

Chapter 3

Topic 1 Choosing a research method

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Activity: Discussion

Should research always be ethical?

Learning objectives

At the end of this activity you should be able to:

- Identify ethical issues of covert research.
- Evaluate the importance of ethical issues and whether these should always be considered when carrying out research.

Anne Other (1999) (not her real name) wanted to study hospital infection-control procedures, such as staff washing hands between touching patients. However, the hospital's research ethics committee said she must first obtain the informed consent of the staff, all their patients and even next of kin if a patient was incapacitated. She felt this would wreck her research, so she conducted it covertly. Her defence was that this was in the public interest – only by studying hygiene behaviour covertly could the causes of hospital-transmitted infections be discovered.

In groups, discuss the following:

1. Did Anne Other act unethically? Give your reasons.
2. Is it justifiable to ignore issues of consent, privacy or confidentiality when studying groups such as criminals or powerful decision-makers? Give your reasons.