

SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE POLITICS OF COVERT RESEARCH

WORKING PAPER BASED ON THE TALK GIVEN ON 21 NOVEMBER 2012
The Contemporary Ethnography Across Disciplines Conference, Hamilton, New Zealand



PANTEÁ FARVID & CASEY ROWNEY
AUT, DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHOLOGY

Farvid, P., & Roney, C. (2012). Some reflections on the politics of covert research (working paper). In R. Scherman, C. Krägeloh & S. Nayar (Eds.), *Walking the talk: The 2012 collection of oral presentations from the AUT School of Public Health and Psychosocial Studies* (pp. 181-189). Auckland, New Zealand: Auckland University of Technology.

Abstract:

This paper is a reflexive methodological piece that seeks to raise questions about the ethical dilemmas of doing covert ethnographic fieldwork. Covert research, once a popular mode of inquiry in social science research, has become increasingly branded as ethically suspect. Issues related to informed consent and deception typically make up the ethical arguments against covert research. Using illustrated examples of academic research and an art project, We consider such issues and invite the reader to consider the politics of ethics broadly, and as related to (covert) fieldwork within and outside academia.

Interrogating covert research

Covert research, as a form of ethnographic fieldwork, is typically research that is undertaken without the participants' knowledge (Spicker, 2011). This type of research typically involves a researcher entering the world of a group or organization in order to observe, first-hand, the experiences, meanings and daily life of those involved (Pérez-y-Pérez & Stanley, 2011). Ethnographic fieldwork is a qualitative approach that explores cultural and social phenomena 'on the ground'. Although the method originated in the discipline of anthropology, it is now widely used within social sciences for examining a variety of topics. This type of research is typically long-term and the researcher becomes immersed in, and observes, a particular culture, sub-culture or group of people, then writes about it. Covert fieldwork is sometimes done when practices being observed are illegal, taboo or socially stigmatised (Sanders, 2006).

There have been many arguments in support of non-disclosure when it comes to the researcher's identity, including both methodological and practical reasons (e.g., Spicker, 2011). For example, it has been argued that the knowledge of being observed often alters participant behaviour (commonly known as the Hawthorne effect) which becomes an important consideration if we want to see how people act and behave 'naturally' in a particular context (Herrera, 1999; Spicker, 2011). From a practical perspective, often the process of observation can be fleeting and anonymous thus making seeking formal consent difficult, inappropriate, or problematic (Spicker, 2011). Furthermore, the process of getting consent can often be intrusive or awkward (potentially jeopardising successful recruitment) and much of the information gained out in the field could be before the research has technically commenced (Spickler, 2011). The academic researcher, upon revealing his or her identity, could be viewed as too far removed from the participants' world and thus not 'trustworthy' to disclose information to because of his or her social, economic, or occupational position. When an area of research is illegal or stigmatised, not disclosing keeps the participants' identity hidden or safe (Herrera, 1999). As such Herrera (1999) argues that "in fieldwork, informed consent can prove impractical, dangerous, or generally

disruptive” (p. 333).

Covert research as a data-gathering tool is typically frowned upon and considered to be morally and methodologically suspect (Calvey, 2008; Spicker, 2011). Its use has resulted in ongoing ethical debates and concerns around the principles of informed consent, the impact that covert research has on the public image of certain disciplines, and questions around the legitimacy of the knowledge created through such means (Herrera, 2003; Spicker, 2011). Covert research typically avoids publishing names of the individuals or even places that were observed thus making ‘fact-checking’ by future researchers difficult. For this reason, it has been criticised as being a less reliable, transparent and not a completely valid research method (Herrera, 2003). Research validity aside, ethical alarm bells often go off with any mention of covert methodologies. This concern is particularly relevant in a research climate where the process of academic research is increasingly bound by bureaucratic systems that judge the suitability of research projects, their aims and their methods. This includes university ethics committees that may have quite rigid guidelines and may be wary of any research that is covert, unusual, new, novel or attempts to use creative (and hence not common) research methodologies (Spicker, 2011). It is becoming increasingly difficult to have a vague plan (in the traditional ethnographic sense) and head out into the field (Sanders, 2006). In academia, we must be aware that ethics committees, with their increasing power, could inadvertently deter, fetter and discourage creative or covert research in their efforts to uphold ethical standards (Calvey, 2008). Such restrictions can become a problem, when unique, covert or evolving modes of inquiry can often lead to the most insightful forms of knowledge production. Thus, a continued dialogue between researchers and ethics committees is vital.

Cases study: Laud Humphreys’ Tearoom Trade

One of the classic covert studies branded as particularly problematic in terms of ethics was Laud Humphreys’ sociological research in the 1960s on the Tearoom Trade in the U.S. (Humphreys, 1970). The

Tearoom Trade refers to men who frequent public restrooms to receive or give fellatio from/to another man. Laud Humphreys sought to examine why men engaged in this form of brief and public form of sexual exchange. He began his research in 1966 and for two years posed as a “watch queen” (the lookout for police) in the tearrooms. Humphreys observed and recorded data on location, which included the frequency of acts, the age of the men, the roles the men played, and whether money was exchanged. He did not reveal his identity as a researcher to many of the men, did not obtain informed consent, but did talk to and question the men about their lives and what motivated them to search out the Tearoom Trade. Humphreys also secretly followed some of the men he observed to their cars and wrote down their license plate numbers. A year later he went to these men’s homes posing, in a disguise, as a health-service interviewer and questioned the men on personal matters such as their marital status, occupation and the stability of their marriages. Results of this study were astounding as many of the men engaging in this practice were found to be heterosexual, religious, and married with families (Humphreys, 1970). Unlike the common stereotypes abound, men who engaged in the Tearoom Trade were not all homosexual, or ‘deviants of society’; rather the types of individuals that were considered ‘upstanding’ members of the community. This study both revolutionised the thinking about the Tearoom Trade, and raised considerable ethical issues such as the lack of informed consent and deception that was involved.

The trouble with covert research

There has been a great deal of opposition to the use of covert research with many researchers stating that covert methods are seldom necessary, breach informed consent, and erode the personal liberty of those who are observed (Spicker, 2011). Covert methods are also considered a potential betrayal of the trust that develops between the researcher and the ‘subject’ as this relationship is based on non-disclosure of the researcher’s ‘true’ identity and research agenda (Perez-y-Perez, 2011). Some argue that using covert methods results

in a negative reputation of social science research and a 'pollution' of the research environment (Calvey, 2008). Others argue that covert research is harmful both to those being observed, and the researcher themselves as they experience excessive strain and stress maintaining their cover (Calvey, 2008). The opposition to covert research is often based on various epistemological assumptions that are not typically made transparent. Those working within an essentialist framework tend to argue that covert fieldwork can contaminate the 'natural' environment; it is difficult to replicate, making verification of findings difficult. From this perspective, observational data can be seen as trivial, anecdotal or 'not scientific'. Those working within a social constructionist framework do not encounter such issues. From a constructionist perspective, (any) research is viewed as a co-constructed exchange between the researcher and the 'researched'. Therefore, the presence and identity of the researcher is always a salient part of the research process and outcomes, whether or not they disclose their researcher status. What becomes important is making it very clear the situational context within which the research occurred, and in what ways the presence of the researcher shaped what was observed and later reported. Here, transparency and reflexivity in research becomes very important.

Much of the opposition to covert research seems to stem from the misconception that it is deceptive. Spicker (2011) offers a distinction between deception and covert research: with research using deception, the nature of research is purposefully misrepresented where the researcher (knowingly) misinforms the participants regarding the aims of the research. A classic example of this, from social psychology, is Milgram's obedience studies where participants were purposefully deceived regarding the purpose and nature of the research taking place (Milgram, 1963, 1974). Although deception may occur alongside covert research, it is not a necessary condition for it (Spicker, 2011). Covert research relates to a situation where it is not revealed that any research is taking place and the identity of the researcher (as a researcher) may be hidden (Spicker, 2011). This can include attending a public event such as a sports match, a parade, a political speech, or infiltrating and becoming part of a specific

sub-culture (e.g., gamers, swingers) and then writing about the experiences analytically.

The criticism covert research often receives also stems from a dichotomous understating of what is/is not covert; rather than viewing covertness as a spectrum of research activity. Most research tends to contain some form of covertness and researchers, by choice, design or accident, can reveal nothing, provide partial information or expose everything related to the research project (Spicker, 2011). Researchers, however, rarely lay out the full “nuts and bolts” of a research project or explicate their specific theoretical or analytic aims in great depth to participants. In many instances, doing so would hugely compromise the aims, legitimacy and outcome of the research (Weatherall, Gavey, & Potts, 2002). Covertness (to varying degrees) is part in parcel of many research endeavours and what appears to be fuelling opposition to (openly) covert research is the ethical objections to deception rather than covert research activities per se (Spicker, 2011).

Consent to what?

Informed consent, one of the bedrocks of contemporary ethical research practice, refers to the notion that a research participant has been fully informed regarding the research topic, aims and processes. This doctrine of informed consent has recently garnered various critiques – what Calvey (2008) refers to as the “consent to what?” problem. Social research is often contingent on many factors and all probabilities, outcomes, or activities cannot be covered by the standard consent form. In the research setting, even when doing supposedly non-covert research, researchers can often find themselves in ambiguous situations with regards to consent. For example, Weatherall, Gavey and Potts (2002) argue that even when informed consent is obtained in discursive research, participants are often not told about the critical lens by which their words will be analysed. Doing so would compromise the aims of the research, whilst not doing so seems to leave us with an ethical grey area that is not easily resolvable (Weatherall et al., 2002). Others have demonstrated

how using ambiguity in research can seem ethically tricky, but also very useful for getting an in-depth account of a (new) social phenomenon that is shrouded in stereotypical discourses (Farvid, 2010).

Ethics beyond academia?

It is often only academics, or whoever is considered a 'legitimate researcher', that come under-fire for doing, or attempting to do, covert research. Journalists, artists, documentarians or authors, can easily go undercover to examine, explore or expose the various facets of daily life; from the mundane (e.g., the service one receives in specific eateries) to the titillating (e.g., the pornographic industry), and the extreme (e.g., sadomasochism). The undercover exposé-producing forms of media have a romanticised appeal and can be pitched as not only informative, but as desirable, due to their audience-grabbing nature (Allan, 2010). Such media or artistic outputs are not typically frowned up and although ethics is meant to be a consideration, they can be positioned as innovative or informative works (whilst having the potential to be coercive or overly revealing).

To give a localised example, the first author was consulted in early 2012 regarding a photography art project that took place in Karangahape Road (locally known as *K Rd*) in Auckland's CBD. Two men (one a creative professional and one a photographer) took to the streets of Auckland one night in search of street prostitutes to talk to and take photos of. The women were approached on the streets near *K Rd* (a red light district) and asked if they were willing to pose for some photos in a nearby office space, if the men paid their typical fee for having intercourse with a client. A few women reportedly declined and nine women agreed. The women not only posed for many photos but revealed information about themselves, details of their entry into prostitution and many aspects of their daily lives. When the first author was shown the images, and told of the artist's intention to display them online and in an art exhibition, alarm and affective unease set in. The ethical issues of consent and anonymity were of

obvious concern to the *academic*, but not the *artist*¹. Besides a brief stint on the internet, various discussions and circumstances lead to the pictures not making it to the public arena (yet). What this experience indicates is that although what an artist achieved in *one* night might take an academic researcher months to do, such undertakings can be ethically suspect and even alarming. Incidents such as these raise the need for increased ethical liability in creative and media spheres, whilst questioning some of the rigid ideals we can have in academia.

Concluding remarks

Covert research should be discussed in terms of research necessity and quality of data, rather than the emotive debates about morality and ethics that have traditionally framed it.

(Calvey, 2008, p. 906)

In assessing the value of covert research, some key considerations need to be made, and a number of questions need to be asked. Firstly, based on the criticism of the lack of informed consent, one needs to consider how transparent or ‘consensual’ non-covert research actually is and whether ‘secrecy’ is an integral or unacknowledged part of ‘robust’ fieldwork. Secondly, rather than an over-arching criticism of covert research, we need to consider projects on a case-by-case basis. Do the benefits of the knowledge produced by any given research outweigh the potential ethical dilemmas? Are participants really put in any danger and will they experience unease? Above all, can covert research tell us more about the topic of interest than conventional and non-covert methods? And, in the end, will it be worth any potential ethical (or other) risks?

¹ This person was not a professional or amateur artist, but a professional in the creative industries who had done this as a side project for personal interest.

References

- Allan, S. (Ed.). (2010). *The Routledge companion to news and journalism*. New York: Routledge.
- Calvey, D. (2008). The art and politics of doing covert research: Doing 'situated ethics' in the field. *Sociology*, 42(5), 905-918.
- Farvid, P. (2010). The benefits of ambiguity: Methodological insights from researching 'heterosexual casual sex'. *Feminism & Psychology*, 20(2), 232-237.
- Herrera, C. D. (1999). Two arguments for 'covert methods' in social research. *British Journal of Sociology*, 50(2), 331-343.
- Herrera, C. D. (2003). A clash of methodology and ethics in 'undercover' social science. *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, 33(3), 351-362.
- Humphreys, L. (1970) *Tearoom Trade: Impersonal sex in public places*. Chicago, IL: Aldine.
- Milgram, S. (1963). Behavioral study of obedience. *The Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 67(4), 371-378. doi: 10.1037/h0040525
- Milgram, S. (1974). *Obedience to authority*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Pérez-y- Pérez, M., & Stanley, T. (2011). Ethnographic intimacy: Thinking through the ethics of social research in sex worlds. *Sociological Research Online*, 16(2), 13-23.
- Sanders, T. (2006). Sexing up the subject: Methodological nuances in researching the female sex industry. *Sexualities*, 9(4), 449-468.
- Spicker, P. (2011). Ethical covert research. *Sociology*, 45(1), 118-133.
- Weatherall, A., Gavey, N., & Potts, A. (2002). So whose words are they anyway? *Feminism Psychology*, 12(4), 531-539. doi:10.1177/0959353502012004012
- Wells, H. M. (2004). Is there a place for covert research methods in criminology? *Graduate Journal of Social Science*, 1(1), 1-19.

Final peer-reviewed version accepted

14 November 2013

ⁱ Single quotation marks are used throughout this working paper to denote particular vernacular related to the field of research, or to 'trouble' some of the terms being used, indicating that the author does not necessarily (unproblematically) buy into such descriptions and is using them cautiously.