



Oxford e-Social Sciences Project



Doing ethics differently

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E-Research in Social Science: What is it?

Digital and computational methods to carry out social science research

No doubt will become obsolete as a label

Examples

- Large data repositories
- Data acquired through computerised methodologies
- Data re-use
- Data mining and aggregation
- Digital images, audio, video
- Network analysis
- Geospatial analysis and representation
- Modelling and simulation

E-Research ethics

- Ethics regulations
 - Minimal conditions -- tell us what needs to be done in order to ensure that our practices are not unethical or illegal -- on a minimal and least controversial understanding of harms and benefits
 - Not unethical / legal does not imply ethical
 - Ethical as an evaluative term, a term of approbation, the ways in which we judge ourselves and others
 - Ethics regulations need to enforce or encourage research that is at least not unethical
 - Ethics regulations must not be an obstacle to research being carried out ethically

What's ethical anyway?

- The ability to benefit or harm each other
 - In research benefits and harms have often been conceptualised on the medical model
- Ethics is not a separable compartment of social action but a pervasive dimension of human actions
- Dependence that we each have on the good will of others
- Inter-individual/group relations: what we owe to each other (Scanlon)
- Self-understandings and self-conceptions as the basis of actions, behaviours, possibilities of desire, want, need and fulfillment
- Human and social being and thriving

Social Science and Ethics

- Social science is a player in the social field not just an observer
- Values are embedded in the methodologies, motivations and purposes of social science
- Social science not only describes but contributes to the formation of self-understandings
- And therefore to the constitution of the sources of what counts as ethical practice and action, as benefit and harm
- What differences are brought about by digital and computational methods of carrying out social science?

An example:

Instrumentalism and Consequentialism

- Dominant discourse about technologies: technologies are mere instruments; human purposes and goals are constituted independently of technologies; they pre-exist them [Impact measures!]
- Dominant discourse in research strategy is consequentialist: what is ethical is what produces the better consequences -- risk/benefit analysis; most often in quantifiable and calculable terms.
- [Tension with the rights-based model of ethics which is embedded in notions of consent]

- Instrumentalism about technologies and consequentialism about ethics are both default positions
- Lend themselves to formalisation and computation
- Calculability of interests
- Consequentialist view of human beings is as of a *homo computans*
- With the power of computation, this view is reinforced
- And further internalised, entrenched and acted upon

Weber's typology of intentional action

Traditional action

Customary, habitual actions; barely intention and minimally reflective

Affective (or emotional) action

Express the feelings, attitudes and emotions of the agent (eg crying at a funeral, shouting at a demonstration)

Value-rational action

Express the commitment and allegiance to a given value (eg not eating meat for an animal rights activist)

Goal-rational action

Actions which are effective in achieving an end which is valued. Usually chosen after having calculated cost and benefits and having considered possible alternatives and compatibility with other valued goals. (e.g. moving one's account to a bank that offers higher interest rates)

On this model, goal-rational actions are the ones that are more amenable to calculation and computability; but because they are, they enter more easily into a certain type of computerised social science, thereby coming to be over-emphasised in social self-understandings

Examples 1

- Huge data sets of numerical values, computationally mined, processed and aggregated -- reinforcement of particular ways of thinking of well-being, of personal achievement, of progress
- COINS: Combined Online Information System
- Agent-based modelling and the view of agents as rational self-interested agents
- Networks and social capital

Example 2: Privacy

- Ethical regulations: respect for privacy of research participants
- Internet behaviour: conceptions and boundaries of privacy are shifting and changing
- Social science avails itself of those very shifts to learn about human behaviour: for example, studies on Facebook; data re-use
- Social science is a player in the field of changing conceptions of privacy in the Internet world, not a neutral observer.

Ethics and e-social science

- Ways in which we can conceive of ourselves which were extremely difficult or impossible without computational means of doing social science
- Feed-back loops to what we value and pursue, what we think of as benefits and harms
- Instrumentalisation of knowledge (Stiegler)
- Makes some values and modes of human flourishing more available, more 'normal', than others
- Why does this have *ethical* significance?

Possibilities for ethically engaged social science?

- Whatever one does, there will be an ethical dimension
- Quietist option
- Options of engagement?
 - Disclosive ethics (Introna, Brey)
 - Ethics of identity: feminism, post-colonialism, queer theory (too many to name)
 - Phenomenological ethics: human being and technological hybrid agencies (Introna, Verbeek, Haraway)
 - Technoscience ethics / 'Anthropotechnique' and anthropological philosophy (Sloterdijk)