

# The SAGE Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods

## Confidentiality

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Book Title: The SAGE Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods

Chapter Title: "Confidentiality"

Pub. Date: 2008

Access Date: October 10, 2013

Publishing Company: SAGE Publications, Inc.

City: Thousand Oaks

Print ISBN: 9781412941631

Online ISBN: 9781412963909

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412963909.n59>

Print pages: 112-113

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412963909.n59>

Respect for confidentiality is an established principle in research ethics codes and professional codes of conduct. More broadly, in many cultures confidentiality is also considered as fundamental to human dignity. Researchers often give assurances of confidentiality to protect the privacy of research participants. This means that information shared with researchers will not be disclosed in a way that can publicly identify a participant or source.

There are many reasons for respecting confidentiality. It can protect people from embarrassment or save them from harm or stigma. Promises of confidentiality are usually necessary when researchers seek sensitive data such as information about health, sexual behaviors, drug use, tax evasion, and other personal secrets. Without confidentiality, many people either would refuse to take part in sensitive research or would be less forthcoming with the information that they share with researchers. Therefore, confidentiality helps to enhance both the quality and validity of data.

Confidentiality can be protected in various ways. Sometimes participants are truly anonymous and cannot be identified in any way, for example, when people use pseudonyms in secure internet chat rooms. Researchers may also remove identifying information from coding sheets or interview transcripts so that no particular response can be linked to a specific person. Identifying information is sometimes stored in a secure location separate from the data that will be used for analysis. This allows researchers to keep track of participants without compromising their confidentiality.

A participant's confidential relationship with a researcher can depend heavily on the commitment the researcher makes to guarantee confidentiality. In Canada and the United States, researchers have faced legal threats to compel disclosure of confidential data. In 1993, Rik Scarce, a Washington State University graduate student, was jailed for 159 days for contempt of court when he refused to disclose information to a grand jury about animal rights activists. In 1994, Russel Ogden, a graduate student at Simon Fraser University, was subpoenaed to a coroner's inquest for his research into assisted suicides among persons with HIV and AIDS. He refused to violate a promise to his participants of "absolute confidentiality" and eventually established a common law privilege to protect against disclosure of identifying information. Since then, Ogden has

resisted two more subpoenas from Crown prosecutors to a criminal trial on assisted suicide.

Although the experiences of Scarce and Ogden are relatively rare, they highlight the conflict between researchers' ethical responsibility to participants and competing obligations to law. In Canada, there have been calls for the development of law that will allow researchers to promise confidentiality without fearing a legal challenge to such promises.

In the United States, some criminological and health research can receive statute-based protections. Researchers funded by the National Institute of Justice can apply for "privacy certificates." Regardless of the funding body, health researchers can make applications to the National Institutes of Health for "certificates of confidentiality."

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412963909.n59>

*See also*

#### Further Readings

Palys, T., & Lowman, J. Protecting research confidentiality in Canada: Towards a research participant shield law. *Canadian Journal of Law and Society* (2006)., vol. 21. pp. 163–185.

Scarce, R. (No) trial (but) tribulations: When courts and ethnography conflict. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* (1994)., vol. 23. pp. 123–149.