

Ethical issues in covert research

Reading activity

- Identify four reasons why covert research is problematic*
- Explain when it is acceptable to use covert research and what precautions need to be exercised*

For sociologists, a balance is invariably struck between the need to collect data and the need to observe ethical guidelines and procedures. The use of covert research is legally and ethically problematic since it denies the principle of informed consent and thus constitutes a violation of personal privacy. In some research contexts, covert methods may be used to avoid participants altering their behaviour in the research process, or when access to certain arenas of information have otherwise been closed to the researcher or where other methods would compromise the safety of the researcher. It should be noted that covert methods may invite legal action from participants which should be considered before covert research is entered into.

In covert studies it is important to safeguard the anonymity of research participants. Ideally, where informed consent has not been obtained prior to the research, it should be obtained post hoc.

Social researchers face a range of potential risks to their safety. Safety issues need to be considered in the design and conduct of social research projects and procedures should be adopted to reduce the risk to researchers.

As far as possible, participation in sociological research should be based on the freely-given informed consent of those studied. This implies a responsibility on the sociologist to explain in appropriate detail, and in terms meaningful to participants, what the research is about, who is undertaking and financing it, why it is being undertaken, and how it is to be disseminated and used.

Withholding information or misleading participants is unacceptable and the intentional deceiving of participants should be avoided wherever possible. It would only be deemed acceptable in exceptional circumstances. Participant or non-participant observation in non-public spaces or experimental manipulation of research participants without their knowledge should be resorted to only where it is impossible to use other methods to obtain essential data.