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symposium
**Researching with families – theoretical, methodological,
ethical and practical issues**

**Ethical Considerations in Family Studies – the
Example of FamResPlan Research Project**

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Research with families

- **Sensitive type of research** - „research potentially posing a significant threat to those involved“
- The sensitivity is even more pronounced when the research involves „hard-to-reach” and socially excluded families
- Many ethical issues are „intensified” due to system research
 - Informed consent (e.g. who gives it – a member, the family, what if all members of the family don’t give consent?)
 - Confidentiality of data (e.g. disclosure of confidential information about other family members)
 - Unexpected findings (e.g. information about other family members)
 - And other...

Selected areas of ethical considerations in research with families

Research design, sampling, recruiting and approaching to participants

- „Bad science is bad ethics“ (Powell et al, 2012)
- Sampling itself as a potential ethical issue – is there a risk of stigmatization and additional marginalization?
- How do we reach our participants (e.g. gatekeepers)?

Rewards/ compensation/ gifts for participation in the research

- Fee as a expression of gratitude, compensation for expences, or motivational tool?
- Is there a risk to offend the participants with providing a fee or risk of understanding the fee as a pressure for participation? Is it acceptable that provided fee serve as a main motivation for participation?
- Need for clear protocols on providing fee to participants – known and acceptable to all involved parties - researchers and participants

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Informed consent

- Informed decision in research is a basic principle of research (involving humans) ethics
- Consent – permission – assent
- Is there a possibility for participants to negotiate about informed consent conditions?
- Is there a relationship of trust established between researcher(s) and participant(s) – especially regarding the presented goal and purpose of the study?

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Research risks

- **Minimal risk** – „risk for harm from participation in the study should not be greater than risk participant is facing in everyday activities and situations”
 - If there is a direct benefit for participants from research – it can be considered to tolerate level of risk above the minimal
- Risk assessment for **children** as a participants should always consider the developmental perspective
- It is necessary to care about the **minimizing the risk** from harm created within research
 - Is active listening sufficient researchers’ strategy or should there be more proactive approach (e.g. providing a list of supporting services, linking with important resources)?

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Participant(s) – researcher(s) relationship

- Question of **reciprocity** – to what extent researcher share his/her personal information with participants and to what extent provide professional support from her/his field of competencies
- Research of **sensitive topics** with families
 - question of closure, how to deal with personal questions from the participants, how to be proactive in care for themselves (self-care for processing difficult information and emotions)
- Friendly/warm vs. professional/distant **approach** to participants
 - due to personal research topics researchers might struggle with the balance of those two approaches

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Anonymity & Confidentiality

- Research of sensitive topics can involve specific risks as disturbing trust and confidentiality related to sharing personal and intimate information
- **Confidentiality** mainly covers next considerations:
 - Data storage and management
 - Reporting about results
 - Sharing information about participants with third parties
- More sensitive is data management in **qualitative studies** (e.g. deductive approach to data analyses)
- **Secondary** use of data

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Unexpected findings

- Ethical issue “what to do with unexpected findings”
 - Is there a legal obligation to take steps, to act or report? If not, is there a ethical responsibility to do so?
- All possible **exceptions** from promised confidentiality have to be integral part of informed consent form
 - What about specific topics where such unexpected findings can occur more likely (e.g. child abuse studies)?

There is no universal ethical principles for family studies



Is it possible (and even needed) to have universal ethical guidelines for family studies?

or

Is it „project focused“ approach to ethical guidelines better option?



Ethical considerations in the FamResPlan project



Commitment to ethical principles in defined areas

- Access to research participants/families; informed consent; conducting research/data collection; impact of research on participants; the influence of research on the research team

Ethics of the research team

- Establishing the Ethical Council of the Project
- Monitoring all stages of the project through the „ethical prism”
- Monitoring of project phases using meetings, documents/procedures/protocols related to ethical issues

Commitment to Ethical Principles

1. Access to Research Participants/Families

- Gatekeepers
- A protocol on cooperation with gatekeepers
 - Defining roles, responsibilities and obligations of researchers and professionals/practitioners from institutions

Commitment to Ethical Principles

2. Informed consent (assent) of the research participants

- Informed consent obtained „in phases” that accompany the stages of the study
- Confidentiality of data and anonymity (encryption)
- Data to be collected
- The consent of the family vs. Consent of a member of the family
- Voluntary participation

Commitment to Ethical Principles

3. Conducting research/Data Collection

- The relationship of trust between participants and researchers
- Unexpected findings
- Research vs. intervention

Commitment to Ethical Principles

4. Influence of research on the participants

- Minimal risk for the participants
- Ensuring well-being, loyalty, fairness, privacy, honesty and autonomy
- Reducing the possibility of additional stigmatization
- Informing the participants about the possibilities of additional support
- Compensation for participation/compensation for invested effort, cost and time

Commitment to Ethical Principles

5. Influence of research on the research team

- Ethics of the research team
- Vulnerability of the researcher
- An external supervisor/independent consultant
- Closure/exit strategy
- Privacy of the researcher
- The data collection protocol
- The protocol of dealing with high risk situations

Etics of the FamResPlan research project



Kranželić, V., Kovčo Vukadin, I., Ferić, M. (2016). Etička pitanja u istraživanjima s obiteljima: primjer smjernica. *Kriminologija i socijalna integracija*, 24(1), 179-210.

Ethical Council - FamResPlan

Ethical council is established with the **aim** of

- inspiring and encouraging the research team to act ethically,
- providing guidance in solving complex ethical issues (predictable and unpredictable),
- increasing the level of professional awareness,
- contributing to their own development as a research team
- increasing the scientific and practical contribution of the FamResPlan project with knowledge within the subject, as well as the methodology of research with families at risk

Thank you!



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More about the FamResPlan project

<http://www.famres.erf.hr/hr/>

<http://www.famres.erf.hr/en/>