

Ethics of Educational Research: An agenda for discussion

Hugh Busher

Why create ethical frameworks for educational research?

- ▶ Ethical approaches to research strengthen the validity of a study because they make its outcomes more trustworthy
- ▶ The generalisability of findings from one situation to another is dependent on research being carried out ethically. Trying to answer questions from an inappropriate sample or data set, or choosing an inappropriate unit of analysis, may lead to misleading findings, undermining their transferability (Bassey, 1998).

Why bother with research ethics in the social sciences ESRC (2005)

Because social science research is all about
'Human participants' (or subjects) which are
defined as including:

- living human beings,
- human data and records (such as but not restricted to medical, genetic, financial, personnel, criminal and administrative records and test results including scholastic achievements).
- And these participants are at risk of harm if research is not carried out carefully

‘Risk’ to participants in research ESRC (2005)

the potential physical or psychological harm, discomfort or stress to human participants that a research project might generate. In social science research this include risks to a subject’s:

- personal social standing, privacy, personal values and beliefs, including the adverse effects (to them) of revealing information that relates to illegal, sexual, or deviant behaviour.
- their links to family and the wider community,
- their position in occupational settings,
- Research which carries no physical risk can be disruptive and damaging to research subjects either as individuals or as whole communities or categories of people

When might risks arise for participants?

Ethical issues can arise at any stage of a research project (Cohen et al., 2000: 49)

- ▶ The nature of the project itself;
- ▶ The context of the research;
- ▶ Procedures adopted;
- ▶ Methods of data collection;
- ▶ Nature of the participants;
- ▶ The type of data collected;
- ▶ What is done with the data (how it is curated) and how it is disseminated.

Researchers' moral responsibility

- ▶ Researchers have the moral and practical responsibility for constantly interrogating their research practices throughout the lives and after-lives of their projects.
- ▶ They have a duty of care for participants especially those who are vulnerable, such as children, in their research projects to protect them from harm
- ▶ *They should:*
- ▶ only carry out research that is beneficial to society - a deontological stance that is favoured in Europe - rather than any study that looks exciting and might further their or their sponsors' careers or business plan
- ▶ only collect data that is relevant to their study
- ▶ Research ethics guidelines from research bodies and institutions may help as aide-memoire to practice

Especial
responsibility
when there is
more than
minimal risk to
participants
ESRC (2005)

Research involving:

- vulnerable groups - e.g. children and young people,
- sensitive topics - e.g. participants' illegal or political behaviour, their experience of violence,
- where permission of a gatekeeper is normally required for initial access to members - e.g. ethnic or cultural groups, members of custodial institutions
- deception or research conducted without participants' full and informed consent at the time the study is started
- access to records of personal or confidential information,
- inducing psychological stress, anxiety or humiliation or causing more than minimal pain
- intrusive interventions - e.g. the administration of drugs or other substances, vigorous physical exercise,

Entering a site: Protecting from harm

Researchers must have a care for participants when negotiating entry with gatekeepers and research participants:

- ▶ Explaining why gatekeepers cannot have access to raw data
- ▶ Offering benefits from the research, e.g. a copy of the final report; a seminar with participants on what researchers have discovered - also benefits researchers!
- ▶ Gaining participants' informed consent and helping them understand their rights to refuse to participate. This raises their self-esteem by recognising why their views are important (empowering students)
- ▶ Explaining research aims, processes and ethics in terms that participants e.g. children/ students can understand
- ▶ Explain what joining a project will 'cost' participants in terms of time and activity

Key Principles for Ethical research ESRC (2005)

- Research should be designed, reviewed, and undertaken to ensure integrity and quality
- Research staff and subjects must be informed fully about:
 - the purpose, methods and intended possible uses of the research,
 - what their participation in the research entails
 - what risks, if any, are involved, including any risks or threats to anonymity that might arise during and beyond the project itself and how these might be minimised or avoided.
- Gaining participants' informed consent requires researchers to give prospective participants as much information as possible about the project so that they can make an informed decision on their possible involvement.
- Participants should be informed of their right to refuse to participate or withdraw from an investigation.
- Where research involves vulnerable groups such as children or adults with learning difficulties, the issue of informed consent may need to be managed through proxies
- Harm to research participants must be avoided, including their wider family, kin and community. Research designs should consider potential harm to respondent's organisations or⁹businesses.

Benefiting from involvement in research

- ▶ Helping participants, e.g. children to benefit from their involvement in research and not just be data fodder
- ▶ e.g. helping them understand how data is collected for particular purposes on particular sites
- ▶ Helping vulnerable participants learn and/ or practice how to carry out ethical research themselves
- ▶ e.g. carry out and analyse interviews or simple questionnaires; making photo-diaries; developing visual artefacts such as concept maps; try writing up research in an ethical manner

Developing ethical field practice: sustaining participants' confidence in a project

- ▶ Being careful when speaking with others on site (or outside it!) to avoid revealing your sources of information, especially those within the institution;
- ▶ Not passing judgemental comments on any practices or views stated by participants in the research, even when other participants ask a researcher for her / his views;
- ▶ Not passing on gossip heard within the research context/ situation from one person to others inside or outside the research context;
- ▶ Being aware of space, including online spaces, - e.g. where one is sitting, to whom one is listening/ talking, who else may be listening even if they are not your co-locuter or part of the research project
- ▶ Knowing when to stop a digital recorder being used for interviews ... and when to start it again ... to spare participants blushes/ avoid collecting unnecessary data

Future proofing participants' contributions

- ▶ Storing and writing up data such as interview transcripts, observation records (including photographs) or institutional documents to preserve the anonymity of participants and their institutions
- ▶ naming participants and institutions fictitiously and/ or choosing codes to use in citing quotations when writing up research, especially from institutional documents
- ▶ Storing data in ways that preserves participants' anonymity and that of their institutions - avoiding contagion from juxta-posed records - store data separately from participants' and their institutions I/Ds
- ▶ Online storage of data can be problematic because of what may be held on servers
- ▶ Writing up in a way to preserve participants' anonymity and that of their institutions -

What ethical
research
PROPOSALS
should make
clear -1
ESRC (2005)

- ▶ Aims of the research
- ▶ Scientific background of the research
- ▶ Study design
- ▶ Participants - who (inclusion and exclusion criteria), how many, how potential participants are identified and recruited, vulnerable groups
- ▶ Methods of data collection
- ▶ Methods of data analysis
- ▶ Response to any conditions of use set by secondary data providers Principal investigator's summary of potential ethical issues and how they will be addressed

What ethical research PROPOSALS should make clear -2 ESRC (2005)

- ▶ Benefits to research participants or third parties
- ▶ Risks to participants or third parties
- ▶ Risks to researchers
- ▶ Procedures for informed consent - information provided and methods of documenting initial and continuing consent
- ▶ Expected outcomes, impacts and benefits of research
- ▶ Dissemination (and feedback to participants where appropriate)
- ▶ Measures take to ensure confidentiality, privacy and data protection

ALISON FOX, HUGH BUSER AND CARMEL CAPEWELL
**THINKING CRITICALLY
AND ETHICALLY ABOUT
RESEARCH FOR EDUCATION**
ENGAGING WITH VOICE AND EMPOWERMENT
IN INTERNATIONAL CONTEXTS

further reading

- ▶ Alison Fox, Hugh Buser, Carmel Capewell (eds.)(pubs: 30 November, 2021) *Thinking critically and ethically about research for education: Engaging with voice and empowerment in international contexts.* London: Routledge.
- ▶ <https://www.routledge.com/Thinking-Critically-and-Ethically-about-Research-for-Education-Engaging/Fox-Buser-Capewell/book/9780367556914>

