Podcast 3. Ethical considerations associated with developing your research instruments: A role for relational ethics

This is the third podcast of four about how thinking about ethical issues can strengthen your study.

Feminist researchers in particular place relationships at the core of their research strategy. This is based on a duty of 'care' and 'compassion' for those from whom they seek to gain understanding (e.g. Noddings, 1984; Zigo, 2001). Reflecting on how best to collect data from others in ways which allow us to create and maintain trusting and caring relationships is a way of showing respect to those we wish to request to participate in our study. That researchers should show respect is a key component of national and professional research ethics guidance. This turns participants into just that, those participating in our study, rather than being the 'subjects' or even 'objects' of our research. Researchers who promote practitioner research, i.e. of professionals studying their own work contexts, advocate that for such research to truly benefit that work context, it needs to be participatory, to involve other colleagues in collaborative ways so as to enable it to both empower those individuals and transform practices (e.g. Groundwater-Smith and Mockler, 2007). This is where relational and consequential warrants compound to support decisions.

Another way of showing respect is by paying attention to issues of equality. If you are involving some participants have you considered how those not involved will feel? Is there anything you can do about this in terms of involvement? Even for your participants do you plan to treat them fairly? This is where control and experiment design frames are problematic ethically as, if you feel you have a really worthwhile intervention, why withhold it from some and offer it to others? If you have mixed groups of participants, such as children and adults or patients and careworkers, can you show your respect by treating them equally in terms of how you recruit, what you ask of them and how you report?

When we think about research relationships, they can exist at multiple levels. This relates to the previous dimension of thinking ecologically about your study. Of course centrally there will be the participants from whom you wish to request some form of data. There may also be gatekeepers who help you negotiate access to these participants ie. those with responsibility for looking after their interests (such as parents of potential child participants or care workers for vulnerable adults). These relationships are particularly important to think about as to how to develop and what to expect of them (e.g. Hofman, 2001). There may also be sponsors to your research. Is anyone funding your studies or allowing you time/other support for your study? If you are studying in your own work context you may © Alison Fox and the University of Leicester, 2015. Any part of this document may be reproduced without permission and can be altered, transformed or built upon, if attribution is given to Alison Fox and the University of Leicester. The document cannot be reused commercially. CC-BY-NC-SA (share alike with attribution for non-commercial use). http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/ The moral rights of Alison Fox to be recognised as the author of this work have been asserted.
need to think about how your study affects your work colleagues. It is worthwhile in any case thinking about how your study might affect others beyond your direct participants and therefore whether it would be courteous to inform or even negotiate your study with them. For example is it relevant to contact leaders in the organisation you wish to study? Be prepared to listen to their questions and tailor your plans to ensure your requests are reasonable in that setting. This is why focusing on the information gained from developing relationships can inform your decisions about which research instruments are appropriate to use in your research setting and how these might be best designed and administered. Of course start your discussions by asking for what you ideally would like to do in terms of data collection but be prepared to listen and show some flexibility in these plans.

Even if the research site is your own work context you have an opportunity to explain that you would like to be seen as playing a distinctive role as a researcher and explain how you are planning to put into practice your responsibilities as such. The more relevant people that are aware of the study, and the more they feel they have had chance to comment on the plans, the less distrust there should be of it and the more culturally appropriate it will be. A knock-on effect is that, by discussing your project’s plans, you will be generating a ‘pull’ or an interest in the study; rather than completing it and ‘pushing’ the findings out. Generating an interest increases the opportunities for your study to contribute to local knowledge and understanding.

All of the above depends on developing effective relationships which will need to be based on trust and respect. These are hard won and easily lost, should any of your actions breach the expectations you have led others to have of you. This is why informed consent is so important. In this process it is important to:

a) sell your project idea to participants (and relevant others) to share your excitement and explain your belief in the value of carrying out the study,

b) explain your requests of them,

c) outline your promises to them to reassure them, such as about how you will store and deal with reporting their data and, finally,

d) explain their rights, such as participation being voluntary, explaining that they can withdraw data, and providing contact information should they have any questions or concerns.
There may be reasons why you feel your study should be conducted covertly ie. without advance participant consent. This increases the risk to participants (and possibly also to yourself) and needs very careful justification. It will be even more important to have preliminary discussions with people in (or who know) the research context, to pay attention to relationships and vital to show respect. This kind of study will need a stronger rationale when applying for ethical approval of your study.

Of course what will be ultimately important will be how you act during the study - how you show respect, whether you keep your promises and how you deal with changes that affect the study as they happen. Thinking about all four dimensions of the framework developed by Kris Stutchbury and Alison Fox (Stutchbury and Fox, 2009) as advocated in this set of four podcasts will support you in feeling more confident about the ethical principles that underpin your study and therefore your decision making.

References:


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