

Discussion Activity

HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS

Activity Name	A Small World?
Objectives	The objectives of this task are to encourage attendees to talk about a real situation. This could be used immediately before a discussion about the institutional, national and international guidelines relating to respect for participants, confidentiality and harm minimisation.
Audience	HDR candidates, HDR supervisors, Research Ethics Advisers, researchers
Time	10 minutes
Equipment/Resources Needed	None
Notes on use	This is a chance to talk about to whether de-identification is an absolute requirement, internal identification and de-identification strategies. The activity could be conducted as an open discussion with the room or in groups of 2-3 reporting back to the whole group.

Situation

In the 1960s, [Barbara Harrell-Bond](#) conducted fieldwork in Sierra Leone.

Her work focused on the experiences of the 754 people with professional qualifications who were then working in the country.

These people were often closely connected through kinship and most knew one another. However, it was only late in her research that she came to understand just how much they knew of each other's personal affairs.

When she released her first report outlining her research findings, Harrell-Bond found some readers could identify almost everyone discussed in the report and, moreover, that they could provide other details about those people such as their political affiliations, the spouse's ethnic background, educational qualifications, and other, more intimate, details.

This occurred despite Harrell-Bond's attempts to conceal the identity of the individuals concerned. Harrell-Bond concluded that there was no way she could disguise the identity of individuals in her report adequately (from Harrell-Bond, 1976).

- What should Harrell-Bond do? What might be the consequences of her actions?

Take 8 minutes for this task.

We will then discuss as a group what the response could be.

What might be the argument for not offering anonymity? How might that have an impact on the nature of the research?

If Harrell-Bond was to respond to her predicament by not making public the results of her research, might she reasonably be accused of being unethical for wasting the time of her respondents; squandering research resources; and consequently bringing research into disrepute?

What If?

...the research was being conducted

1. now?
2. among a remote and nonliterate group?
3. in your home city?
4. on a virtual community?

Take 5 minutes for this task.

Further Resources

1. Your institutional guidelines
2. Australian National Statement
 - a. [National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research](#)
3. New Zealand Code
 - a. Royal Society Te Apārangi [Code of Professional Standards and Ethics](#) in Science, Technology, and the Humanities
4. Mark Israel on confidentiality in social research (Sage video)
 - a. <http://methods.sagepub.com/video/srmpromo/SbJcMu/confidentiality-in-social-research>
5. Tolich, M. (2004) Internal confidentiality: When confidentiality assurances fail relational informants. *Qualitative Sociology*, 27, 101-106.
<https://www.researchgate.net/publication/226007255> [Internal Confidentiality When Confidentiality Assurances Fail Relational Informants](#)
6. Harrell-Bond, B. (1976) Studying Elites: Some Special Problems. In Rynkiewich, M.A. and Spradley, J.P. (eds), *Ethics and Anthropology: Dilemmas in Fieldwork*. New York: John Wiley, pp. 110-122.