

HOW TO GAIN INFORMED CONSENT IN RADICALISATION RESEARCH

How (de)radicalisation research can be done while meeting
all the research ethics requirements without the risk of
respondents being linked to the research project and being
labelled a radical

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INTRODUCTION

Norms in research ethics and regulation regarding the collection of personal data and requirements posed by the European Committee concerning Framework Program 7 research require researchers to carry out interviews under informed consent. This means that the interviewed person is informed about the goal of the project, knows who to contact with questions concerning the project, how to retract their data and knows that participation is voluntary. Both the interviewee and the researcher should sign an informed consent form in which this information is made explicit.

In SAFIRE researchers from the University of Amsterdam held interviews with participants in a deradicalisation programme run by Exit -Germany, an NGO that helps individuals who want to leave the violent extreme right wing scene (so called Exiters or Aussteiger).

The UvA and Exit Germany agreed that interviews could be held with Exit Germany Exiters but only under the conditions set by Exit-Germany with regard to confidentiality. Exit-Germany and the SAFIRE researchers and ethicists decided that having the names of the Exiters was neither necessary nor even desirable, because this information could be leaked, leading to the Exiters potentially being labelled radical and treated as such. This could put them in danger and negatively affect their possibilities in life; consistently, labelling of respondents in general should be prevented at all costs. Moreover, the Exiters did not want to give their names to the Safire researchers as they are aware that being linked to such a project could have severe negative consequences for them. Requiring the use of regular informed consent forms in these interviews was both ethically undesirable and would lead to very little or no respondents and therefore also be practically unfeasible.

Both Exit-Germany and the SAFIRE consortium agreed that Exiters should not be linked to SAFIRE in any way. So, we designed a procedure in which the Exiters would get all the information they needed to decide to participate or not in the interviews, without the SAFIRE consortium knowing their names or other information that could lead to their identification .

Exit- Germany would mediate between Exiters and the SAFIRE consortium. This procedure does not yield informed consent in a strict interpretation because no contract is signed between the participant and the researcher . All requirements for informed consent are, however, met.

METHOD

INDIRECT PROCEDURE

Instead of asking Exiters to sign the informed consent form, including their names, we met all requirements of informed consent using an indirect procedure.

For informed consent researchers need make participants aware of the following basic points:

1. participation is voluntary
2. participants can quit at any time during the interview what participants' data are used for
3. who gets access to the data
4. to whom participants can turn if they have questions or want (some part of) their data removed from the study.

In order to insure that these points were met, Exit-Germany and the principal SAFIRE researcher responsible for the data collection signed a contract that specified obligations for both. The SAFIRE team was obliged to:

1. keep all information confidential that could lead to the (indirect) identification of the Exiters
2. only use the information obtained in the interviews for the purpose of SAFIRE
3. include in all publications that interviews were conducted with and under the supervision of Exit Germany
4. obtain written permission from Exit Germany before using any information obtained in the interviews for other research purposes.

Exit-Germany was obliged to:

1. provide a secure environment for the interview
2. inform the Exiters about :
 - a) the goal of the interview
 - b) that participation is completely voluntary and that participation can be stopped at any moment
 - c) that if Exiters would like to have further information about SAFIRE Exit Germany can and will obtain this information for them
 - d) that if the participant would like to have (part of) the interview removed from the research data, Exit Germany can and will arrange this.

The interviewers consciously tried to avoid questions that could lead Exiters to give details about themselves that might lead to their indirect identification. Details on, for example, someone's address were not necessary for the project; indicating that a participant lived in a big city or a small village is enough.

A person from Exit-Germany, whom the participant could trust, was present during the interview.

At the beginning of the interview the Exiters were again told that participation is voluntary and that all information would be stored anonymously. The researcher asked the Exiter to state verbally that they had been given and understood the information and that they understood that their participation was voluntary. The researchers made audio tapes of each interview in full. The mediating role Exit-Germany played in obtaining informed consent led to the protection of the identity of the participants and helped ensure the credibility of the Exiters' data .

In total 10 interviews were held with Exiters in Germany using this indirect informed consent procedure.

RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

The informed consent procedure we used in the Exiters' interviews is not informed consent in a strict interpretation because no contract is signed between the participant and the researcher. With this alternative indirect procedure, however, we were able to meet all requirements for informed consent in terms of making the participants aware of the necessary basic elements of informed consent. The benefit is that no identifying information exists for any of the Exiters, which either the SAFIRE consortium or any third party can access: the data stored by SAFIRE do not contain any

information to link participants' identity with their data. The identities of the Exiters are, of course, known to Exit-Germany because the Exiters participate in their programmes. This also ensures that should an Exiter request that we remove their data, we can find it.

We would argue that when interviewing people who can experience very negative consequences if their names are associated with a research project, this indirect way of getting informed consent is ethically more desirable than using a regular informed consent form.

The most important feature of the indirect informed consent approach is that researchers do not get names and information that can lead to indirect identification of a participant.

In order to create an indirect informed consent procedure, you need a trusted person or organization that can and wants to play the mediating role that Exit-Germany played in SAFIRE. Gaining access to sensitive groups or individuals for research purposes, such as (former) radicals, usually involves organizations or individuals who are already in contact with those groups and individuals. It is advisable to think about how to protect respondents and ensure informed consent while still in the process of establishing contact with a mediator and gaining access to the relevant groups. There should be no exchange of e-mail addresses or telephone numbers between the researchers and potential participants; the mediating organisation or individual should be willing to assist in arranging the interviews, thereby allowing the researchers to have an interview and obtain data without collecting *any identifying information* about the participant.

If policy makers and local governments have commissioned a study about radicalisation they should require researchers to use the norms that underlie informed consent without requiring (former) radicals to sign informed consent forms and reveal their identity. The use of a trusted mediating organization or individual ensures data validity and research integrity.