

Abstract for IHSR conference, August 2006, JFK, California.

Form and Value of Diversity in Human Science Research

Arne Collen

Saybrook Graduate School and Research Center, 747 Front Street, San Francisco, CA 94111

USA

acollen@saybrook.edu

Abstract

This presentation explicates the theme by placing the researcher in relation to forms of diversity evidenced in human science research. The human participant, who the researcher depends upon for fulfilling the researcher's interest, co-creates the research context and process with the researcher, often bringing into and projecting upon the researcher personal attributes of the participant. Individual differences (characteristics of participants) provides an inherent progenitor of diversity the researcher must embrace in any form of human science research. Human inquiry using more than one researcher presents the counterpart and complement to reveal a second form of diversity issues. The sociocultural background of participants and researchers constitute a third form of diversity to be understood in conducting human science research. Compounding and often derived from basic characteristics of both participants and researchers are their perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs that bring multiple perspectives to the research context, leading to special emphases in data processing, and presentation and interpretation of findings. Multiple perspectives is a central part of all general theories of systems, and this construct of perspectivism provides a fourth form of diversity. Following from these forms of diversity, a meta analysis of a body of human oriented empirical research reports of the same phenomenon would provide yet another form of diversity, in that each report could potentially contribute a side of the phenomenon, like the facets of a jewel, to the fuller and comprehensive and holistic description of the phenomenon. The paper concludes with an appraisal of the value of convergent advantage, rather than discursive elimination, of the forms of diversity in advancing methodology for human science r

[Note text below is 2003 conference text. Rewrite for the 2005 conference]

Introduction

The context of human science research is a social situation that often involves participants selected because of their social, cultural, and economic circumstances. But regardless of selection criteria, doing the research brings many vulnerabilities to those who volunteer and consent to participate. Scrutiny of the research arena for its impact on these human beings is one phase of the research that is easy to overlook. Formerly labeled research ethics, the occasion of its application is the review of research procedures in its proposed form by an Institutional Review Board (IRB). The purpose of this paper is to examine this area of vulnerability.

It is easy to imagine vulnerability could naturally become relevant to those who are expected to disclose and perform whatever may be requested of them for research purposes. Human participants become vulnerable when they volunteer and consent to be subjected to research procedures. But what is less obvious, and less understood, is that many others indirectly are implicated when something goes wrong with the participant in the course of the research, when the researcher abuses his or her role as data collector and observer, or when the social contract of informed consent is broken. In short, there are several aspects of vulnerability to be known beyond the immediately obvious one, when we engage in human science research with human beings.

To do human science research requires one kind of social contract. At one extreme, the research situation is often acknowledged and formalized through a written document known as the consent form. At the other extreme, it is an implicit unspoken agreement between researcher and participant coming about through time and place spent together engaged in data gathering. There are many practices in between these two extremes involving written and spoken instructions, releases, and permissions. But in all cases, the human relationship is tantamount to a social contract that brings profound implications for all parties that may be connected in some way with the research.

As the consequences of research gone a rye that have come to the attention of authorities can attest, this social contract has increasingly gained recognition as a legal contract. Thus, in a litigious-prone society, it is more important than ever for

researchers to be aware of both the social and legal implications of doing research when human beings are the participants.

There is an expected moral code and an ethical code of conduct to which researchers are bound to provide a safe place for research, exactly because of participant vulnerabilities. The moral code consists of basic human civilities we extend to one another, such as do no harm, act in a respectful manner, and xxx. We find our moral code in our religious and spiritual traditions, and despite their diversity, we depend on their commonalities for us to trust and carry out our social contracts. The ethical code consists of the specific regulation of behaviors, such as avoid conflict of interest, do not engage in behaviors beyond the social contract, and xxx. These codes are developed by professions, such the American Medical Association, the American Psychological Association (APA) , and the American Sociological Association, to give its members guidelines. They include guidelines for research practices, such as Principle 9 of the APA Code of Conduct.

We might state that doing human science research means creating a context, clearing a space, that is made as safe as possible for those who will occupy it. Given the many possible risks—research always carries some level of risk—incorporating safeguards into the situation involves contemporary practices expected of researchers by IRBs. It is the responsibility of those who would do, supervise, and oversee research to know the codes of conduct. Since the atrocities of the Second World War, ignorance and following the orders of superiors are no longer accepted excuses for not knowing codes of conduct and allowing certain research practices to occur. Furthermore, more now than ever before, researchers are under stricter regulations to cease and report research practices that bring adverse effects.

What does it mean to be vulnerable?

According to the Oxford New English Dictionary, vulnerability has several denotations (Table x).

Table 1. Denotations of vulnerability*

1. Susceptible of receiving wounds or physical inquiry.
2. *Fig.* Open to attack or inquiry of a non physical nature.

3. Open to attack or assault.
*Oxford, p. 2253.

Vulnerability from an IRB point of view

We can translate the question posed in the previous section, “What does it mean to be vulnerable?” to an equivalent form that an IRB uses to evaluate proposed research for its impact on human beings. It is the question: “What are the potential risks (costs) to the human participants?” The latter question has become popularly expressed in IRB review as the cost benefit ratio.

We may think of this approach in parallel with environmental impact. In the United States, much effort is made at all levels of government to require an environmental impact study to evaluate the impact (costs) on the environment of any proposed construction, such as a new skyscraper, dam, and highway. Those who are to construct such an artifice must convince the authorities and the public that the benefits of such a construction will outweigh any destructive consequences to the environment.

Similarly, researchers present an application to their IRB, designed in accord with the cost benefit concept, that describes both the benefits of proposed research and any potential for harm that could come to those who will enable the researchers to demonstrate stated benefits. This presentation is to be a persuasive rationale that the stated benefits clearly outweigh the potential risks (costs), thereby justifying the execution of the proposed research procedures.

Risk, and therefore for our purposes, vulnerability, has been analyzed into several forms. There are physical risks to one’s bodily person, other persons, and one’s physical environment when participating in research. There are psychological risks, such as the mental fatigue, anguish, conflict, confusion, and emotional upset that may come in performing the research procedures. There are social risks of participation, often present in collective forms of data collection and as a consequence of participation should others in key personal relationship with participants learn about the content provided through participation. There may be consequential cultural risks with participation that impact on one’s standing and duties in the community. There may be economic risks based solely on the

participant's perception, such as issues of job security and advancement in one's career, that may not become apparent until after participation. There may be political risks involving peer and power relations with others in position of authority over the participant, namely employers and supervisors. And there may be legal risks through disclosure, specifically, of criminal acts, child abuse, sexual harassment, and illegal behaviors, since researchers are under increasing obligation to report them to state authorities. This category scheme is widely recognized among IRBs in the United States.

From a systemic point of view: Who is vulnerable?

There are many persons who are vulnerable in this situation. It is not just about the human participants. Although the major concern for IRBs is to protect human participants, who are usually the most vulnerable party, when we apply systems theory to the research situation, it becomes apparent there are several persons present, namely, the research supervisor, institutional administrators and the IRB. They are also vulnerable. Adequate supervision is expected to minimize the risks to participants that researchers bring to the research situation in their level of competence to execute the research procedures. IRB approval should mean careful scrutiny has been given to research proposed, such that the human participants are sufficiently protected and safeguards are evident to attend to potential risks should any of them materialize. Institutional administrators are expected to provide sufficient oversight, such that supervisors and IRB are accountable and may be checked if necessary. For those institutions receiving outside funding for research, the institution is vulnerable, in the sense of being accountable to that agency to justify funding the research. In turn, for governmental funders, there is accountability to the tax paying public. For private funders, there may be shareholders. Those sources held accountable by their stakeholders represent more remote, but nevertheless, important sources of vulnerability.

The sources of vulnerability from this point of view form the following classification scheme: participant, researcher, IRB, institution, funders, and stakeholders. The scheme is systemic in that key relations exist among the elements of the scheme and they form a series of nested hierarchical social relations (Figure x). Altogether, the scheme represents a complex social system. It is also a constituency based classification scheme because it is defined according

to all parties that may have a direct involvement in the research or some claim to it, as indirect as it might seem. Various avenues of accountability help to define the relevant constituencies to include in the scheme.

Vulnerability in research process

Doing human science research may be conceptualized as a cyclical process (Collen, 2003). There are several phases to a research study, and gaining approval of an IRB is only one such phase. There are vulnerabilities present at each phase of formulating the inquiry, proposing it, executing the research procedures, collecting data, processing data, reporting and disseminating the findings.

Three contrasting approaches to vulnerability

Several research practices are commonly found in human science research that pose various kinds and levels of risk to human participants. Common examples are treatment regimens, psychological testing, research interviewing, and participant observation. We find these practices evident in the proposed research that comes before the IRB for evaluation. From an examination of the cases having received IRB review, sources of vulnerability may be organized according to a category scheme.

Some schemes begin with processing the cases into preconceived topologies that researchers and IRBs find meaningful, such as denotations of vulnerability, ethical codes of conduct, phases of research process, and constituencies. Typically, such topologies have been articulated elsewhere and the researcher assumes applicability to the research situation. We term these a priori schemes. We may apply any one of these schemes to classify a set of cases reviewed by the IRB. Table x shows one illustration using xxxx.

Table x. Vulnerabilities of doing human science research illustrated through deduction.

Others schemes may be derived more inductively through the examination of the cases themselves, looking for major ethical dilemmas and issues, for example, that suggest to us denotations and connotations of what it means to be vulnerable in this social situation. This approach seeks to uncover the aspects of what it means to be vulnerable in the research situation through the text provided by the researchers and participants, as much as possible using the language of the those persons. Such terms favored by them are chosen to represent the category rubrics that as a set define the category scheme. Processing the cases in this latter fashion to generate an emergent typology may be termed a posteriori scheme. An illustration of this form of category scheme is shown in Table x.

Table x. Vulnerabilities of doing human science research illustrated through induction.

Whether a priori or a posteriori, the cases so classified may also be aggregated by their salient elements on the basis of any association of created meaning imposed by and particular to the researcher. We may find the language terms drawn either from the published literature or the participants themselves. Often the key to the decision is the direct experience of the researcher with the phenomenon, in this case vulnerability, during the course of the inquiry. The resultant classifications may be termed an abductive scheme.

Table x. Vulnerabilities of doing human science research illustrated through abduction.

In practice, researchers tend to use any combination of the above approaches to classification. However, it is essential that clear rules of classification accompany the presentation of the findings, else others have to question the presentation in regard to such points of critique as the authenticity, consistency, reliability, and validity of the findings.

Thematizing vulnerability

The classification schemes conveyed in the previous sections have a stagnant sense of reality. They are like snapshots that freeze events which happened to us. Now they serve as prompts that trigger our memories to relive by recollection our experiences of those events once more. If we look across the cases, across the categories, we may discover some pretty clear evidence of common threads running through human science research in regard to the vulnerabilities of doing human science research. Although we may do this with the results of any of the three approaches presented above, it does serve methodologically, as a basis for triangulation to converge the three approaches in hunting for the themes of vulnerability. For the set of cases used to illustrate this paper, this convergence is shown in Table x.

Table x. Themes of vulnerability in doing human science research.

To the extent that this triangulation may be found repeatedly for subsequent samples of cases, suggests some basis for generalization. However, from a purposive and human-centered point of view, even one instance of a theme may be taken as inherently relevant to the study of vulnerability. It is just important to remain aware that every theme may not be relevant to every participant in human science research.

Ethical Predicament

There is a tension that exists in doing research with human beings. On the one hand, the researcher places himself or herself at risk as a data collector and observer in executing research procedures. On the other hand, the participant has to trust the researcher to act morally and ethically. There has to be the trust existent between researcher and participant to carry out the research procedures in a cooperative and collaborative fashion. There has to be a conscientiousness and vigilance of potential risks during the execution to minimize harm and aversive impact.

The predicament becomes manifest when risk ceases to be a potentiality and signs begin to emerge that it may be an inevitability. Both researcher and participant are vulnerable from their different perspectives to what harm may come. They are expected to act in ways that avert worsening and promote amelioration of the situation. However, since power of the social relationship tends to favor the researcher, the researcher is under that much more obligatory responsibility to act at the first signs of discomfort, emotional upset, and harm.

Researchers who would propose research must accept this ethical predicament, and responsibility that comes with it, as inherently part of what it means to engage in research with human beings.

Summary and Conclusion

To be a human participant is to be placed in a situation with some level of risk. It is to be voluntarily vulnerable, that is, to be, knowingly or not, at the effect of research procedures. To the extent that informed consent may be achieved, the human participant may attain more cognizance of the potential risks involved, that is to say, his or her vulnerability in the research situation. Such vulnerabilities reflect upon the researcher, whose responsibility requires communicating risk to the participants. Indirectly, those associated with the researcher and the research undertaken also become vulnerable, in terms of the shared responsibility that comes with supervision and oversight of the research.

There are several choices available to approach fulfill our purpose. A number of a priori and a posteriori schemes may be applied to the archive of cases having received IRB review. An examination of the applications and correspondence between the research and IRB reveals forms and themes of vulnerability.

From this coverage of vulnerability in doing human science research, we have expanded the meanings of what is meant by vulnerability. It may be translated to the idea of potential risk, as popularly applied by IRBs in the United States. When considered from the vantage points of phenomenology and hermeneutics, we may deepen our understanding, perhaps even vicariously experience, the nature and facets of vulnerability in our study of specific cases coming before the IRB, shades

of which reveal more than what one may find in stated denotations of meaning. It is in the contextualizing of situated research experience of this relationship between researcher and participant that we can articulate vulnerability, which commences upon a social act, that of mutual consent. When systems theory is applied, vulnerability may be considered omnipresent in the human social relations that comprise our study and understanding of human science research as a complex social system.

Vulnerability is a central aspect of doing human science research, in that, it is at the heart of what it means to be human, to trust another human being, and enter into a human relationship, even if for a circumscribed and limited period of time for research purposes. Researchers may enhance their attention to the vulnerabilities of their participants by being as cognizant as possible of research ethics, the ethical dilemmas and issues, and the potential risks and specific safeguards pertinent to their research procedures.

References

Collen, A. (2002). Research ethics in action: Cybernetic, praxiological, and systemic perspectives in an evaluation system. In R. Trappl (ed.), *Cybernetics and Systems 2002*. Vienna: Austrian Society for Cybernetic Studies, 469-474.

Collen, A. (2003). *Systemic Change through Praxis and Inquiry*. Praxiology: Volume 11 of The International Annual of Practical Philosophy and Methodology. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers

AMA

APA Code of Ethics

ASA