

The Practice of Social Research  
Doctoral Training Centre

## Research Ethics: Critical Perspectives

Dr Eric Jensen (e.jensen@warwick.ac.uk)  
25<sup>th</sup> January 2012

THE UNIVERSITY OF  
WARWICK

## Research Ethics Further Considerations - Overview

- The principles of research ethics and their limitations
- Research Ethics = signed consent forms?
- Research Ethics = communication and trust?
- The duties of an ethical social researcher

WARWICK

### Current context for research ethics

#### • 1) **Neo-liberalisation.**

The burden of responsibility shifts from researcher to participant through medium of the informed consent form.

#### 2) **Bureaucratisation, Instrumental Rationalisation.**

Purpose of consent form and underlying questions of ethical responsibility displaced by fetishisation of consent forms (one solution for all research ethics contexts)

WARWICK

### Current context for research ethics

3) **Conflation of concerns about legal liability** (i.e. institutional risk) **and ethics** (i.e. researcher's responsibility to their participants).

–Legal and ethical concerns had overlapping origins but have become distinct in their emphases.

–Ethical and legal issues should be separated in the interests of ethics, which is increasingly being overtaken by concerns regarding institutional liability.

WARWICK

## Principles of Research Ethics

- Beauchamp and Childress (1994) elaborated an approach to ethical deliberations based on four universalistic principles.
- Based on an averred secular 'common morality', these are:
  1. **Autonomy** (traces back to Kant)
  2. **Non-maleficence** (first do no harm)
  3. **Beneficence** (could trace to utilitarianism)
  4. **Justice**

WARWICK

## Limitations of Principlism (drawing on bioethics literature)

- Harris (2003) argues that limiting ethical deliberation to the four principles would stifle and sterilise the discussion by turning it into a uniform 'checklist'.
- Evans (2002) goes further, arguing that ethical principles should be open to public determination, rather than professional ethicist and researcher determination.
- 'Formal', 'instrumental', 'goal' and 'thin' rationality all refer to the kind of logic wherein a "pattern of action is...*calculated* to be the most efficacious means for achieving *predetermined or assumed ends*" (p. 13).

(see Jensen, 2008)

WARWICK

## Limitations of Principlism (sociological critique)

- Thin ethical discourses “tend to ask, What should a scientist or patient do in this situation, given the universal ends” of principlism (p. 20), rather than considering a broader range of societal and cultural ends
  - e.g. inter-generational responsibility or relative apportioning of risks and benefits between wealthy and poor.
- Excluding such broader considerations serves the purposes of researchers by allowing for quick and efficient ethical conclusions in favour of their research.

(see Jensen, 2008)

WARWICK

## Limitations of Principlism (sociological critique)

- Evans argues against such ethical efficiency as anti-democratic and anti-pluralistic.
- Instead he advocates ‘thick’, values-based ethical discourse based on the assumption that ethical ends are not universally held.
- Rather, the thick framework allows for a potentially infinite range of ends to be contested within a sphere of agonistic struggle and debate.
- Evans contends such thick ethical discourse is more democratic and more legitimate because it does not close down lines of thinking arbitrarily based on purely technocratic criteria

WARWICK

(see Jensen, 2008)

## Research Ethics – the consent form

- Consent form based on neoliberal model of research subject
- Displaces responsibility for ethics and protection of research subjects from researcher to subjects
- The current practice of informed consent often lacks authenticity and assumes altruism model of research participation

WARWICK

## An Alternative Perspective: *A Duty-based Model of Research Ethics*

WARWICK

### Return to core principles

- **Avoid harm to research participants**
- -Ensure that research is only undertaken if it is worthwhile (for society, participants, etc.- not just for researcher's career, etc.)
- **Informed consent based on not exposing 'subjects' to unnecessary or undisclosed risks.**
  - i.e. supposed to be about protecting participants from harm, not protecting researchers' and their institutions from liability for negative outcomes.

### Duty of Care

- Researchers need to feel responsible for
- ensuring the protection and good use of data
- with which they are entrusted.

WARWICK

### Ethical principles of social research

#### *Duty of Conducting Quality Research*

- Carefully plan the research to avoid wasting respondents' time (i.e. proportionality to ensure that excess data is not collected)
- Fully and rigorously analysing the data
- Accurately represent full range of responses received (i.e., not skewing the analysis towards the client's preferred outcomes)
- Where the research could benefit a broader community, results should be published in some form, including full methodological details.

WARWICK

## Ethical principles of research

### ***Duty of Conducting Quality Research***

- Quality assurance
- Clear and honest communication with participants regarding the aims and outcomes of the research
- Ensure that data is maintained in confidential or anonymous manner unless participants can explicitly

WARWICK

## Ethical principles of research - issues

### ***Duty of Conducting Quality Research***

- Exclusive reliance on potentially exclusionary forms of data collection (e.g. iPhone app)
- Ensure survey and interview questions use accessible language that does not marginalise or exclude the participation of culturally disadvantaged visitors
- Using the data collected in full (e.g. recording and transcribing qualitative interviews)

WARWICK

## Ethical principles of research

### ***Duty of Conducting Quality Research***

Bottom line: Duty to develop relevant methodological knowledge and skills to design, conduct and analyse the research to good standard.

\*If poor quality methods used, this portends a range of ethical problems, including harm to:

- -The institution and discipline
- -The participants (e.g. being represented inaccurately and served less effectively due to the low quality research)

WARWICK

## Conclusion

- The neo-liberalising trend in research ethics should be re-assessed in favour of approach based on core principles of avoiding harm and ensuring wider value of research.
- Ethical practice should not be exclusively operationalised through standardised consent forms.
- Practical suggestion: researchers can document their assessment of risks, steps taken to mitigate risk, etc. in a brief paper that can be supplied to their institution and made available to participants (though not requiring them to read it)

WARWICK

## References

- Beauchamp, T. L., & Childress, J. F. (1994). *Principles of Biomedical Ethics* (4th ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Evans, J. H. (2002). *Playing God?: Human genetic engineering and the rationalization of public bioethical debate*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Harris, J. (2003). In praise of unprincipled ethics. *Journal of Medical Ethics*, 29, 303-306.
- Weber, M. (1968/1925). *Economy and Society* (E. Fischhoff, Trans. Vol. 3). New York: Bedminister Press.

WARWICK