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Embracing Qualitative Research: A Visual Model for Nuanced Research Ethics Oversight

Dr Elaine Doyle and Dr Patrick Buckley

Synopsis

The research ethics review systems within universities evolved from the positivist biomedical model but have expanded to include all non-clinical research involving human subjects. However, the application of the biomedical paradigm to qualitative research often creates significant problems. The paper highlights the fundamental differences between biomedical and humanities and social science (HSS) research. We develop a visual model which encompasses the traditional research ethics concepts but that can be applied to both contexts. The model was evolved based on findings from qualitative interviews carried out with expert members of research ethics committees.

Introduction and Background

It is acknowledged in the literature that the application of biomedical research ethics paradigms to qualitative research often creates significant problems for qualitative, social science research which can be subjective, messy and non-linear. It is essential that research participants be treated respectfully. However, the principles of anonymity, free and fully informed consent, confidentiality and withdrawal are becoming sanctified by research ethics committees as absolutes, regardless of the situation (Buckley, 2011; Murray et al., 2011). It must be acknowledged that not all ethical considerations apply in the same way in all methodologies, particularly because of the two main differences between biomedical and HSS research, namely the nature of the research interventions and the relationship between researcher and researched. These key differentiating factors are what drive the need for biomedical and HSS research to be treated differently when it comes to ethics oversight.

There have been many calls for ‘tools to support ethical practice in participatory and other non-postpositivistic research’ (Kleinman and Vallas, 2001: 1060). Halse and Honey suggest mutiny against the current mode of review has a magnetic attraction but report that ‘if there ever was a glorious golden age of unfettered freedom for research, it is unlikely to be resurrected in a neoliberal world of legislative controls, legal responsibilities, and institutional audit and accountability’ (2007: 349). Absenting HSS research from any kind of ethics oversight is neither feasible nor desirable. Instead, social science academics need to move beyond demonstrating the failings of current practice and build a consensus around more suitable review processes.

Methodology

This paper answers the calls for tools to support ethical practice in qualitative research. We develop a research ethics model encompassing the variables relevant to research involving human subjects. We show how this model can be applied in a practical way to both biomedical and non-clinical contexts through the application of different levels of tolerance in each domain.

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Issues and Questions Considered

Our model is fabricated by taking four continua based on (1) informed consent, (2) anonymity, (3) risk of harm and (4) contribution and the variable ‘the researcher’, and scaffolding them into a single structure, as shown in Figure 1.

Outcomes and Findings

Despite numerous calls in the literature for a change in approach to the research ethics oversight of HSS research, the extant literature in the area fails to advance beyond describing ethical dilemmas encountered by researchers in their own context and critiques delineating the unsuitability of biomedical research ethics procedures for HSS research. Neither category addresses the underlying problem of how research ethics oversight of HSS research might be conducted more sensitively without necessitating separate processes and therefore the effect of this moderating influence would need to be to allow projects with larger circles (when mapped onto the model) to proceed if they are supervised by more experienced researchers.

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