

RESEARCH ETHICS IN RADICALISATION AND INTERVENTION RESEARCH

How to research a sensitive topic using respondents

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INTRODUCTION

As discussed in the focus paper *Democracy and Deradicalisation Programmes*, programmes developed to address non-violent or pre-violent radicalisation can be justified if these programmes focus on helping adolescents in their quest for the good life. However, which kinds of interventions work in helping adolescents in their quest for the good life and prevent or stop radicalisation is not clear at this moment, as a proper evaluation is often lacking (Lub, 2012).

This means that research is necessary to evaluate existing programmes and to develop and evaluate new programmes to stop or prevent radicalisation. However, this does not mean that researchers have carte blanche.

RESEARCH ETHICS AND DATA PROTECTION

The norms of research ethics governing the way in which (information about) respondents are protected are particularly relevant in this type of research¹. The sensitive nature of the subject of radicalisation requires a very careful protection of the respondents. If respondents are linked to a research project concerning radicalisation they could be labelled as 'radical'.

This label could haunt them throughout their life and even make a normal life impossible (for example because they are on a blacklist and cannot travel or are regularly questioned by the police). To illustrate what can happen to a person when he or she is labelled unjustly, consider a Dutch case about a business man

¹ The focus document "*How to gain informed consent in radicalisation research*" gives more information about a procedure that can be used to ensure that respondents remain anonymous.

whose name and date of birth were given repeatedly to the police by a drugs criminal who had attended the same primary school. His name was entered in various databases making travel impossible, which led to the bankruptcy of his business. For several years it was known that although his name was flagged, the man was not a criminal, though this did not help his situation.

After years of problems the Ombudsman concluded that the government should clear his name. At first the government replied that it would be impossible to clear his name and remove his name from all databases. Their solution was that the businessman needed to take another identity. The Ombudsman did not consider this a just solution and required the government to clear his name (Nationale Ombudsman, 2009).

Labelling as a result of a research project should, therefore be prevented. For researchers this means that data about respondents should be completely anonymous and indirect identification of individual participants should be made impossible. In practice, researchers should avoid mentioning specific places where groups or individuals can be seen, they should not use photos that contain identifiable people and they should not use respondents' personal data in e-mails and digital calendars (for example by indicating an interview appointment with a research participant).

For respondents, taking part in a research experiment, survey or interview, this participation should not be too demanding. Within psychological and physiological research most ethics committees use the rule-of-thumb that participants should not be required to do things or undergo conditions more demanding or risky than what they encounter in their private or professional lives.

This means that in research into the effects of G-forces, for example, a fighter pilot can be subjected to larger G-forces than someone who is not a fighter pilot, because the pilot is regularly subjected to large G-forces in his/her professional life. In the Netherlands, this also demarcates the line between research that should be evaluated by a formal medical ethics committee and research that can be evaluated by an ethics committee that has no legal status, such as from a department of psychology (CCMO, 2001).

This differs between countries, but usually when demands on or risks to participants exceed what they are used to in their normal lives, the requirements to protect respondents increase and in some cases will not be approved by ethics committees. In research into programmes to prevent or stop radicalisation the psychological burden or stress to respondents when having to complete a survey or an interview should be taken into account.

According to a critical article by Lub (2012), assumptions and ideas behind programmes to prevent or stop radicalisation are often not theoretically tested in a literature review before programmes are developed and implemented. If policy theory and assumptions are at odds with the current state-of-the-art in radicalisation research then burdening respondents with interviews and surveys concerning the programme is not justified. This would also mean that the programme is probably not effective and therefore the advice of the researchers to the programme developers or those who carry it out should be to stop or change the programme because of its likely inefficacy.

This means that in evaluating programmes it is necessary to first test the policy theory in a literature review before participants in a programme are asked to participate in an evaluation of the programme.

CONCLUSIONS

Programmes to address non- or pre-violent radicalisation can be justified if the programmes focus on helping adolescents in their quest for a good life. At this moment research is necessary to evaluate what types of programmes work in this regard.

However, research in this sensitive topic requires that researchers are aware of the possible negative consequences for respondents and need to protect their respondents carefully.

This careful protection of respondents requires that researchers are meticulous in anonymising respondents even in documents or databases meant only for their own use.

This means that research involving respondents with regard to programmes addressing non- or pre-violent radicalisation is justified if:

1. The programme is focussed on helping people in their quest for the good life (justification for an intervention in non- or pre-violent radicalisation)
2. The policy theory and assumptions should be tested in a literature review before respondents are asked to cooperate.
3. Respondents give their informed consent either directly or, preferably, indirectly (see the focus document on Informed Consent for more details on obtaining indirect

4. consent) Anonymity of respondents is assured. No direct or indirect identification²
5. The burden or risk for respondents should be low. This is usually not a problem since most research in this field relies on interviews and surveys.

REFERENCES

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² Hence the preference for indirect informed consent procedures, see The focus document "How to gain informed consent in radicalisation research".