



## E-VOX POP ERIC ANDERSON

### WHAT TO DO WHEN ETHICAL ISSUES ARISE AFTER DATA COLLECTION



Photograph and content © Eric Anderson. Reproduced with permission.

Building on my earlier work as to why men sexually cheat, I was interested in the narratives of middle-age women who have affairs, and the rationales for their behaviours. Recruiting participants for such a study, though, can be difficult, particularly as the women are still married and so greatly value their privacy.

I determined that the best way to obtain honest reasons would be to collect data without the participants' direct knowledge. To do this, I partnered up with the dating website AshleyMadison.com and retrieved from the company 100 women's profiles (two from each of the 50 American states) that met this demographic. I received all the communications that the women had with men on the website over a designated period of time. In total, I coded 42,000 separate conversations (see Chapter 4 for how to analyse data). Although some women had more conversations than others, the average was that each woman had talked with 41 men.

The participants had technically given consent to being studied because the terms and conditions of the website state that the company has full ownership of the data. I had also ensured that the company stated to its users that their written communication with other members could be used for research purposes. Thus, while the participants had not opted into this study, they given consent for their data to be used more generally via the terms and conditions of their signing up for an account.

I also gained ethical approval for this study from two universities to use this data; one in the UK and one in the United States. I ensured that the participants' information was completely anonymized; and I myself never received participants' real names. I was given the usernames and locations of participants, and I changed these to prevent identification. All other potentially identifying information was adapted or deleted as well. I completed the study and wrote an article about the sociology of women's affairs.

However, prior to the study being published, the AshleyMadison website was hacked and the safety of all the information was brought into question. This meant that data could be leaked meaning that what were once completely anonymous profiles could conceivably be interpreted, to the extent of participants' names being identified. With this risk in mind, I knew I had to put the wellbeing of the participants first, and thus removed the study from publication.