



Researchers' decision making: exercising discretion when navigating ambiguity in research practice

Throughout the research process researchers encounter an incalculable amount of conceptual, methodological, and ethical decisions to make. Apart from some clear-cut cases these research decisions are subject to contextual relevance and potentially conflicting aims and values and thus cannot be entirely reduced to general rules or guidelines. As such, individual researchers possess considerable discretion in how the research is conceived of, executed, and reported.

Research on this discretionary space in which researchers navigate ambiguity is critical considering the extensive effect that researcher discretion has on research topics, methods, and outcomes. Studying the subject is difficult however, because of ambiguity's short expiration date. When the results of a decision are known, the ambiguity that once surrounded it collapses and is rendered unrecognisable. Accordingly, interview-, focus group-, or survey studies cannot capture the logic and deliberation of the researchers at the time of the decision. To achieve this, direct empirical study of researcher discretion in practice is necessary.

Through participant observation of researchers in practice – triangulated using interviews and document analysis – we aim to provide this understanding of how researchers exercise their discretion, under which circumstances they can benefit from support or guidance, and what form this support or guidance may take.

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