



Call for submissions

Research ethics on sensitive topics: epistemological and practical issues

International conference, Paris (Aubervilliers), December 2-3, 2021

Introduction

Ethics, defined as a “*reflexive* approach on the values and ends of scientific research” (Coutellec, 2019), is a constitutive dimension of research practice. Yet, its understanding and practice still divide opinions: juridical and practical measures vary depending on countries, institutions, universities and disciplines. The formalisation of ethics in research was initially developed in the United-States in the 1970’s, as part of biomedical experiments (Grady, 2015; Larouche;2019). In European research, these issues have been tackled much more recently (McKenzie, 2019). The General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) implemented in 2018 is the first European initiative to develop a data protection code. Despite several attempts, many countries still have not elaborated an ethical and deontological regulation or code of research at the national level (Béliard, Eidelian, 2018; Bosa, 2008; Clair, 2016). Discussions on ethical issues remain limited within the confines of health and medical research or topics considered as sensitive by regulatory bodies like the French CNIL¹. In this context, the understanding of ethics is restricted to the protection of information pertaining to participants’ ethno-racial origins, political and religious beliefs, sexuality and health. Broader ethical concerns (*i.e.* reflexivity, positionality, methodologies and methods) are seldom addressed – and even less in a collective way – by researchers, academics or practitioners.

As a major component of the scientific process, ethics should be discussed collectively. Yet, in the absence of compulsory ethical approval procedures, the deontological arbitration is often based on researchers’ personal beliefs or left to their peers’ discretion. Feminist and decolonial epistemologies highlighted the power relations that underpin social structures as well as research institutions. The peer review process, therefore, is performed differently depending on

¹ In France, the National Commission on Informatics and Liberty must, among other things, ensure the protection of individual data.



the social characteristics (gender, age, class, race...) of the different research stakeholders. It is precisely because of the multiple positionalities and power relations at play in research that it is essential to question their impact on ethical principles and practices. Not only do we need to understand the effects of research on the people it involves (research participants, interviewers, researchers, practitioners), but we also need to ascertain whether those effects are acceptable to all parties and how to limit those deemed undesirable. This task seems even more important as the sensitivity of the work increases. Foregrounding feminist and decolonial epistemologies among others, this conference aims to unpack the specific ethical questions and challenges which arise when doing sensitive research.

A research topic is considered sensitive when it concerns issues that are intimate, discreditable, illicit or overlooked, including research dealing with the suffering, injustice, insecurity and violence experienced by research participants and/or the researchers (*e.g.* research on sexual violence, conflict zones). Sensitive topics are thus topics where strong socio-political implications emerge (Bouillon, Fresia, Taillo, 2005; Robin, Join-Lambert, Mackiewicz, 2017), sometimes steeped with physical and emotional risks (Boumaza and Campana, 2007). Finally, the sensitivity of research is not only determined by the object of the research, but can also be the consequence of the way one approaches a theme and of theoretical choices that are made at the time of the research design (Hennequin (dir.), 2012). As a result, conducting sensitive research requires a specific protocol where particular attention is paid to the methodology, research participants, and research experiences.

This conference aims to provide an overview of the different ways in which ethical issues linked to sensitive topics are tackled, and the implications they raise for research participants, stakeholders in the field, and researchers in the contemporary context. More broadly it asks how ethical issues can be articulated with existing legal frameworks, various epistemological positionings, and the research practice itself. Particular attention will be devoted to understanding and navigating power relations (gender, age, sexualities, class, race...) in research ethics.

The proposed reflexion will gather experiences from different scientific disciplines (sociology, demography, political science, development studies, anthropology, history, psychology, epidemiology, or law) and from different countries insofar as research frameworks vary and these issues are addressed differently depending on local contexts. Discussions of ethics in sensitive research encompasses not only data collection but rather the whole research process, including research design, theoretical standpoints, data collection, writing and dissemination. Submissions presented will be based on qualitative or quantitative data as well as mix-method.



Axis 1: Regulations of research practices

In May 2018, the GDPR implementation harmonized the regulation of personal data protection within the EU. In the case of research on sensitive topics, it is for instance highly recommended to get a Data Protection Officer (DPO) to validate the research protocol first. How have these new legal measures been embraced by social scientists working on sensitive topics? Has their implementation significantly altered the place given to ethics in research practices? How do researchers adapt to these new regulations or framing of practices, whether such framing is institutionalized or not? This first axis seeks to explore researchers' knowledge of the law (*e.g.* in regard to sensitive data) and its effects on the research itself (whether these effects are real, expected or possibly even dreaded). The reflection will extend to discussions of other practices or regulations in place in wider contexts, for example when an ethical approval is mandatory or, on the contrary, where standards of ethics in research are not legally framed.

We will discuss researchers' awareness and understanding of ethical regulations in place. Ethics, deontology, and associated regulations are rarely a part of students' training curriculum, and very few seminars tackle these issues extensively if at all. Thus, we ask: Can ethics be taught? And if so, in what ways could such programs be designed? This axis welcomes submissions proposing reflections or experiences on methods and approaches to teaching research ethics.

This axis also addresses the consequences of new ethical requirements and frameworks on research practices themselves. For instance, we look at the obligation to obtain free and informed consent in a way that is explicitly formulated by the participants. Though essential to protect participants, such a requirement can nevertheless become an obstacle to the research itself. This is especially clear when dealing with sensitive topics where, regardless of anonymisation, participants may not want to leave a written trace of their participation. Naming violence explicitly can also have a detrimental impact on the research as participants may not identify themselves as victims of violence, thus refusing to take part in the research (Debauche *et al.*, 2017). The link between ethics and its regulation must therefore be questioned. How to carry out research within the remits of legal requirements? and can legal and deontological frameworks guarantee the ethical nature of research *per se*? Ethics committees such as Institutional Review Boards (IRB) have indeed been criticised for being too strict and/or inadequate to human subjects (Grady, 2015; Larouche, 2019). How then can we collectively design efficient ethical tools that would nonetheless enable reflexivity? The axis assesses the implications of ethical frameworks on researching sensitive topics, balancing the risks (*e.g.* a



protocol becoming too strict (Fassin, 2008)) with the deontological and scientific benefits of ethical regulation (Bosa, 2008; Gagnon, 2001).

Axis 2: The researchers' positioning when doing sensitive research

In sensitive research projects, researchers face challenges to negotiate access to the field, manage their relationship with participants, handle the reception of the research, and navigate ambiguous relationships with various institutions. In order to gain support from the plurality of stakeholders required for research, researchers must adopt strategies which are themselves steeped in power dynamics, especially when dealing with institutional settings. In such environments navigating power relations can be a violent experience in itself. It is therefore essential to question the researchers' positioning and positionality when confronted with these situations.

The academic literature abundantly criticised as unrealistic the expected positioning of the researcher as an objective external presence. In particular, feminist and decolonial approaches acknowledged the implications of researchers' material conditions and power positions (age, gender, race, class etc.) on their research practice (Clair, 2016). Both approaches also ask how to mobilise the central concepts of empathy and care to engage participants about matters that might generate suffering. They invite researchers to break with ethnocentric epistemologies by enabling oppressed groups to speak directly for themselves (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018; Vergès, 2019). A reflexive approach to positionality is particularly important when the researcher holds a socially dominant or subordinate position in the research relationship. How can we collect participants' accounts in a social environment that can be hostile, especially when involving stigmatised, oppressed, or marginalised individuals? How to deal with relations that can sometimes be conflictual? How can we create a space inclusive of participants' subjectivities and perceptions of themselves and their relationship to the world? This axis welcomes discussions of epistemological and ontological approaches to ethics in the context of researching sensitive topics. This includes submissions reflecting on the "right" posture to adopt when researching sensitive topics and experiences of participative action research that challenge power dynamics and include participants throughout the entire research process.

Axis 3: Sensitive research and its impact(s) on researchers

Sensitive topics convey "social pain, injustice, domination and violence" (Bouillon, Fresia, Tallio, 2005). When working on these topics, the researcher is likely to experience as well as create violent situations. These situations can come from participants but also from the subject



or socio-political context of the research environment. Sensitive research involves the researcher politically, physically, emotionally, and methodologically. Violence and suffering, whether witnessed or experienced, whether they are the object of the research or emerge from it, can indeed be a particularly difficult or tricky experience for the researcher. In such context, how are we to apprehend and deal with these issues?

While the emotional implications of research are often overlooked in academia (Dickson-Swift *et al.*, 2009), we consider that emotional and/or physical dangers must be fully considered as important ethical stakes of research. Though these challenges may incite creativity, there is a problematic lack of institutional measures and resources to accompany and support researchers. Isolation and suffering, often understood as a constitutive and expected dimension of research, are seen as private issues. All the while their material, political and methodological dimensions and implications are neglected.

This axis seeks to open up space to pinpoint and understand these challenges, highlight the mechanisms at play, and identify individual and collective initiatives used to deal with them. Positive and/or ambivalent feelings that emanate from the research – and notably the field - will also be discussed. Following the steps of feminists and intersectional researchers (Clair, 2016; Masson, 2016), we will explore theoretical and methodological tools which can be mobilised to address these concerns. Sensitive research also poses material and physical risks which need to be examined, in particular by asking how prepared researchers are to work in ‘the field’ and what is provided by institutions to ensure their protection.

Axis 4: The impact(s) of sensitive research on the participants

Reflexive work raises questions about the place of participants in the research. Responding to a survey or interview is never a meaningless act, especially when the topic is sensitive (Campbell & Adams, 2008; Campbell *et al.*, 2010). It may expose participants to social sanctions, for instance when participants are part of a close social network (family, colleagues...) or when the field is subjected to strict confidentiality (legal or medical secrecy, protection of participants’ integrity...). What, therefore, motivates people to participate in sensitive research? Ethical principles urge us to consider the research’s impact on the participants before, during, and after the study process. What, then, are the consequences of participation for participants’ affective and social life? How to balance the imperative to prevent or reduce risks with the free will of participants to engage in difficult research? This axis proposes a reflexion on the one hand on the institutional ethical mechanisms in place to protect the integrity of participants, and on the other hand on the role of participants in defining for



themselves the conditions of their ethical involvement in research. The ontological violence caused by the objectification of participants should be explored as well, since it may constitute an addition to the violence already experienced by vulnerable participants. Those indirect impacts of research on participants may require a full-fledged (post-)study, expanding boundaries of the “end” of a research.

This axis also questions the relationship between researcher and participant through the lens of the ‘do no harm’ principles (Vassy, Keller, 2008). What measures should be taken by researchers to anticipate participants’ emotional needs? How can they position themselves as a relay to provide support to participants who express the need for it in the continuity of feminist ethics of care (Gilligan, 1982; Ibos, Damamme, Molinier, Paperman, 2019)? How to think of long-term measures for participants who would show interest, which could be co-constructed by researchers, professionals, community activists and the participants themselves? In this section, potential difficulties experienced by participants will be examined as well as the solutions to address them.

Submission process

This call for submissions welcomes submissions in French or in English. Submissions may be based on scientific research, reflexive presentations, or various forms of empirical work. This call is addressed to researchers, professionals and activists, whose activities are related to sensitive topics and/or raise ethical issues.

Submission papers must be 3000 to 5000 signs long (spaces included) and include a title, an abstract, the main bibliographic references, as well as a short presentation of the author (status, scientific discipline, institutional affiliation). If the submission fits in with several axes (non-exhaustive list), it must be mentioned in the proposition. Once received, they will be sent anonymously to the members of the scientific committee for selection.

Applications must be sent before June 15, 2021 at the following address: terrainssensibles2021@gmail.com. Results will be communicated in early September. The conference will take place on December 2-3, 2021 at the Centre des colloques of Campus Condorcet (Aubervilliers) if global health conditions permit it.

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