Handout 8: Ethical Considerations in Research

There are critical ethical issues in the field of research that deserve careful attention of researchers. Research must be conducted in a way that conveys respect and care of the people who agree to be researched. Points to consider include:

- Treating informants as people not objects
- Informed consent
- Using deception
- Withholding treatment
- Cultural diversity
- Confidentiality
- Negotiating the information and presentation
- Presenting the final report.

It is important in any research project to not lose sight of the means of finding information. The means of obtaining information in social research is obviously by interacting with the participants. Regardless of the importance of the research and the methodological soundness the consequences for participants must be considered. If the research could harm participants or the group they represent in any way it must be abandoned.

If we don’t see our participants as objects but as partners in a research exercise then as in any partnership we must inform the people about the purpose and process of the research. Before participants agree to be involved in a research project they must be informed of:

- The reasons for the study
- The purpose
- The methods that will be used to collect data
- Whether they will have an opportunity to check the data prior to it being used
- How the data will be represented
- Whether they will have a chance to comment on the final report
- Who will have access to the final report.

Confidentiality is also an important issue. This means not only not talking about people involved in the research but also disguising any identifying information in the final report. This means changing their name and any other information that might identify them.

Understanding the meaning of what the participants tell us is critically important otherwise we do a disservice to them and we can also misinterpret the data. It is important that the information you collect is crosschecked either by the participants or else by a follow up interview or observation to ensure accuracy.

The issue of who will read the report also needs to be considered. If the final report could be misused in any way to harm or discriminate against the participants or the
group they come from the researcher must seriously consider whether or not to write up the results. The management of this can be difficult.