Anonymity and Confidentiality

Ethical aspects
Aliya Kuzhabekova, Assistant Professor
NU GSE
Why do we need to care about anonymity and confidentiality?

- To protect individuals from public exposure when sensitive information is revealed during the study.
- Public awareness may create the risk of persecution, reputational, financial, legal consequences.
Telling the difference: Anonymity

• **Anonymity** means that the researcher does not know the identity of the participants in the study.

• **Examples:**

  Observation in public places, where you cannot identify the person you observe.

  Survey, where you do not ask the participants for their names.
Telling the difference: Confidentiality

- **Confidentiality** means that the respondent's identity is known to the investigator but protected from public exposure.
- The researcher keeps any identifying information out of published reports.
- **Examples:**
  Interviews with individuals, where you can see and recognize them later, but other people will not if you properly conceal their identities.
How to write about confidentiality and anonymity in proposals?

Incorrect:
• “I will ensure that anonymity and confidentiality of interview-participants are protected”
• “The anonymity of the subjects of the study will be protected”
• “The identity of the participants will be confidential”

Correct:
• “Participation in the survey will be anonymous”
• “All measures will be taken to protect/ensure confidentiality of the information provided by the participants”
• “While anonymity of the participants cannot be achieved in this study, all identifying information will be kept confidential”
Examples of identifying information

- Name
- Addresses
- Employer's name or address
- Relatives' names or addresses
- Date (e.g., birthdate, date of death, etc.)
- Phone / fax numbers
- E-mail addresses
- Social security numbers
- Member / account numbers
- Voiceprints
- Fingerprints
- Full face photos & comparable images
Ensuring confidentiality

- **During recruitment** – making sure that only you are aware that the participant was involved in your study
- **During data collection** – on making sure that nobody whom the participant knows was present or noticed them in the process of data collection
- **During data analysis/storage** – making sure that only researchers had access to data records
- **During data reporting** – making sure that all identifying information was removed in the final reports from the study
# Potential flaws and how to avoid them

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Flaws</th>
<th>Solutions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Recruitment:</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1) Asking an individual to identify participants</td>
<td>1) Request a list and select out of the list</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) Snow-ball sampling</td>
<td>2) Request a list of acquaintances, but invite only one of them</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Data collection</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1) Collecting data at a place, where an individual can be seen together with you by somebody that they know</td>
<td>1) Choose an alternative location, where such an encounter can be avoided</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) Collecting data at a public place when very sensitive issues are discussed</td>
<td>2) Choosing a quiet place, where people cannot overhear you talking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Data storage</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1) Storing data at a place where the records can be seen by other people</td>
<td>1) Keeping data in a locked place or in a password protected location on your computer, encrypting identifying data, deleting data past the study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2) Using codes for records and keeping them in a separate location</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Data reporting</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1) Revealing any information, which will make an individual recognizable</td>
<td>1) Using pseudonyms and removing identifiers (age, gender, position, exact site name, etc. – depends on a study)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Confidentiality in focus groups, group interviews, group observations

- More difficult to maintain because more than two people participate
- Participants can be requested to sign individual confidentiality forms (non-disclosure agreement) in addition to consent forms
- The consent form should include a statement informing the participants that confidentiality cannot be completely ensured because there are other participants and each participant should be requested to keep all the information confidential
When confidentiality can be broken?

- There is disclosure or evidence of physical, sexual or serious emotional abuse or neglect. Suicide is threatened or attempted. There is disclosure or evidence of serious self-harm (including drug or alcohol misuse that may be life-threatening).
Confidentiality and information of legal relevance

- During a study, a researcher may find out about illegal activity. Reporting illegal activity is on a continuum. At one end is a situation where you would have a moral and legal obligation to report the activity, generally if there is a serious and imminent risk of harm to either the individual concerned or others (planning a drive-by shooting would certainly fall into this category).

At the other end is crime with no external victim e.g. information about personal drug use, here the responsibility is to keep this information confidential. If you are investigating information about illegal behavior as part of your research the advice would be to ensure anonymity of participants in your research notes. It would not usually be expected that these participants would sign informed consent forms.