

# Ethics of Educational Research: An agenda for discussion

Hugh Busher

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# The underlying principles of educational research

'a commitment to honesty'

Sammons (1989)

'an avoidance of plagiarism'

Berger and Patchner  
(1988)

'respect for the dignity and privacy of those people who are the subjects of research'

'the pursuit of truth – the right to try to find out as carefully and accurately as possible, but also the right of society to know'

Pring (2000: 143)



# Research and research ethics?

- 'Research' is defined as any form of disciplined inquiry that aims to contribute to a body of knowledge or theory
- 'Research ethics' refers to the moral principles guiding research, from its inception through to its completion and publication of results and beyond – for example the curation of data and physical samples after the research has been published

ESRC (2005)

- 'Ethics embody individual and communal codes of conduct based upon adherence to a set of principles which may be explicit and codified or implicit, and which may be abstract and impersonal or concrete and personal'.

Zimbardo (1984)

# Why bother with research ethics in the social sciences?

ESRC (2005)

‘Human participants’ (or subjects) are defined as including

- living human beings,
- human beings who have recently died (cadavers, human remains and body parts),
- embryos and fetuses,
- human tissue and bodily fluids,
- human data and records (such as but not restricted to medical, genetic, financial, personnel, criminal and administrative records and test results including scholastic achievements).



# '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 and how it is disseminated.



# When is there more than minimal risk to participants?

ESRC (2005)

## Research involving

- vulnerable groups – e.g. children and young people, those with a learning disability or cognitive impairment, or individuals in a dependent relationship
- sensitive topics – e.g. participants' illegal or political behaviour, their experience of violence, their abuse or exploitation, their mental health, their gender or ethnic status
- where permission of a gatekeeper is normally required for initial access to members – e.g. ethnic or cultural groups, members of the armed forces or inmates and other members of custodial or health and welfare 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, including genetic or other biological 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, that participants would not normally encounter in their everyday life

# Why create ethical frameworks for educational research?

- Ethical approaches to research do not reduce the validity and reliability of it but highlight the contextual complexities within which it is carried out (Kelly, 1989)
- To be ethical, a research project needs to be designed to create trustworthy (valid) outcomes if it is to be believed to be pursuing truth.
- 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).



# Key Principles for Ethical research 1

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 and 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 to participation means researchers giving prospective participants as much information as possible about the project so that they can make an informed decision on their possible involvement.

# Key Principles for Ethical research 2

ESRC (2005)

- The confidentiality of information supplied by research subjects and the anonymity of respondents must be respected
- Research participants must participate in a voluntary way, free from any coercion. They should be informed of their right to refuse to participate or withdraw from an investigation. In cases 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 who should be either those with a duty of care or who can provide disinterested independent approval . In the case of children, researchers cannot expect parents alone to provide disinterested approval on their children's behalf.



# Key Principles for Ethical research 3

**ESRC (2005)**

- Harm to research participants must be avoided, including their wider family, kin and community. Research designs should consider potential harm to respondent's organisations or businesses.
- There is no simple rule for getting right the balance between potential risks to participants and benefits of the research to a wider community.
- There may be exceptional circumstances in some fields of research when, with the consent of the participants, some short-term and minimal degree of harm which causes no lasting effects or prolonged personal discomfort might be acceptable
- The independence and impartiality of researchers must be clear and any conflicts of interest must be explicit.
- Research should be conducted so as to ensure the professional integrity of its design, the generation and analysis of data, and the publication of results, while the direct and indirect contributions of colleagues, collaborators and others should also be acknowledged.

# Codifying Ethical principles and moral practices for educational research

Definitions of professional ethical practice are often enshrined in codes to guide the decisions of researchers. Codes have been developed by the British Psychological Society (1993), the British Sociological Association (1992), the British Educational Research Association (2004), the British Association for Applied Linguistics (1994). Moral and ethical codes apply equally to quantitative research methods as to research based on qualitative data. Jones (2000) points out the importance of the code devised by the American Statistical Association (1998).

University ethics committees police such codes to ensure that research carried out under their auspices does not breach them.



# To implement these principles

- The responsibility for the conduct of the research in line with the relevant principles rests with the principle investigator (PI)
- The responsibility for ensuring that research is subject to appropriate ethical review, approval and monitoring lies with the institution which employs the researchers
- Institutions should have clear transparent, appropriate and effective procedures in place for ethical approval whenever it is necessary
- Once risks have been identified, researchers should discuss these with research participants in order to secure proper informed consent. However informed consent may be impracticable or meaningless in some research, such as research on crowd behaviour; or may be contrary to the research design, as is often the case in psychological experiments where consent would compromise the objective of the research. In some circumstances – such as users of illegal drugs – written consent might also create unnecessary risks for the research subjects.

ESRC (2005)

# Reducing risks to participants practically

(Cohen et al, 2000:51)

This involves protecting the rights of the participants:

- maintaining privacy,
- guaranteeing anonymity,
- guaranteeing confidentiality,
- avoiding harm, betrayal, deception.

Grounds for informed consent:

- participants must be in a position or old enough to understand the choice that they are making
- disclosure of purposes of research;
- disclosure of any risks to participants;
- a provision allowing participants to withdraw at any time.



# 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



# There is no solution! (Burgess, 1989: 8)

- 'fieldwork is inherently problematic by virtue of the conditions that make knowledge production possible ... where personal relations and social interactions are the context for unearthing meaning' (Marlene de Laine 2000: 205)
- In the end researchers have to take decisions about how to carry out research that makes the process as ethical as possible within the frameworks of the project, including budgets of time and finance which they have available to them.
- Researchers need to consider whether it is worthwhile undertaking a piece of research by weighing up the balance of harm and benefit that arise to participants and to society from carrying it out (de Laine, 2000: 205).
- Writing up research has to be carried out ethically, too, so that the presentation of the data both respects participants' right to privacy and sustains the right of society to know about the research (Cohen et al 2000).