Debating Point

Student research and ethics

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Ethical codes of practice have largely ignored student project work, although there has been some discussion that it ought to be treated as a special case and handled by less stringent ethical review. However, if ethical review is about safeguarding the interests and rights of those who volunteer to participate, then there can be no case for accepting less stringent ethical criteria just because the researcher is a student. In this debating point article two issues are addressed. First, the principle must be established that student research is conducted under competent supervision and it is therefore the supervisor's role to ensure that the student discounts any methodological strategy which places the participants at unacceptable risk. Second, and perhaps more controversially, the question of ethical review is raised for student classroom or field exercises which involve collecting data from human participants to meet practical coursework requirements. The proposal is made that these exercises should also be subject to ethical review and a further proposal is made about how this might be handled for large numbers of students on course.

ALTHOUGH recent legislation governing the ethical conduct and monitoring of research relates only to clinical trials, there have been irresistible pressures over the past few years to tighten up and standardise the ethical requirements of all investigations involving human participants. The NHS has introduced its Research Governance Framework which applies to all investigations involving NHS staff, patients, facilities and premises. The Charitable Trusts and Research Councils are increasingly refusing to fund research in any institution which does not have in place an organisation-wide Code of Practice for regulating research. Most, if not all, institutions engaged in research have now developed their own codes of practice. The ESRC has just launched its research ethics framework (summer, 2005) and, even as I write, a flier from *The Times Higher Educatiuon Supplement* announces a new 'illustrative framework' to be published in the autumn of 2005 'to help universities and colleges develop their own ethics guides'. There is a common sense of dismay that so many codes of practice are coming into existence in the social and medical sciences, without necessarily being entirely compatible with each other or making the same demands on those seeking ethical approval.

While most researchers accept, albeit in some cases reluctantly, that they need to adhere to a code of practice, there has been considerable dispute about whether student projects and practical work involving human participants should be subject to the same rigorous ethical criteria as other research.

On the one hand, there is the argument that students are 'in training' and that their research is primarily for educational purposes and does not necessarily attempt to be original or creative in scientific terms. This has led to the suggestion that ethical requirements for student research should be less stringent than for staff or trained researchers and, as a 'special case', should be subject to separate ethical review. In its research ethics framework the ESRC appears to be leaning towards separate review procedures for projects undertaken by under- or postgraduate students. For student projects within or involving the NHS one proposal currently under consideration by a working party of COREC (Central Office of Research Ethics Committees), chaired by Len Doyal, is for

specially constituted SPECs (Student Project Ethics Committees), which would be established in each university under the joint control of the university and the Department of Health. Current speculation (October, 2005) is that the Doyal Report recommendations may not be implemented.

On the other hand, the Helsinki Declaration of Human Rights (1964) places the emphasis squarely upon the paramount importance of respecting the rights, dignity, safety and well-being of the participants. This being so, there is no case for accepting less stringent ethical requirements just because the research is conducted by students. In practice some student projects are of a publishable standard, especially if conducted by postgraduate students, so it is hardly valid to draw a line between low and high stringency purely on the basis of whether the researcher is a student or not, or a postgraduate or undergraduate! And what about pre-degree students running practical projects for their GCSE, A-level or Highers examinations in the name of psychology? The assumption should always be made that students conduct their projects under 'competent' supervision, and it is the responsibility of supervisors, therefore, to ensure that the research is sufficiently rigorous, and that it safeguards the interests of those who participate and does not waste their time by exposing them to suspect experimental procedures or 'poor science'.

In this short article I want to address two issues: first, what exactly should be the supervisor's responsibility for ensuring that the student's research project adequately meets ethical standards? Second, in a more fundamental way, does student practical work conducted to meet coursework requirements and involving the collection of data from other individuals (possibly classmates) also require ethical scrutiny? If so, how should this be handled? Both of these are contentious issues and I would welcome debate on them. There are, of course, other issues relating to student involvement as participants in research rather than as researchers but these issues are addressed elsewhere (e.g. Foot & Sanford, 2004).

Supervisors' responsibility for the 'ethicality' of their students' research

Traditionally within psychology the undergraduate student dissertation or thesis is taken as the single most important window on a student's intellectual potential and capacity for research. This status is afforded to it for the simplest of reasons, namely that it is the one substantial piece of assessed work that students conduct which is independent of their course, taps into their real interests and offers a truer measure than any other of their originality, creativity and ability to manage a whole process of psychological enquiry and discovery. It is not surprising that the British Psychological Society requires students to pass their dissertation before they can be eligible for the Graduate Basis for Registration (GBR).

For those of us who teach in the higher education sector, however, and especially for those of us who have served as external examiners across the country, the variability of supervisory practices that we have experienced may be substantial. In some departments of psychology a maximum number of supervisory hours is stipulated per student, and the types of assistance which students are entitled to expect or request are also carefully specified. In other departments students are given little guidance about how much or how little supervision they can expect to receive. In consequence some students may be very demanding; others rarely see their supervisors. The prevalent attitude appears to be that it is up to individual students to take the initiative, and if they choose not to avail themselves of the guidance on offer, then that is entirely their privilege, and certainly their fault if the project is a mess!

However, it is not the intention here to raise the question about what kinds or amounts of supervision students should actually receive. The main question is: if poor science is unethical science, then what is the

supervisor's obligation to ensure or guarantee that the methodology is basically sound and ethical enough, especially when the student rarely seeks supervisory guidance? There is big dilemma here. While supervisors may see it as their role to support and guide students in coming to decisions about their research methodology, they certainly do not want to *tell* their students what to do at every turn or how to instruct their participants. Many would argue that it is students' own project and that they must be permitted to make their own decisions and, consequently on occasion, their own mistakes. It is partly at least their own judiciousness in choosing the best research strategy for their purposes that is being assessed. It is not up to the supervisor to guarantee that the 'best science' has always been done in the circumstances. Some allowance should therefore be made for students' inexperience in the process of conducting research.

While one may agree with this up to a point, if the interests and well-being of the participants are in any sense compromised or put at risk, then the supervisor must surely intervene. However, ethical codes of practice are remarkably silent about the ethical responsibilities of supervisors, as indeed they are about handling student research in general. Certainly at an institutional level, and for insurance purposes, it can readily be assumed that supervisors are effectively the 'chief investigator' and ultimately responsible for the outcome of their students' work.

The case I wish to argue is that it is the supervisors' responsibility to ensure that, when students are exercising their choice about what procedure or strategy to follow, they are made fully aware of the ethical implications of the procedures that they are considering. And it is also the supervisors' responsibility to ensure that any ethically unacceptable procedures are discounted. So, while supervisors may not wish to change or improve every minor aspect of the methodology, they should be vigilant about any flaw which may undermine the ethical acceptability of the study.

There is, of course, a further important corollary here, following on from what was said about students choosing their own level of help and guidance from their supervisors. At some point prior to data collection students must clear their research designs with their supervisors and must not change their minds about what they are going to do without referring the changes back to the supervisor. Quite apart from anything else, changes may invalidate the ethical approval that has been granted. Students must understand their responsibility here: even if they choose rarely to consult their supervisors, they *must* obtain their supervisors' agreement to their research design prior to submission for ethics approval and prior to data collection. Likewise supervisors *must* scrutinise their students' research proposals properly prior to passing them on for consideration by an ethics committee.

Briefing students on the need to apply for ethical approval is also a responsibility of supervisors or departments and few would disagree that it is good practice for students to become used to thinking about the ethics of their research, along with the careful preparation of consent forms and participant information sheets. In my own institution the university or departmental ethics committee expects to see copies of these forms. It takes the view that it is not just a question of ensuring that the rights of individuals are properly expressed (right to withdraw, anonymity, confidentiality, secure storage of data, etc.), although these are important. The institution and department need to feel confident that what is emanating from the university on its headed notepaper and in its name are well composed and properly written. As a research supervisor I expect all my students to show me copies of the letters they send out to local education authorities, hospitals, clinics or other bodies from whom they intend to recruit or seek permissions. Ill-chosen phrases, bad grammar, sometimes wrong information, does an institution no favours with external organisa-

tions whose cooperation may be needed in the future.

Ethical approval and classroom practical work

While few would dispute the need for at least some kind of ethical scrutiny of individual student research projects, there is a substantial amount of other empirical work which would not fundamentally be described as research, but which forms part of coursework requirements. Examples of these are classroom practicals where students act as 'subjects' for each other, constructing a survey requiring students to compose questionnaire items and pilot them on a sample of friends, relatives or random members of the public, or running a focus group as part of a class or field exercise in order to derive information about the constructs or issues which people see as important in relation to some general problem.

Many would see it as highly contentious for such exercises to require ethical scrutiny at all, and I suspect that most psychology departments run exercises like this routinely, especially on master's courses, without considering whether ethical approval is necessary, simply because they are not deemed to be research. However, most codes of practice (like the EU Directive, 2001) do not treat teaching exercises of these kinds as any different from research exercises. Any investigation or type of enquiry which uses participants for whatever purpose is subject to the same level of ethical scrutiny and, under most institutional insurance policies, needs to meet the same ethical standards. It is a breathtaking thought that course teams across the country should perhaps be seeking to obtain ethical approval for all such exercises and for all the students involved (sometimes scores, even hundreds, at a time).

In my own institution, where a huge amount of student practical work is conducted, particularly in education and social work training, we have evolved a method of handling this through a generic approval procedure. Course leaders are expected to take responsibility for completing a single ethics protocol setting out the range of exercises which they typically employ in a class for teaching and coursework purposes. This protocol details the procedures and kinds of issues/topics which commonly occur and covers the class for up to three years and for any number of students who, in consequence, do not need to fill out separate and individual ethics forms. Clearly if there were any substantial variation in the nature of the exercises covered by generic approval, then they would have to be considered and added to the protocol as and when they occurred. This system is still in its infancy but has been readily accepted by the academic community as a much simpler device than students (hundreds for some courses) having to write their own individual protocols for a series of routine classroom exercises.

Conclusion

I have no doubt that I speak for all psychology teachers and researchers when I say that we are all striving for 'light touch' solutions, which are bureaucratically as simple and easy to use as they can be. My own institution has developed a fairly rigorous and workable system for ethical review which academic staff are slowly taking on board. It has also grasped the nettle of ethical approval for classroom exercises out of concern that any complaint or accident involving participants from within or outside the university could lead to legal action which might result in a valid challenge to its legal or insurance obligations. Other tiers of management involving sponsorship decisions and management risk assessment are being handled separately from ethical review, although they do complicate procedures somewhat and increase the time-lag for decisions. Fortunately most student project work, which is not externally funded and does not involve the NHS, can be handled at departmental level through departmental ethics committees and does not raise sponsorship and management risk issues.

It is clear from conversations that I have had with academics from other institutions that there is considerable variation in evolving practices for ethical review of student project and practical work. In my view it would be useful to share institutional practice and experience, and I hope to stimulate some debate through this article.

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