

Research Ethics (1): Research Ethics and Developing Ethical Principles

From an early age, parents, schools, religious teaching and society in general provide us with moral guidelines to help us to learn and form our ethical beliefs. Some people are more ethical than others! Many ethics are reinforced in our legal system and thus provide a constraint on people's activities, while others are not. It could well be argued that The Ten Commandments were one of the first attempts to provide us with rigid religious and moral imperatives about things that we should do and things that we should not do. In areas not covered by the law, there may well be social pressure to conform to a particular standard. Even pressure groups or peer groups can influence individuals and organisations to behave in a particular way.

So, why do we need to understand about ethics and how do we transfer this to the context of your research? Over recent years there has been a growing awareness of a whole range of moral issues associated with the methods of research and the need for regulatory codes upon those who undertake it. In educational research particularly, there is a whole series of dilemmas into which researchers might be placed. For example, on the one hand researchers are looking for new knowledge and truth but, on the other hand, this has to be countered against the way in which the research might threaten the values and rights of the subject (Cohen and Manion, 1994).

During the research process, it is essential to maintain the ethical integrity of all behaviours right from the start (Rearden, 2006). Acting ethically should become second nature. There is a fine line between acting unethically and misconduct. In the most basic of ways, acting ethically involves:

1. Acknowledging the work of others. Your literature review shows what others have written.
2. Respect for other people. You need to inform people why you are asking questions and to what use you are going to put the information they provide for you. You need to ask permission and allow refusal to participate. Privacy needs to be respected. You have to be fair in your research and avoid any unsuspecting innuendo based upon your own views.
3. Scientific honesty and subjectivity. You need to be scrupulously honest about the nature of your findings. Your research question should be designed to create data that enable you to adopt a balanced view and not one based upon the strong views and prejudices that you might have (Walliman, 2004).

Before conducting your research it is useful, if not essential, to consult the BERA guidelines for educational research. BERA stands for the British Educational Research Association. It is the body that most UK education researchers belong to and where most educational research is disseminated at conferences where we party the night away talking stoically about '-ologies' until the sun comes up. Yes, it is the place where the really interesting people in the world meet and exchange ideas! The BERA guidelines are definitive and, at the very least, are the starting point in looking at the ethical issues and conundrums that might face your research. See: www.bera.ac.uk/files/guidelines/ethica

You will find that your school of education or department is likely to have its own ethical guidelines and it is essential that you consult these. For example:

Nottingham Trent University School of Education guidelines are conducted with an ethical focus upon:

- the person
- knowledge
- democratic values
- the quality of educational research
- academic freedom.

Responsibilities to participants

The participants in research may be active or passive subjects of such processes as observation, inquiry, experiment or test. They may be collaborators or colleagues in the research process or they may simply be part of the context, e.g. where students are part of the context but not the subjects of a teacher's research into her or his own professional practice.

The School of Education considers that educational researchers should operate within an ethic of respect for any persons involved directly or indirectly in the research they are undertaking, regardless of age, sex, race, religion, political beliefs and lifestyle, or any other significant difference between such persons and the researchers themselves or other participants in the research. This ethic of respect implies the following responsibilities on the part of educational researchers.

Voluntary informed consent

The School of Education takes voluntary informed consent to be the condition in which participants understand and agree to their participation without duress, prior to the research getting underway.

Researchers must take the steps necessary to ensure that all participants in the research understand the process in which they are to be engaged, including why their participation is necessary, how it will be used and how and to whom it will be reported. Researchers engaged in action research must consider the extent to which their own reflective research impinges on others, for example in the case of the dual role of the teacher and researcher and the impact on students and colleagues. Dual roles also introduce explicit tensions in areas such as confidentiality and must be addressed accordingly.

Deception

The securing of participants' voluntary informed consent, before research gets underway, is considered the norm for the conduct of research. Researchers must therefore avoid deception or subterfuge unless their design specifically requires it to ensure that appropriate data is collected or that the welfare of researchers is not put in jeopardy. Decisions to use deception or subterfuge in research must be the subject of full deliberation and subsequent disclosure in reporting. Approval for this course of action must be obtained from the Ethics Committee within the School of Education.

Right to withdraw

Researchers must recognise the right of any participant to withdraw from the research for any or no reason, and at any time, and they must inform them of this right. In all such circumstances researchers must examine their own actions to assess whether they have contributed to the decision to withdraw and whether a change of approach might persuade the participants to re-engage. In most cases, the appropriate course of action will be for the

researchers to accept the participant's decision to withdraw. Decisions to persuade participants to re-engage must be taken with care. Researchers must not use coercion or duress of any form to persuade participants to re-engage with the work. In cases where participants are required by contractual obligation to participate e.g., when mandated as part of their employment to facilitate an evaluation study, researchers may, however, have proper recourse to a third party (e.g. the employing authority) to request compliance with the contract.

Children, vulnerable young people and vulnerable adults

The School of Education requires researchers to comply with Articles 3 and 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of a Child. Article 3 requires that in all actions concerning children, the best interests of the child must be the primary consideration. Article 12 requires that children who are capable of forming their own views should be granted the right to express their views freely in all matters affecting them, commensurate with their age and maturity. Children should therefore be facilitated to give fully informed consent.

The School of Education considers that the spirit of Articles 3 and 12 above should also apply in research contexts involving young people and vulnerable adults.

In the case of participants whose age, intellectual capability or other vulnerable circumstance may limit the extent to which they can be expected to understand or agree voluntarily to undertake their role, researchers must fully explore alternative ways in which they can be enabled to make authentic responses. In such circumstances, researchers must also seek collaboration and approval of those who act in guardianship (e.g. parents) or as responsible others (i.e., those who have responsibility for the welfare and well-being of the participants, e.g. social workers).

Researchers must ensure that they themselves, and any collaborators or research assistants and students under their supervision, comply with legal requirements in relation to working with school children or vulnerable young people and adults. Researchers must recognise that participants may experience distress or discomfort in the research process and must take all necessary steps to reduce the sense of intrusion and to put them at their ease. They must desist immediately from any actions, ensuing from the research process, that cause emotional or other harm.

Researchers must recognise concerns relating to the 'bureaucratic burden' of much research, especially survey research, and must seek to minimise the impact of their research on the normal working and workloads of participants.

Incentives

Researchers' use of incentives to encourage participation must be commensurate with good sense and must avoid choices which in themselves have undesirable effects (e.g. the health aspects of offering cigarettes to young offenders or sweets to school children). They must acknowledge that the use of incentives in the design and reporting of the research may be problematic; for example where their use has the potential to create bias in sampling or in participant responses.

Detriment arising from participation in research

Researchers must make known to the participants (or their guardians or responsible others) any predictable detriment arising from the process or findings of the research. Any unexpected detriment to participants, which arises during the research, must be brought

immediately to their attention or to the attention of their guardians or responsible others as appropriate.

Researchers must take steps to minimise the effects of designs that advantage or are perceived to advantage one group of the participants over others, e.g. in an experimental or quasi-experimental study in which the treatment is viewed as a desirable intervention and which by definition is not available to the control or comparison group respectively.

Privacy

The confidential and anonymous treatment of participants' data is considered the norm for the conduct of research. Researchers must recognise the participants' entitlement to privacy and must accord them their rights to confidentiality and anonymity, unless they or their guardians or responsible others specifically and willingly waive that right. In such circumstances it is in the researchers' interests to have such a waiver in writing. Conversely, researchers must also recognise participants' rights to be identified with any publication of their original works or other inputs, if they so wish. In some contexts it will be the expectation of participants to be so identified.

Researchers must comply with the legal requirement in relation to the storage and use of personal data as set down in the Data Protection Act (1998) and any subsequent similar acts. In essence people are entitled to know how and why their personal data is being stored, to what uses it is being put and to whom it could be made available. Researchers must have participants' permission to disclose personal information to third parties and are required to ensure that such parties are permitted to have access to the information. They are also required independently to confirm the identity of such persons and must keep a record of any disclosures. Disclosures may be written, electronic, verbal or by any visual means.

The Data Protection Act also confers the right to private citizens to have access to any personal data that is stored in relation to them. Researchers seeking to exploit legal exclusions to these rights must have a clear justification for so doing. Researchers must ensure that data are kept securely and that the form of any publication, including publication on the internet, does not directly or indirectly lead to a breach of agreed confidentiality or anonymity.

Disclosure

Researchers who judge that the effect of the agreements they have made with participants on confidentiality and anonymity will allow the continuation of illegal behaviour, which has come to light in the course of research, must carefully consider making disclosure to the appropriate authorities. If the behaviour is likely to be harmful to the participants or to others, the researchers must also consider disclosure. Insofar as it does not undermine or obviate the disclosure, researchers must apprise their participants or their guardians or responsible others of their intentions and reasons for disclosure.

At all times, the decision to override agreements on confidentiality and anonymity must be taken after careful and thorough deliberation. In such circumstances it is in the researchers' interests to make contemporaneous notes on decisions and the reasoning behind them, in case a misconduct complaint or other serious consequence arises.

The School of Education considers it good practice for researchers to debrief participants at the conclusion of the research and to provide them with copies of any reports or other publications arising from their participation. Where the scale of the research makes such a

consideration impractical, alternative means such as a website should be used to ensure participants are informed of the outcomes. (School of Education Ethical Principles for Research).

Materials that reflect and respect these guidelines might include the following.

Access Letter Example 1: Access to Schools

[Address]

Dear [xxx]

Following our telephone discussion, I would like to provide you with further details of my project.

I am a student at Nottingham Trent University. As part of my studies I am exploring [*Specify what your study is about*]. In order to do this I would like to carry out a small scale study in your school. This will include carrying out [*individual or focus group*] interviews or the administration of a questionnaire [*whichever is applicable*]. I will be asking questions about/exploring the following:
[*outline as required*]
[*outline as required*]
[*outline as required*]

To complete this piece of work, I would need to speak with [*insert number*] of children in [*specify year group*] and [*specify number*] of teachers. The raw data will not be seen by anyone else and once my dissertation has been marked, I will destroy the data collected.

The interview information I collect will be transcribed and used as part of my dissertation. No individual will be identified within my dissertation and the identities of all those involved will be anonymous.

I have an up-to-date DBS check.

I hope you will be able to help me with this project and if you have any questions or require further information about this work please contact me on [*provide contact details: email and phone*].

My dissertation supervisor [*insert name*] is also able to provide details of this study and you can contact [*him/her*] by email [*provide email address*] or by telephone [*provide phone number*].

Yours sincerely,

[*name*]

Access Letter Example 2: Access to Schools

[Address]

Dear [xxx]

Following our telephone discussion, I would like to provide you with further details of my project.

I am a student at Nottingham Trent University. As part of my studies I am exploring [*specify what your study is about*]. In order to do this I would like to carry out a small scale study in your organisation. This will include [*specify the research approach – interviews/survey/case study*]. I will be asking questions about/exploring the following:

[*outline as required*]

[*outline as required*]

[*outline as required*]

To complete this piece of work, I would need to [*state what/who you would need access to*]. The raw data will not be seen by anyone else and once my dissertation has been marked, I will destroy the data collected.

[*Include this if appropriate*] Any interview data I collect will be transcribed and used as part of my dissertation. No individual will be identified within my dissertation and the identities of all those involved will be anonymous.

I have an up-to-date DBS check.

I hope you will be able to help me with this project and if you have any questions or require further information about this work please contact me on [*provide your contact details: email and phone*].

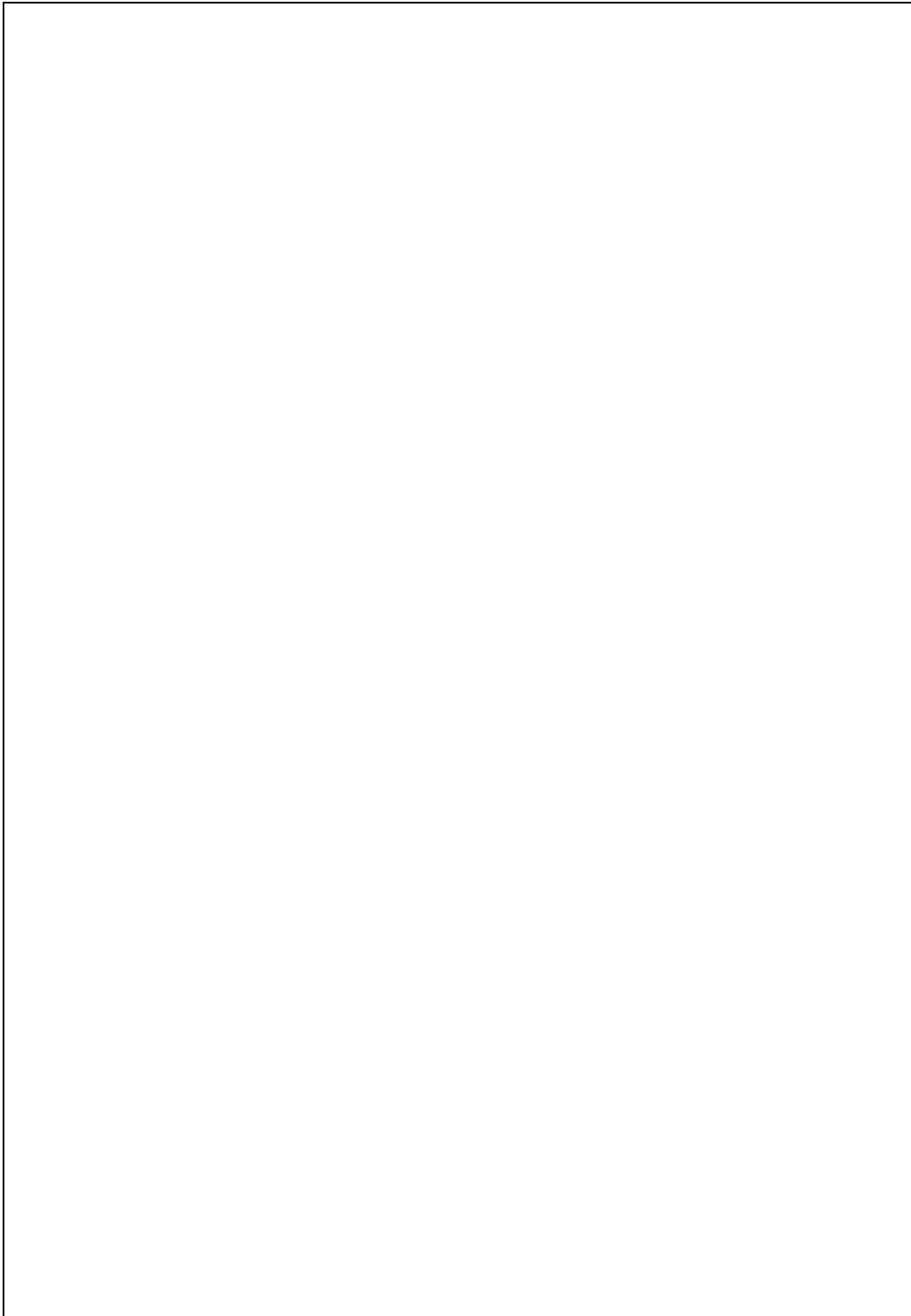
My dissertation supervisor [*insert name*] is also able to provide details of this study and you can contact [*him/her*] by email [*provide email details*] or by telephone [*provide phone number*].

Yours sincerely,

[Name]

Task

Consider the ethical issues facing your research. Work in groups to support each other in thinking about the issues and the actions that you might need to take.

A large, empty rectangular box with a thin black border, intended for students to write or discuss their thoughts on ethical issues in research.

References

- Cohen, L. and Manion, L. (1994) *Research Methods in Education* (4th Edition), London: Routledge
- Reardon, D. (2006) *Doing Your Undergraduate Project*, London: Sage
- Walliman, N. (2004) *Your Undergraduate Dissertation: the essential guide for success*, London: Sage
- www.bera.ac.uk/files/guidelines/ethica