

Research with Vulnerable Populations: Ethical Concerns in Information Studies

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Any research with vulnerable populations entails particularly nuanced efforts to meet the fundamental ethical precepts of doing no harm, respecting individuals, protecting privacy, supporting mutual participation, and providing informed consent. Individuals living with severely imbalanced power dynamics may have little experience in either negotiating or expecting those ethical precepts. Although possibly unfamiliar to participants, the scholar's ethical constructs should be the linchpin of any research.

Scholars always face difficulties in putting those ethics into action. For example, explaining consent forms without condescension requires a careful balance between the scholar's understanding of potentially negative consequences and the participant's self-respect. Intruding into community and individual lives without controlling the nature, timing, or depth of that intrusion requires scholars to fully recognize that the participants control their own lives with no deference to research imperatives. We are not "giving up" that control in that it was never ours to begin with – a distinction with a difference that we always remember and struggle to put into practice.

I would argue that information studies (IS) scholars have an additional layer of ethical concerns beyond those essential components of all sociological research. Information, like water, flows through every life; it may come in flood or drought, be pure or polluted. While IS scholars conceptualize information on this holistic level, other sociologists generally accept information as a background element in their work – unobtrusive and rarely noteworthy. IS scholars, however, know the power of human information interaction.ⁱ Its danger,^{ii iii} opportunity,^{iv v} complexity,^{vi vii} and energy^{viii ix} are inherently recognized in our ethos of social responsibility.^x In the creativity of information retrieval design,^{xi} the cultural base of archives management,^{xii} the community core of library growth,^{xiii} socially centered digital library development,^{xiv xv} and all the other inculcations of information studies, we monitor and even shape the ethical^{xvi} and humanistic^{xvii} aspects of information priorities and products. That knowledge increases our responsibility for considering the information centric ethics of our research.

One of many exemplars of that ethical social responsibility in action is theoretical research addressing the information concerns^{xviii} of vulnerable populations.^{xix xx} Building on germinal research in information interaction (e.g., the everyday life information seeking [ELIS]^{xxi} model), much IS research addresses the role of information in socially undervalued populations.^{xxii} Some information interaction work carefully integrates power analysis perspectives on voice,^{xxiii} socially constructed knowledge,^{xxiv} subjective authority,^{xxv} and contextually rooted, individual situations^{xxvi} in populations that are rarely studied^{xxvii} and frequently marginalized.^{xxviii xxix}

In addition to the ethical directives under which all scholars function, IS scholars must consider six additional problems. Other fields surely manage their own variations but I posit these as requiring our full attention.

- Translation: IS straddles two worlds, our own and that of the people who use our work. Translating our scholarly work into practice literature is part of what we do to give back to communities. Several questions pertain to the audience for those translations. Do we address our own practitioners in libraries, archives, and web teams? Do we address our population's practitioners in schools, shelters, and municipal governments? Do we focus on those who teach our population's practitioners in schools of social work, education, and criminal justice? If ethical practice requires this translation work, then will IS faculty find it a part of or a detriment to their tenure goal?
- Give/keep: The implications of IS theory inform our work but they are likely to be unfamiliar to our study participants. As a project progresses and we provide preliminary feedback to our participants, we have to consider what to give them and what to keep back. Do we share that IS theory which is part of our teaching, reading, and practice or do we hold back until we have been able to integrate that theory into our solid, peer reviewed, and fully complete data? Are we justified in holding back what we know from our own field? The tension between our information insight and our participants' need for that insight, apart from the research project, is natural and, at times, urgent.
- Step by step: As do most researchers, IS scholars move from a particular study context to insights to analysis to a nascent model and, possibly, to a theory and/or effective application. Our trajectory is established by research tenets. Our participants, however, may want immediately that which we envision as the end product of a long process. Do we insist on holding back our initial data analysis until we can deliver that which is asked of us? Do we speak to participants' needs for a model, standard, guideline, benchmark, or procedure? Information is often a tool so we are responsible for considering that perspective in our decisions. The tension between our research trajectory and participants' immediate needs requires honest examination.
- Rope off the cliffs: In almost any information interaction study we witness or even try to engender information problems. Our participants may waste their time, misjudge the accuracy of factual data, or make use of potentially dangerous social networking options. Some of those risks we prompt and others we observe. At what point, if any, do we step out of the researcher role and into the information guide role? Is it appropriate to use that information assistance as an incentive for participation?
- Information utility: We see a wide range of applications for information, some of which may be unfamiliar to or exceptionally critical to our participants. In providing data summaries and analyses with integrity, how do we account for application potentials? Our reports can be deliberately used or inadvertently ignored by participants who focus on advocacy, funding, public relations, and other priorities. Are we willing to privilege the perspectives of most use to our participants? How do we know when we've made that choice?
- Visceral: On an affective, even visceral, level we understand information as a living, dynamic, integral component of life. Looking at information holistically, IS scholars see its flow through communities and lives. Our participants, however, may see it primarily in terms of immediacy as it intersects their day. They are completing tasks (e.g., handing out documents) or looking for supplies (e.g., a complete set of e-government

forms up on web site). How do we insure that our perspective does not interfere with our effort to make our findings fully available?

These six considerations have no simple solutions and none are offered herein. As with all the gray areas of ethics, the integrity of individual scholars and values of the discipline will make the difference in practice.

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