

There's No Ethics Here!

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Increasingly education research students are drawn to forms of research that are researcher-centric, such as desk-based systematic literature reviews and autoethnographic studies of personal experience and practice (Doloriert and Sambrook, 2009). Whilst most UK universities require ethical approval, I remain perplexed by frequent claims from both students and supervisors, that such studies have no ethical considerations, with ethical scrutiny consequently perceived as a barrier or chore. Do such studies really lack ethical issues? This article asks whether it is realistic to claim that there are 'no ethics here', and argues that the role of education ethics committees goes beyond simply project approval, namely the promotion and maintenance of ethically literate researchers.

Worthwhile and interesting educational research of whatever kind, needs to contribute critically to discourses that matter professionally and emotionally to theorists, practitioners and the recipients of education. This implies the presence of ethical dimensions not the absence of them. Autoethnography is convenient and attractive to practitioner researchers because they can write about researching their own relationships, personal experience and professional practice. Ellis, Adams and Bochner (2011) discuss 'relational ethics'; researchers do not exist in isolation they are connected to social networks including friends, family, colleagues, and the community of practice. Even where the researcher-*is*-researched (Doloriert and Sambrook, 2009) and is therefore the key focus, relational ethics must be considered. Autoethnographic research values narrative that exposes vulnerability in writing about self, others and motives. Mesner (2016) challenges us to consider how we provide complete commitment to relating stories, particularly those of the traditionally marginalised, and balance ethical concern for implicating others relationally. Once a story is told the teller is potentially exposed, and in the modern world of open access publishing, Google scholar, social media and internet trolling, the outcome of that exposure could be hostile.

Relational ethics are heightened for autoethnographic research, but also not absent I would argue for systematic literature review. The often underestimated methodological demands of systematic review aside, such studies are increasingly popular due to the ability to enter the debate without the need to attract and engage participants. The claim, therefore, is that there are no ethical considerations because the review is based on secondary 'data' that already

entirely resides within the public domain. Vergnes, Marchal-Sixou, Nabet, Maret, and Hamel (2010) observe that the question of ethics in systematic reviews is rarely touched upon. Wager and Wiffen (2011) writing in the context of biomedical research, suggest that authors of systematic reviews need to be mindful of ethical issues such as redundant publication, conflicts of interest e.g. due to funding, and accurate and unbiased reporting of others' work. Vergnes et al. (2010) also suggest that systematic reviews often assume, erroneously, that the accessed original research was ethically produced, thus it is possible to unwittingly become the publisher of unethical research. Just because a report or a document is in the public domain does not imply that it is being generated ethically in the first place.

I have suggested above that relational ethics may also be present within systematic reviews. To explain this, consider the following example; a student's PhD proposal, with supervisor support, seeks to debate proposed provision of mental health support in schools based on systematic review. Mental health provision engages significant professional and emotional investment from those who experience mental health issues, from practitioners, policy makers and researchers. Arguably, this study seeks to be controversial and will, therefore, raise ethical issues in relation to its perception by its intended audience and exposure of the author to their critical scrutiny. Regardless of the 'public domain' claim, the researcher's arguments will inevitably and deliberately affect others. What is the responsibility of the research supervisor in this scenario? If they encourage the 'no ethics here' claim, are they acting unethically? Do they not have a moral obligation to at least make their student aware of and encourage their thinking on the issue of relational ethics? I'm not arguing that we shouldn't engage in controversial and contentious research, far from it, nor that we should tighten up ethics approval processes to make it difficult for such research to happen. I am arguing simply that we shouldn't and can't ignore ethics. Mesner (2016) alerts us to the folly of assuming ethical certainty; our understanding of ethics evolves, this makes it problematic to argue the absence of ethical considerations for any research. It also highlights the need for all researchers, regardless of discipline, to be ethically aware, or ethically literate.

As more doctoral students and practitioners engage in research into professional environments, I would encourage ethics committees not to accept claims of 'no ethics here' and to challenge assumptions that researchers engaged in systematic review or autoethnography have any less need to be ethically aware. Having served as an ethics committee chair, my observation is that all too often proposals and the review process itself, focus almost exclusively on avoidance of harm and neglect to explore the potential benefits

of proposals. If a study does not have benefit, why do it? Consideration of benefit is an integral part of the ethical justification for a study.

The importance of the ethical approval process itself needs recognition. As a peer-review process, it has value in advising improvements to research projects and helping to ensure good quality research. For educational research students, who should receive training in research ethics (Universities UK, 2012), full engagement in the ethics process, encourages careful design of projects, provides valuable opportunity to write for critical review and provides confidence that they are able to act ethically during their research. Trussell (2010; 380) discusses the significance of '*ethically heightened moments*', described as difficult, often subtle and usually unpredictable situations that arise in the practice of doing research. Ethically literate researchers will respond appropriately to such moments, how will those in ethical denial or under the illusion that there are no ethical considerations, recognise and respond to such ethically heightened moments? The default position should be that there are *always* ethics here!

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