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Citation: Pickles, James (2018) Contamination of overt data with covert data. *Research Ethics*, 14 (4). pp. 1-3. ISSN 1747-0161

Published by: SAGE

URL: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1747016117721281> <<https://doi.org/10.1177/1747016117721281>>

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Contamination of overt data with covert data

Research Ethics
2018, Vol. 14(4) 1–3
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DOI: 10.1177/11747016117721281
journals.sagepub.com/home/rea


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Abstract

A research project was conducted which explored LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) hate crime. Participants were invited to share their narratives and personal experiences of hate crime, discrimination and violence through semi-structured interviews. The study helped us understand how people who experience ‘hate’ responded to, managed and reconciled the identities for which they were victimized. This case study focuses on a situation where a research participant requested a copy of an interview they gave for the hate crime project. The interview copy was to be used for the participant’s own personal purposes. The participant’s request potentially risked the contamination of ethical (overt) data collection, with their own covert data gathering. The ethical implications of this scenario raise many questions for ethicists and researchers to discuss.

Keywords

hate crime, LGBT, research ethics, research methods, research participants, sexuality research

The participant agrees to take part in a semi-structured interview for a research project you are conducting. The standard procedure to take part is to read through an information sheet outlining how their interview will be used, and to sign a consent form acknowledging that they understand the purpose of participation. All

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personal information is anonymized with pseudonyms to protect the identities of all participants. During the interview the participant describes and explains their experiences of discrimination and hate crime. Two weeks pass and then your participant asks for a copy of the interview recording (recording A). Nowhere on the consent form you both signed does it state that a participant can request of copy of their interview. However, as part of the Data Protection Act (1998) they have a right to request information that they have provided. They also disclose that they want to use this recording for a public art piece they are creating which will shed light on the discrimination they experience. The purpose of the interview recording *is* to shed light on the participant's personal experiences of discrimination. However, the consent agreement, which you both signed, stated that the interview was only to be used for the LGBT hate crime research output. The recording was never meant to support an independent art piece, which was being created as part of a university degree programme. Consent agreements are conventionally used to reassure the participant that the *researcher* will not use the participant's interview recording for additional purposes. In this case study, it was the *participant* who sought to use the recording for purposes the interview was never meant to support.

The art project will play two separate recordings, concurrently, on a loop. The interview recording (recording A) is to be used alongside an additional audio recording, which the participant alone carried out covertly. The participant's recording (recording B) is of a meeting between LGBT peers, at which you both were present, outside of your research parameters. During the meeting, the participant was verbally discriminated against by their LGB peers. The use of recording A alongside the meeting recording B, which has been gathered without ethical consent procedures, challenges the ethics of how data are used and combined. Additionally, the participant's request for the recording A, which they provided as part of the LGBT hate crime project, challenges the ownership of data you collect. This raises the question about whether your data will be tarnished if used in conjunction with ethically ambiguous data. Further, your voice is on both recordings, which risks revealing both of your identities if they are played concurrently. The participant argues that there are valid reasons for both of the recordings to be used together. The participant also notes that the art project on discrimination, of which both recordings will be used, is closely tied with the original LGBT hate crime project you are conducting.

The covert meeting recording B and the overt interview recording A being used jointly has several purposes. Firstly, it is to highlight the participant's experiences of discrimination within the LGBT community by their LGB peers. The request for recording A is so they can highlight this using their own voice captured in the recording. Secondly, it is to demonstrate this lived/experienced discrimination through their additional, covert recording B of the meeting. This is done by using

the examples of the participant being discriminated against at the meeting by LGB people. The combined use of both recordings being played concurrently will either ‘whistle blow’ the discrimination they experience from their LGB peers, and implement some change, or it will compromise your entire research project conducted on LGBT hate crime, which is separate from the participant’s artistic work. There is also the possibility that it will potentially do both of these things.

Questions for discussion:

- Do you give them a requested copy of your data?
- Does this risk contaminating and compromising your entire research project?
- Would you design an agreement where you are anonymized in their work?
- Would you report them for obtaining data for their own research and professional practice, as part of a university degree course, covertly?

Declaration of conflicting interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

Funding

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