

Unexpected ethical dilemmas – scenarios for the workshop activity

(Summary of activity: in pairs or small groups participants will spend 10-15 minutes reading and discussing a dilemma before moving to the next. Participants will brainstorm responses to the questions and write their responses on paper, which each group/pair will add to when they get to that dilemma)

Scenario 1: Transcribing sensitive information

As part of the participatory design process for research that aims to develop technologies to facilitate communication between older adults and their grandchildren, you have conducted a range of interviews with older adults. During the interviews you ask questions about who the key people are in your interviewees' lives, and how they would like to keep in touch with their family members. You email the interviews to the online transcribing service, but are surprised when you receive a telephone call from the manager complaining about the content of one of the audio files. The transcriber found the interview extremely distressing as it evoked memories of losing her oldest child two years ago. She was so upset she was unable to complete the interview and has been absent on stress leave ever since.

You realise she was transcribing an interview that you also found distressing. In response to questions about important family members, one participant had described how her youngest child had been killed in an accident thirty years ago. She said she still kept his school books which had been untouched since the day he went to school and didn't come home and felt she now had to decide what to do with them as she was getting older and didn't want someone else to throw them out. Now the transcribing service says you should have provided a warning about the sensitive content of the audio file. However, there was no information about this requirement in their terms and conditions, or from the university ethics committee.

Questions:

How could this situation be managed or addressed?

Should the researcher have provided a warning to the transcribing services?

How could/should we avoid this situation in the future?

What are the ethical considerations (formal policies / principles as discussed in the course) that may guide our interpretation of this case?

What lessons would you take from this dilemma?

Have you encountered any similar ethical dilemmas?

Scenario 2: Managing group dynamics

You are running a series of focus groups with older adults on the design of an online health information portal. The focus groups are a follow-up from prior interview and ethnographic sessions, in which participants who attended these sessions are invited to now join the focus groups. Many of these participants are socially isolated, which is one of the factors that you are looking at in relation to what these population needs from an online health portal. During the scheduling and during the conduct of the focus group you run into several inter-personal issues.

2.a) Two participants who don't know each other disclose to you that the only reason they actively seek to participate in research studies is the opportunity for "romantic" encounters – meeting other single and eligible seniors. It looks like due to scheduling constraints, these two participants may end up in the same focus group. You are about to go ahead with this scheduling, and inadvertently play matchmaker.

2.b) One of the participants expressed mildly racist comments during the preliminary one-on-one interviews about health information practices (e.g. "I don't like to go to immigrant doctors"). You are not sure if these can simply be attributed to a lack of social tact. However, this participant exhibits health information practices that may be a perfect and essential complement to the profile of the other focus group participants, thus ensuring you collect data from an appropriately varied sample. You are about to go ahead with the scheduling, while being worried that the focus group may derail as some of the other participants are of the groups identified by the potentially troublemaking participant.

Questions:

How could/should we avoid the situation in the future?

Should the researcher have excluded this participant – and gone against his psychologist's recommendation?

How could this situation be managed or addressed?

What are the ethical considerations (formal policies / principles as discussed in the course) that may guide our interpretation of this case?

What lessons would you take from this dilemma?

Have you encountered any similar ethical dilemmas?

Scenario 3: Researcher safety

You are a PhD student conducting research in a socio-economically disadvantaged community. As part of this research you have installed an interactive display in a local library, which aims to foster social cohesion by providing community members with opportunities to share photographs and stories of the local area. You visit the library regularly to conduct observation studies. In addition, users can provide feedback to you via an online survey, which they access on the display. During your visits to the library you notice that the same people are often present, including a man who is very interested in what you are doing but who makes you feel uneasy. After your third visit to the library you start to receive inappropriate and suggestive content via the online survey. It seems to be personally directed to you and you suspect that the person responsible is the same man at the library who makes you feel uneasy.

Questions:

What should the researcher do?

How could/should we avoid this situation?

How could this situation be managed or addressed?

What are the ethical considerations (formal policies / principles as discussed in the course) that may guide our interpretation of this case?

What lessons would you take from this dilemma?

Have you encountered any similar ethical dilemmas?

Scenario 4: Managing communications with participants

You are conducting a field study with older people who are socially isolated, which takes place over 12 months. During the field study participants use the technology you have developed to communicate with each other by sharing photographs and messages. The aim is to enable people who do not have existing family and friends to build new social connections. To help facilitate conversation between participants you use the technology to provide 'prompts'. Once a week you send a message and a photograph in relation to a particular theme to encourage participants to talk about that theme. You know that one participant is particularly interested in football, so you share a photograph of your son's football jumper and suggest the participants should talk about their favourite teams and favourite sports. One participant responds to your photograph with great enthusiasm; the jumper is in the colour of her favourite team. When you next visit to conduct an interview she asks lots of questions about your son. At the end of the field study the participant (who has no family and has nobody to talk to except carers who visit each week) expresses a desire to keep in touch with you and your family.

Questions:

What should the researcher do?

How could/should we avoid this situation?

How could this situation be managed or addressed?

What are the ethical considerations (formal policies / principles as discussed in the course) that may guide our interpretation of this case?

What lessons would you take from this dilemma?

Have you encountered any similar ethical dilemmas?

Scenario 5: Blurring of boundaries

You are conducting a longitudinal study with a socio-economical disadvantaged group (recent refugees), on the use of a life skills learning support app. Your field study involves daily visits to the community centre where the participants receive several educational services, such as preparing their CVs, learning basic computer skills, learning how to deal with a job interview, etc. Most participants are very friendly to you (as they are to all the staff at the centre). One day at the end of your visit one of the participants asks you to drive her to a dentist appointment.

Questions:

What should the researcher do?

How could/should we avoid this situation?

How could this situation be managed or addressed?

What are the ethical considerations (formal policies / principles as discussed in the course) that may guide our interpretation of this case?

What lessons would you take from this dilemma?

Have you encountered any similar ethical dilemmas?

Scenario 6: The role of the researcher

You are a Computer Science PhD student, working on mobile technologies that facilitate better communication around shared tasks (a common topic within the field of Computer Supportive Cooperative Work – CSCW). You are conducting a deployment study of an app that you have developed that allows family members to share their calendars – the app has new interaction mechanisms where users can attach rich multimedia documents to the shared calendar items (such as video recordings of one person instructing the other family members about the grocery lists that was also attached to the calendar item marked “Saturday morning shopping”), but also allowing for more detailed information about personal appointments (e.g. always posting a streetview image of the meeting’s location). The field study is 8 weeks long, and you conduct in-person check-in interviews with the dyad participants (couples) twice a week. In week 3 of the study it becomes obvious that one couple has communication problems, as their expectations for what they share with each other are not the same. By week 5 the interviews about the usability of the app are difficult to run, as this dyad treats it as “couples’ counselling”. By week 7 the couple breaks up, with one accusing the other that they have secrets as evidenced by the limited sharing happening through the app.

Questions:

What should the researcher do?

How could/should we avoid this situation?

How could this situation be managed or addressed?

What lessons would you take from this dilemma?

Have you encountered any similar ethical dilemmas?