Chapter 8

Data Documentation and Informed Consent in Research

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines data documentation and informed consent in research. The exercise of documenting data provides an opportunity for researchers to reflect on a study to guide current work and inform and enhance future research. The chapter explains data documentation, how data is created or digitized, what data mean, what their content and structure are and any data manipulations that may have taken place, specific steps for documenting data-based research beginning with the study design and ending with data analysis and guidelines for obtaining informed consent, developing culturally appropriate methods of sharing information for research purpose and discusses prevailing views on current controversies, ambiguities and problems with these guidelines and suggests potential solutions. The literature also includes many references to the need for data documentation and informed consent. Further research is needed to examine the validity and user friendliness of innovations in information sharing procedures for obtaining consent in different cultural settings.

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INTRODUCTION

The authenticity of research outcome, more than ever before is predicated on certain extended variables or scale of measurement which research itself brought about by its continued scientific approach. Until recently, validity and reliability of a research work was silent on issues such as ethics in research, particularly as it affects human subject research method. During the past few years an increasing sensitivity has emerged to the importance of data documentation and availability, especially in education and the social sciences. Most recently, Huschka and Wagner (2012) have shown that data documentation and its availability are requirements not only for good scientific practice but also for good methodological work. Many researchers, however, still lack experience with data management and documentation. Since funding organizations and professional associations are increasingly expecting researchers to share all scientific outcomes (including data) from publicly funded projects, data documentation and informed consent in research have become important cross-disciplinary issues. Even though several institutions have called for the professionalization of research data management, precise knowledge of effective data documentation is still missing (Walters, 2009). However, in contrast to other disciplines, education, social sciences and humanities are confronted with specific challenges that currently prevent effective data management and documentation. These challenges include, e.g., privacy issues and the particular properties of qualitative data (non-standardized, context-sensitive, and informed consents etc.). Hence, as studies move on and researches meet with challenges bordering on authenticity defense and ethic violation, ethical solutions have since been sought which generated new research frontiers for scholars in areas like moral imagination, shareholders consultation, dialogue and other frontiers with a view to solving the problems several crises like lack of credibility and risk of data loss which modern scientific and academic research currently face (Büttner, Hobohm & Müller, 2011; Gläser & Laudel, 2008).

However, two important criteria for conducting social research are replicability and reflexivity. Qualitative research usually centers on reflexivity while quantitative research focuses on replicability (Hammersley, 2007). A distinction must be made between demands in relation to the research process and those in relation to the publication of understandable results. Whereas the research process (e.g. developing questionnaires, conducting interviews, etc.) should be made transparent for third parties, the published results must be replicable and understandable. These quality criteria for good scientific practice are achieved, inter alia, through the good management and documentation of data collected and computed. Similarly, informed consent is a vital step to any research project. It is the process in which a participant consents to participate in a research project after being informed of its
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