accurate and that they are allowed to be included in your dissertation.

- *Example* In the above example, if the interviews are lengthy, and the opinions are contentious in what is probably a sensitive situation, you will gain respect and cover yourself against problems if you get a signed copy of the drafts of your accounts of the individual interviews from the respective people. This is absolutely necessary if you quote people directly. If you say you will do this in advance, you will be likely to get a less cautious response during the interview, as there is an opportunity for the interviewee to check for accuracy.

FAIRNESS

In any tests or experiments, thought should be given to ensure that they are fair, and can be seen to be so. Participants will feel cheated if they feel that they are not treated equally or are put at some kind of disadvantage.

- *Example* You have devised a simple test to gauge people's manual dexterity on equipment that can only be used by the right hand. Left-handed people will feel justifiably disadvantaged.

AVOID SEXISM

The way language is used can often lead to sexism, particularly the use of masculine labels when the text should actually refer to both men and women. Bias, usually towards the male, is also to be avoided in your research.

- *Example* The use of words such as 'manpower' rather than 'labour power', 'one-man show' rather than 'one-person show', and the generic 'he' or 'his' when you are referring to a person of either sex. Research bias can occur when you devise a study that assumes the 'boss' is a man, or that all primary school teachers are women.

BE PUNCTUAL, CONVENIENT AND BRIEF

Punctuality, brevity and courteousness are essential qualities to help your efforts to gain information. Appointments should be made and kept. Time is a valuable commodity for almost everybody, so it will be appreciated if you regard it as such.

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- *Example* You need to get expert information on the intricacies of management procedure in a hotel reception. You turn up three-quarters of an hour late, just at a time when a large crowd of business people (note – not businessmen) normally arrive to check in. You have missed your ‘slot’ and will cause real inconvenience if you start asking questions now.

BE DIPLOMATIC AND AVOID OFFENCE

On the whole, people are willing to help students in their studies. However, do not abuse this willingness by being arrogant and insensitive. You might be dealing with delicate issues, so try and get informed about the sensitivities and feelings of the participants. Above all, do not make people appear ridiculous or stupid!

- *Example* Don’t regard yourself as the host of a chat show when, say, interviewing a group of elderly people in a residential home about their past lives. They may have very different views on what is proper to talk about, so avoid the pressure tactics and ‘clever’ questions used to prise out information not willingly given.



FIGURE 12.3 Avoid causing offence

GIVE THANKS

Any help should be acknowledged with thanks, whether verbal or, in the case of questionnaires or letters asking for information, written.

- *Example* Adding a short paragraph at the end of the questionnaire thanking the person for answering the questions is simply done, as is a simple expression of thanks before leaving after an interview.

12.3 Scientific honesty and subjectivity

This refers back to some of the issues raised in Chapter 5 about philosophy. The main point I want to make here is that of being scrupulously honest about the nature of your findings, even (and especially) if they tend to contradict the main thrust of your argument. Good quality research is not achieved by using the techniques of a spin doctor. Politicians might want to put the right kind of gloss on data collected for them in order to bolster their arguments, but this is not tolerated in academic work. Data should speak for themselves. Your analysis should reveal the message behind the data, and not be used to select only the results that are convenient for you.

As with most things, this kind of honesty can be more complicated than at first glance. Consider the following scenario. A study is being carried out of the use of animals in experiments to develop new products, in this case, an anti-ageing pill that may have useful properties for combating Alzheimer's disease. The data on the level of discomfort that the animals suffer, based on medical measurements and observations, are contradictory and difficult to quantify. The researcher carrying out the study feels that an anti-ageing pill is not really a medicine, so testing on animals is not justified. However, the experimenters argue that if many human lives can be prolonged by fighting off the horrible effects of Alzheimer's, then the slight suffering of some animals is justified.

How will the researcher present the data in an honest and balanced way?

It would be easy to present one side of the argument and stress the amount of suffering caused to animals in the search for an elixir of youth. That the animals suffer can be derived from the data. By interpreting the data on the animals' discomfort level as demonstrating cruelty, and by ignoring the likely medical benefits of the pill, a strong case could be made for discontinuing the experiments.

But such certainty is not inherent in this situation. Much better, i.e. more honest, if the researcher discussed the issues driving the research, and the difficulty of gauging the level of suffering of the animals, and concentrated on assessing the strengths of the opposing arguments, taking into account the uncertainties of the data and of the eventual properties of the product.

If you can achieve a balanced view, it is probably not necessary to specifically state your personal attitude to the issues. However, there are situations where it is impossible to rise above the events and be a detached observer. For example, if you are a committed and active supporter of a ban on hunting with dogs, and make a study of this sport, you should declare your interest. Your arguments may well be valid and based on good evidence, but you are unlikely to seek supporting evidence for the other side!

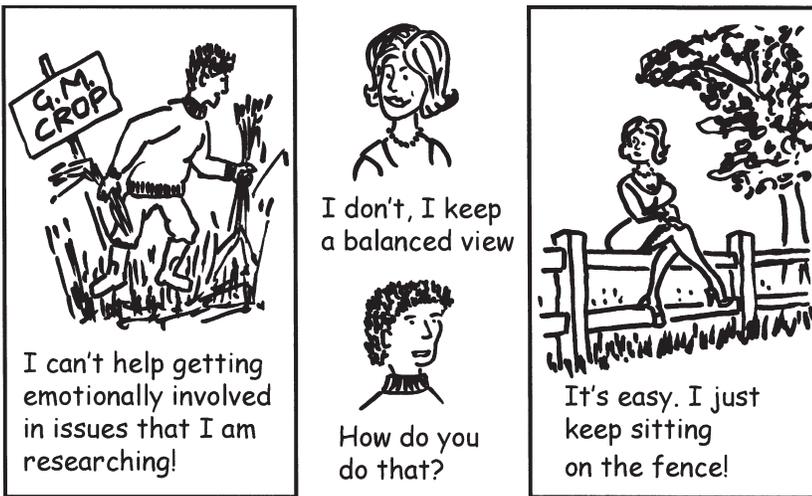


FIGURE 12.4

Another way to ensure that you will avoid being accused of spin or false interpretation of the evidence is to present all the data you have collected as fully and clearly as possible. This may be the results of a questionnaire, measurements of activities or any other records relevant to your study. You can then base your analysis on these data, and it is open to the reader to judge whether your analysis is correct and whether your conclusions are valid. All arguments are open to challenge, but if you present the raw materials on which your arguments are based then at least the discussion has a firm foundation.

12.4 What should I do now?

The issues of ethics in academic work pervade almost all aspects. Some of these issues are based on simple common sense and civilized behaviour, such as one's relationships with colleagues and other people. Others are more formal in character and require real organizational effort in order to fulfil the requirements, such as systematically employing a sound referencing system, and gaining permissions for use of information and activities. You should therefore:

- Consider carefully how you will use the written work and ideas of other people in your dissertation. Will you be discussing and comparing their ideas, or will you be developing ideas of your own based on those of others? You will probably do some of both.

Consciously devise a method to differentiate between quotation, summary, paraphrase and commentary so that you will be aware of which mode you are writing in at any time.

- Examine your plans for getting information from other people. Systematically organize them to take account of all the relevant ethical issues. This will entail matters of procedure as well as content in written and verbal form. You can use the bullet points of aspects above as a checklist.

12.5 REFERENCES TO MORE INFORMATION

Although ethical behaviour should underlie all academic work, it is in the social sciences (as well as medicine etc.) that the really difficult issues arise. Researching people and society raises many ethical questions that are discussed in the books below. The first book has two sections that are short and useful. The other books on this list are far more detailed and really aimed at professional researchers – though the issues remain the same for whoever is doing it.

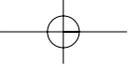
Robson, C. (1993) *Real World Research: A Resource for Social Scientists and Practitioner-Researchers*. Oxford: Blackwell. See pp. 29–34, 470–5.

Laine, M. de (2000) *Fieldwork, Participation and Practice: Ethics and Dilemmas in Qualitative Research*. London: Sage. The main purposes of this book are to promote an understanding of the harmful possibilities of fieldwork; and to provide ways of dealing with ethical problems and dilemmas. Examples of actual fieldwork are provided that address ethical problems and dilemmas, and show ways of dealing with them.

Mauthner, M. (ed.) (2002) *Ethics in Qualitative Research*. London: Sage. This book explores ethical issues in research from a range of angles, including: access and informed consent, negotiating participation, rapport, the intentions of feminist research, epistemology and data analysis, tensions between being a professional researcher and a 'caring' professional. The book includes practical guidelines to aid ethical decision-making rooted in feminist ethics of care.

Geraldi, O. (ed.) (2000) *Danger in the Field: Ethics and Risk in Social Research*. London: Routledge. Read this if you are going into situations that might be hazardous.

Barnes, J.A. (1979) *Who Should Know What? Social Science, Privacy and Ethics*. Harmondsworth: Penguin. A good comprehensive guide, but probably too involved for your purposes.



There are also books about ethics that specialize in certain fields. Here are some examples. You could search out some in your subject perhaps.

Whitbeck, C. (1998) *Ethics in Engineering Practice and Research*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Graue, M.E. (1998) *Studying Children in Context: Theories, Methods, and Ethics*. London: Sage.

Royal College of Nursing (1993) *Ethics Related to Research in Nursing*. London: Royal College of Nursing, Research Advisory Group.

Burgess, R.G. (ed.) (1989) *The Ethics of Educational Research*. London: Falmer.

Rosnow, R.L. (1997) *People Studying People: Artifacts and Ethics in Behavioral Research*. New York: Freeman.

