Author's Commentary on "Keeping Things Private"

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This case examines the ethical responsibilities of a researcher to protect the confidentiality of her research subjects. According to Sieber (1992), confidentiality refers to the researcher's "agreements with persons about what may be done with their data" (52). Confidentiality differs from privacy, which refers to individuals' control over access by others to them or to information about them, and anonymity, wherein individual identifiers such as names are not connected to the data or even known to the researcher (Sieber 1992).

In this case, the researcher is faced with questions about how to present her findings and with whom while still protecting her respondent's confidentiality. Sociologists and other social scientists who work with large data sets and present results as aggregate statistics often face little risk of their respondents being identified through research reports. However, when samples are chosen for convenience or when purposeful sampling is used, identifying the research subjects becomes a real possibility. For example, if a researcher studying teachers named the school district where the research occurred, someone with knowledge of the school district could likely identify individual teachers based on traits such as age, gender, and number of years with the school district (Sieber 1992). Or, as is the case here, when a population contains only a small number of certain types of individuals, such as persons of a particular race, anyone with knowledge of the population used to draw the sample can likely identify these unique persons in the sample.

This "deductive disclosure," as Sieber refers to it, is a particularly important ethical issue in qualitative research. In much ethnographic or in- depth interview research researchers strive to understand a research question by using rich descriptions of individuals and particular social situations. With in-depth interviewing, the words of respondents are critical pieces of data and are typically presented to support the conclusions the researcher has drawn after analyzing the data. As such, the unique

traits of individuals and groups are key components of the data and become essential to answering the research question.

A classic example of this dilemma is Carolyn Ellis's ethnographic research which was the basis for her book *Fisher Folk* (1986). Ellis's data came from a single, remote and insular community. When Ellis's book was given to the research participants they were able to identify themselves and their neighbors in the book, even though their real names had not been used. In this case, many of the study participants were angered by the perceived breach in confidentiality that occurred when Ellis published what they had told her. Breaches in confidentiality such as those in the *Fisher Folk* example can shatter the researcher-subject relationship and can damage the public's trust in researchers (Allen 1997).

In hindsight, Ellis (1995) contends that her problems could have perhaps been prevented by approaching the respondents with the data she planned to publish before she published it, thus allowing them to know what would become of their "data" and how they would be portrayed in the final research. This undoubtedly means more work for the researcher, particularly when working with certain populations. However, this approach could not only ensure ethically sound research, but may also lead to more theoretically sound research by allowing respondents to comment on the accuracy of the researcher's data and interpretations.

Sieber takes the position that all issues of confidentiality should be considered beforehand and clearly stated in the consent form. Thus, the researcher should carefully consider all potential uses of the data and clearly explain those uses in the consent form. Following Sieber's recommendation, in this case, Dr. Kline should have mentioned the presentation to the doctors in the consent form. However, the extent to which one can foresee every possible threat to confidentiality is questionable. Furthermore, researchers may not feel comfortable if bound to specifics laid out in the consent form. For example, like Dr. Kline, a researcher may wonder if compromising respondent confidentiality is necessary in order to maximize the good that flows from sharing the study results.

Typically, consent forms ensure that identifying information will be removed from reports. However, with qualitative research what constitutes identifying information can be very subtle and may depend on who the audience is that receives research reports. Many qualitative researchers may then face the challenge of changing enough of the characteristics of the individual while still maintaining the essence of

the data.

References

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