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HANDBOOKS



The Routledge Handbook of Planning Research Methods

Edited by Elisabete A. Silva, Patsy Healey, Neil Harris,
and Pieter Van den Broeck

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2.3

PLANNING RESEARCH ETHICS

Huw Thomas and Francesco Lo Piccolo

Introduction

This chapter will discuss why researchers of all kinds – faculty, students, consultants – need to be ethically sensitive. The chapter is written against a background of what has been termed an ‘ethical turn’ in many disciplines (Loo, 2012: 10), and an increasing regulation (and bureaucratisation) of planning (and other) research conducted within universities. Although some argue that there are no ethical principles which are specific to any occupation,¹ in this chapter we argue that the circumstances of planning research, at least, raise distinctive ethical issues.

PhD students undertaking planning research in most countries of the global North, and more recently in other southern European countries,² are now required to gain formal approval that their research projects are ethically sound. In many countries research by undergraduates and master’s students also requires such approval.³ Central to the chapter’s preoccupation is the relationship between regulating the behaviour and actually improving behaviour. Regulating is one thing; getting real improvement is another. Under what circumstances might we expect a code of ethics to ensure ethical behaviour by planning researchers?

The chapter begins by considering the ethical dimensions of research practice. These will differ according to the way research practice is understood. It then asks why regulation of researchers’ conduct is now such a preoccupation of universities and researchers. Finally, it examines the nature of codes of ethics and when they are likely to be most effective.

Why be concerned about research ethics (and when should we be concerned)?

The research process can be divided into:

- 1 framing a research problem/question
- 2 designing an appropriate study, including fashioning research instruments
- 3 conducting the research, including the analysis of data in relation to the research question
- 4 dissemination of findings

Within the positivist tradition (see Chapter 2.2), these activities are supposedly discrete and sequential. Within other traditions this is not even always an ideal, but the activities still remain central to defining what is being undertaken as the practice of research.

A great deal of the discussion about research ethics, and often the concerns of university administration of research ethics, focuses on point 3, with occasional attention to point 2. This is perhaps understandable, because in these aspects of research decisions are often made which have a direct impact on others – such as people, other beings, and places. Choices are never entirely technical matters. At the very least, virtues such as honesty, integrity, and perhaps transparency are expected of decision takers. Most would accept that the ethical content of decision making, even when it is described as ‘technical’, is greater than this. For example, the standard requirement that whenever possible researchers ensure that participation (by humans) in their study is voluntary would fall under point 3. The typical justification for wanting to secure voluntary participation is that this respects the fundamental humanity and autonomy of each and every human being (Small, 2001). This is an ethical position, and one which we will have more to say about later in the chapter. Securing consent to participation may not always be achievable; whether this means the project should not continue in that form is itself an ethical judgement. That judgement will depend upon how important it is that participation is voluntary, and in what ways it is important.

Writing up research can be considered part of the analytical process. Writing clearly involves choices – of evidence, interpretation, and language – as researchers make out a case as to what they believe they have established. This is perhaps most obviously so in ethnographic research (Geertz, 1988). Sandercock and Attili’s (2012) ethnographic research of racialised conflict over land taken from First Nation inhabitants of western Canada underlines the ethics of this aspect of research, as the ‘writing up’ was in the form of a film. They provide an interesting account of the ethical choices they made in editing the film, which is an especially public artefact and also one where contemporary publics are often ‘savvy’, and aware that choices and techniques are involved in producing what they are viewing. In their case they took a collaborative approach to the process, which was consistent with their ethico-political beliefs. In fact, all writing up of research intends to persuade the reader of that of which the researcher is already persuaded. But in writing up planning research, like any social research, the commentary (like the study itself) has within it a picture or model of humanity, of what people are and what motivates them, a picture that is inevitably normative.

The choices may be more apparent in writing ethnography, but argument and persuasion are central to the presentation of all academic and consultancy research. Hence, in contemporary academic writing, a considerable portion of citation is simply establishing the credibility of the author. This has been so for some time, particularly in positivistic physical science (Martin, 1992, 2008). This is a long way from the idea that references simply cite sources. One can argue that the *de facto* convention of academic writing has changed so that references are now properly used in this way; however, even if we accept this contention, the silence over the practice itself raises ethical issues.

Points 2 and 3 may attract most attention, but points 1 and 4 are also shot through with value judgements, and as such can be argued to be ethically significant. In relation to point 1, many have argued persuasively, albeit in slightly differing terms, that the framing of research questions is central to the political struggles in planning and environment policy over establishing the dominance of a particular way of seeing and understanding the world within which a particular, favoured policy direction can be argued to be ‘inevitable’ and ‘natural’.⁴ A great deal of planning

research is commissioned by, or undertaken in partnership with, planning agencies of various kinds. If such projects accept the conceptual framework within which the planning agency works, then it will be underpinning, and helping to reproduce, this way of seeing and understanding the world, and the political consequences which follow. In planning research on issues such as cultural heritage, environment and public health, social justice and equal opportunities, this may be especially evident. For those undertaking action research with communities, on the other hand, ethical stances cannot be avoided as they seek to collaborate, and empathise, while retaining a distinct identity and role as researchers (Attili, 2009).

Arguably, all research is undertaken in order to contribute to a shared understanding of an aspect of the world by some community or other – usually scholarly, but often policy-related, or simply a social grouping. This means that dissemination is important to the research undertaking. Some also argue that integral to the definition of true social research of any kind is the construction of reasons for action/change, which inevitably involves disseminating research findings and their implications (Flyvbjerg, 2012). Planning research, certainly, is typically action-oriented, and hence dissemination will be a key part of doing the research (see overall introduction). Sandercock and Attili (2012: 162–163) exemplify this: “Our research strategy is to put as much effort into community dissemination and follow-on planning as we put into the research”. Such a stance involves ethical positions in relation to what kinds of intervention to make, in relation to what communities and institutions, and even how to react to threats, implied or otherwise, from those in positions of power who may be seeking to influence dissemination (Imrie and Thomas, 1995; Healey, 1991/2009; Flyvbjerg, 2012).

We have argued in this section that ethics/values are unavoidable within the *process* of research. Within some ontological and epistemological traditions, they are also bound up with the conceptual frameworks we use to understand the world. The metaphysical underpinning of experimental science, its ontology and epistemology, is only one way of seeking an understanding of the world. Within social science, positivism, which is an approach framed by the same metaphysics as experimental science, is fiercely contested (e.g., Flyvbjerg, 2001). Values are central to various (different) critiques of positivism within social science. Thus, it is criticised by some for ignoring, and having no resources to address, the value-context within which social scientific problems/issues are framed and pursued (Flyvbjerg, 2001). Others suggest that to make sense of individual and social activity, social science must understand the systems of meaning (and values) within which individuals and groups make sense of the world and generate reasons for acting (Winch, 1958). Conceived in this way, the academic fields of social science and the humanities might be characterised as activities which seek understanding rather than seek knowledge (Collini, 2012). One implication is that understanding them might sometimes involve feeling one’s way into sets of values and ways of life which have ethically questionable dimensions.

Regarding research as intended to help us understand the world better, and hence differently, has additional sets of normative implications, particularly for a discipline like planning, because understanding the world a certain way suggests ways in which it can, and should, be changed. Most planning research (especially when intended to directly inform practice) does not make any reference to any sort of ethics or ethical theory. This does not imply that there is no (normative) ethical theory at the base of the research, but just that it is implicit, and sometimes at a non-cognitive/conscious level (Lo Piccolo and Thomas, 2008). It would be a significant advancement in our planning research practice to make these implicit normative ethical foundations explicit.

Seeing people a certain way is part and parcel of behaving towards them in given ways – the two are inseparable. This implication of research holds, whether one is taking oneself to be de-mystifying power-relations in a major planning project in Denmark (Flyvbjerg, 1998) or

exposing the failure of planners to grasp the concrete realities of the communities they were affecting with their policies, as Jacobs (1961) and Dennis (1970,1972) did in their different ways. In these cases, Geertz's (1988) argument that a process of persuasive interpretation of circumstances is central to ethnographic research rings true. But even self-consciously dispassionate studies, such as Forsyth's (1999) account of struggles over urban expansion in Sydney or Le Goix and Webster's (2008) theorising of gated communities, still invite us to understand the social world in a certain way, and that way will be shot through with values. This is impossible to capture in any code of ethics, for the latter's bullet points can get little beyond 'don't lie; don't fabricate' and the like; and that is not what is going on when research is being written up.

In the case of planning, the quality and quantity of knowledge (depending on sources of information, availability and treatment of data, level of access to policy decisions, established goals and priorities) of the planning researcher are given privileged status in some contexts and can influence and/or affect people's lives, their status, and even their citizenship rights. In many cases (and more often in recent times, due to the position of contemporary entrepreneurial universities), planning researchers are looking for institutional requests and commitments, with significant ethical implications. Thomas (2010) has discussed how planning research can be helpful to those who would promote and sustain hegemonic policy discourses and that legitimacy is acquired through claims to a particular kind of rationality and objectivity. In other words, planning research as it is developed in universities – as a product of institutional requests – may result in the university's helping to justify and sustain a particular set of governance arrangements. It will be able to accomplish this because of the university's standing as the guardian and constructor of (a supposedly neutral and objective) knowledge. Thomas was writing about the UK; yet, as Healey (2008) has argued, different countries (and sometimes regions within them) have different institutional contexts within which universities operate. These provide different opportunities for influencing policy, and different kinds of ethical challenges.

It is clear that ethics and values are intimately bound up with research activity, whether conducted within the planning field or in other disciplines. Yet it does not follow that research should be regulated using codes of research ethics and procedures for gaining ethical approval. After all, good behaviour is always a social norm, but not all areas of life are formally regulated. In relation to social research, and planning research more specifically, it is only in recent years that formal procedures have begun to constrain researchers. In the next section we discuss why this has happened.

Why regulate research?

Research is a social practice which finds its definition and rationale within a particular way of conducting and ordering social relations and institutions more generally – that is, a way of organizing social life. While curiosity, learning and teaching, and social roles (teacher, priest, elder, guru), which are at least in part based on some conception of possession of greater or lesser knowledge or understanding, may be widespread in human societies, research as the kind of activity conducted in contemporary universities is distinctive of a society in which the natural and social world is viewed primarily as an object capable of being studied, understood, and ultimately managed (and planned). Because research has become a particular kind of social practice, it is subject to social regulation, which has, historically, been both informal and formal, depending on the sociopolitical context of the practice of research.

In our view, the general regulation of social science research, and codes of ethics as part of this, has coincided in many countries with a number of related phenomena. Prominent among

these is the increased emphasis on the importance of research as an activity which defines a university and is also a major source of revenue, a feature that has always been prominent in some countries, but by no means all (Rüegg, 2004; Collini, 2012). Secondly, there has been an acceleration of research, with minimal teaching, as a career path – both for established faculty, who may simply relinquish other duties, and for newer faculty, who are recruited as researchers and intend following, if possible, a research career. The research-based PhD has become almost universally required as a qualification/apprenticeship for academic life. Running alongside these developments, social research institutions have continued and perhaps intensified their roles as authoritative producers of knowledge, particularly for policy development that professes to be based on evidence (Allen and Imrie, 2010; Thomas, 2010). So, universities and research institutes are doing more research and are claiming it is important, and more and more academics are thinking of themselves primarily, or at least in large measure, as researchers. It is in these circumstances that it can seem attractive and appropriate to devise and subscribe to a code of research ethics as part of a tacit professionalising of the researcher's role and practice. It is arguable that the planning field still has an insecure place in the academy, and for such a discipline a clear commitment to ethical self-regulation, including adherence to a code of ethics, can be an important part of the continuous assertion of academic legitimacy. Stengers (1987) discusses the process by which 'soft' sciences are becoming 'harder' in order to acquire broader recognition. The process of 'hardening' a discipline comes from the need for gaining broader social legitimation and reaching a higher status for its members. In order to do so, a discipline has to accept the 'rules of the game'. For example, there is pressure to follow the methods and practices of more 'structured' and – temporally – well-established sciences. The establishment of professional codes of ethics is a (modest) step in this search for academic legitimation.

What are codes? And how might they help regulate or improve behaviour?

In discussing professional codes of ethics for planning, Taylor (1992) rehearses a distinction which also appears regularly in discussions of research ethics (e.g., Small, 2001): is a code a set of ethical guidelines which could apply to any occupation, or at least any professional occupation, or does it identify challenges and issues which are particularly pertinent to particular kinds of activities? The appearance of virtues such as honesty, objectivity, and respecting confidentiality (e.g., Resnik, n.d.) in research ethics codes illustrates that to a large extent what is being asked of researchers is simply that they be of good character as they go about their work (Thomas, 2009). Yet it is certainly the case that different kinds of research tend to bring distinctive challenges and dilemmas. *The case studies in Lo Piccolo and Thomas (2009)* illustrated ethical challenges which had resonance for researchers in planning, but were likely to have little or no resonance for researchers in experimental science. For example, at the core of Porter's (2009) concerns is exploring the feasibility that a non-indigenous researcher researching the lives and views of indigenous peoples can free herself from the objectifying imperial gaze that has structured (and defined) indigenous/non-indigenous relations over centuries. She is rejecting the research position of the experimental researcher on ethical grounds.

It follows that codes of ethics which are sensitive to the circumstances under which particular occupations or activities are undertaken are likely to be more useful. In the case of research, appropriately different codes will be needed by researchers engaged in activities involving people, other sentient beings, other organisms, or objects, for example. Different codes may also apply to people engaged in activities which can potentially cause widespread harm. These are just some examples of differences which many would regard as warranting special mention in a

code of research ethics. Researchers who wish to avail themselves of guidance from a code need to unearth one that is appropriate for their kind of research, therefore. It should be noted that what counts as a significant difference between types of research is itself an ethical judgement. So, for a group of people to agree about even the need for, and broad lineaments of, a code, they must already share significant ethical perspectives.

This consideration has a bearing on another of Taylor's points. He argues that central to a code of ethics must be a vision of what the activity (e.g., planning research) should be, a vision of what MacIntyre (1985) might refer to as the characterisation of excellence in that activity.⁵

Such visions are contestable. This is not always obvious because often discussions of research ethics focus on the minutiae of day-to-day research activity. Interpersonal relations do matter, and researchers must be sensitive to the ethical implications of factors such as the power relations bound up in social life. The research activity itself can create distinctive kinds of social relations which will have their own power dynamic, and at times one that is questionable (e.g., Porter, 2009). In addition, those engaging in research, in any capacity, are inevitably embodied and socially located (in terms of gender or class, for example) as they engage in the research process. As Sayer (2005) has argued persuasively in relation to social class, these characteristics, and their associated hierarchies, can have a moral dimension because they have judgements of personal worth bound up with them. But, as already discussed, different research traditions will have very different visions of what constitutes excellence in research (see Chapter 2.1), and hence what kind of research practice a code of research ethics is seeking to foster.

Yet we must remember that if researchers are intent on doing wrong, no code of ethics will persuade them otherwise. Research on cheating by university students has something to teach us here. Reviewing a long period of field research in various settings and using a variety of methods, McCabe, Treviño, and Butterfield (2001) argue that having an ethical code which forbids cheating (e.g., plagiarism, etc.) alone is ineffective; but a code can be helpful within a school or university whose actions – at all levels from the corporate to the individual lecturer – make it clear that cheating is regarded as serious wrongdoing. In brief, the organizational culture is a vital component of shaping behaviour, and if the injunctions of a code are upheld, and in other ways seen to be relevant to day-to-day practice, then its detailed prescriptions may have some influence (see also Thomas, 2012). It is plausible to suggest that this is likely to be true of research ethics, especially as accounts of some celebrated scientific scandals point to competitive pressures within academia as important factors in causing people to do things they know are wrong (Broad and Wade, 1985). Getting the culture 'right' and embedding a code of ethics within it is unavoidably a collective activity;⁶ central to this culture will be a notion of what constitutes better or worse, and possibly excellence in, research. Given the way that planning research is typically conducted – by small groups within a larger department or institute – it will be useful for the individual researcher to get consistent norms and values from all the networks that she operates within.

Let us suppose that the organizational culture within which a researcher is working is supportive of ethical behaviour, as it expresses it. In this context, how might a researcher identify circumstances in which it is appropriate to use a code and what might a code contain? These will be discussed in turn.

When does something fall under a code? Codes and ethical traditions

Codes of research ethics tend to contain a core set of concepts. Central to most are integrity and respect for persons. The current UK Economic and Social Research Council framework

for research ethics identifies what it calls 'six key principles' (ESRC, 2010: 3). These highlight the significance of:

- integrity, quality, and transparency;
- informed consent;
- confidentiality;
- voluntary participation;
- avoidance of harm to participants;
- independence/freedom from partiality and/or clear declaration of interest/partiality.

Small (2001) points out that the kinds of concepts just listed gain their meaning within an ethical tradition or theory which will itself have metaphysical underpinnings. Underlying the significance of informed consent and voluntariness, for example, is a liberal notion of respect for persons, which views the person as ontologically and morally more basic than, and prior to, any social entity. But liberal conceptions of what is meant by 'respect for a person' simply cannot be transplanted unchanged into, say, the kind of feminist perspective on life which emphasises the significance of our social being in constructing our individuality. As Small says, applying the notion of respect to social groups is not simply an extension of the Kantian notion of respect for individuals, but a different idea entirely. This kind of conceptual revision, and argument around it, is central to ethical life. It is an unavoidable part of the way in which we construct our social existence, and moral concepts have to be understood within these forms of life (MacIntyre, 1998: 1–4).

Small (2001) suggests that as a consequence, ethical codes are simply compromises between groups with fundamentally different ethical perspectives, a kind of lowest common denominator that all can live by. Not surprisingly, he goes on to argue that developing ethical behaviour among researchers should focus not on codes of ethics but on how to discuss ethical issues and reach agreement on ways forward, a thought to which we will return. If one follows MacIntyre's approach, even a lowest common denominator will be illusory – for the terms used will have been ripped from the context which gives them their full meaning. As a consequence, either they will be applied in ways which will seem arbitrary, even when agreeable to all, or, at other times, their application will be embroiled in irreconcilable conflict, such as research involving human embryos, or research which involves contact with largely undisturbed peoples, as concepts are interpreted within different ethical traditions.

As Christians (2000) points out, codes of research ethics developed in the context of positivist, 'value-free' science. This has shaped their form and content. One consequence is that the nature and purpose of research as a practice are usually not alluded to in the codes. It is assumed to be socially beneficial and value-free (as natural science is widely considered to be). The codes focus on the day-to-day practice of research itself, and within that, the researcher is viewed as detachable (including ethically detachable), at least in principle (and ethically) from that which is being researched.

This is particularly inappropriate for research such as planning research which involves, of necessity, an engagement with the value-saturated world of public policy (see overall introduction). For example, if planning is about a dialectical relationship between knowledge and action (Friedmann, 1973, 1987), then those who claim to produce planning knowledge will inevitably be implicated in the moral landscape of practice. As we know, most planning practices present ethical judgements and dilemmas. As Kaufman (1993: 113) highlights, "much of the behaviour of planners reflects both ethical choices and carries with it ethical consequences. Ethical

judgements are involved, sometimes explicitly but more often implicitly, in many planning activities including collecting and analyzing data, forecasting, cost-benefit analysis". So, if we consider and recognise the pervasive ethical dimensions involved in planning work (Kaufman, 1993), ethics is a relevant, even if not particularly discussed, component of planning research, which mainly derives from the continuous involvement of planning researchers in planning practices. Planning practice is inherently political, denying the rhetoric or stereotype of the planner as a value-free means-end technician who deals with "factual data but avoids the value questions of defining these objectives" (Klosterman, 1978). In those circumstances, good researching is partly defined by sensitivity to the politico-ethical implications of the research (Flyvbjerg, 2001).

So, planning researchers may sign up to a code of ethics and still disagree about whether the circumstances they find themselves in fall under the code at all, and – if they do – just how the code applies and guides them. Some time ago, one of the authors of this chapter conducted research into the way that issues of racial discrimination, racism, and social justice were understood within the daily practices of the British planning system (Krishnarayan and Thomas, 1993). It became apparent during this project that some participants who were committed to promoting race equality within planning saw their participation in the research as an opportunity to use the researchers as conduits for communication with others within and outside their organization. Without necessarily wanting to waive complete anonymity, they appeared to be seeking to use the researchers as 'backchannels'.

This kind of case raises a whole range of considerations. First, is it necessary that a researcher be sensitive to these kinds of aspirations and wishes on the part of participants? In the positivist tradition, where researchers claim to be able to 'stand outside' the 'subjects' of research, then the wishes and projects of participants are relevant only to the extent that they affect the quality of data gathered from those participants. Others would claim that the research project is itself an intervention in a power-infused social setting, and the researchers are ethically bound to recognise and react to this (e.g., Ladsong-Billings, 2000). A code of ethics which insisted on such recognition would challenge a still-significant tradition of planning research. Secondly, even if researchers agree that they should be sensitive to these kinds of aspirations on the part of the participants, a code of research ethics will not help them to act. General exhortations in a code to respect people, and even to promote social justice, are open to varying interpretations. In the case in point, researchers with differing understandings of what 'race equality' might mean – and hence how good or bad current circumstances are – will react differently to the (implicit) suggestion that they be 'used' by particular participants in a research study to promote the 'struggle' in a particular way (Thomas, 2000).

Conclusions

These considerations suggest that a code of research ethics can help focus researchers' attention when it is embedded within the research culture of the researchers' most significant reference group, and ideally beyond. The code must grow out of, and – when drawn upon and interpreted – contribute to, a continuing conversation within the research group about the nature and significance of its practice. Hence, central to planning research which has a sound ethical basis will be the development of a community of researchers which shares an outlook on what matters, and what the place of human life (including practices like research) is in relation to what matters. Within this community there will be shared terms of reference and vocabulary which allow principled, but constructive, discussion and disagreement about research ethics. In particular, they allow constructive discussion about why, when, and how research may be

appropriate. Within research communities, codes of ethics may have a role as rules of thumbs, or reminders of key dangers to researchers' integrity, but not as answers to day-to-day issues that arise in research.

Notes

- 1 See Ladd (1980), cited in Small (2001: 390–391).
- 2 It is worth noting how widespread this kind of concern has now become – for example, ethical approvals for research proposals are now required in some of the southern European university systems, such as those of Portugal and Spain. In both countries increasing attention is paid to ethical issues arising in social research, particularly with reference to those activities which involve the treatment of personal data or the engagement of children or adults unable to give informed consent.
- 3 In relation to PhD research. For the position of undergraduates and master's students we rely upon anecdotal data.
- 4 For example, Hajer (1995), Throgmorton (1996), Murdoch and Abram (2002).
- 5 Hendler (1990), too, notes the significance of ideals of excellence in relation to codes of ethics in planning.
- 6 McGinn *et al.* (2005) discuss the practicalities of developing an ethical culture within a research team.

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