Faculty of Education - Papers (Archive)   Faculty of Social Sciences

2011

Conducting ethical research

Jan Wright
University of Wollongong, jwright@uow.edu.au

Gabrielle O'Flynn
University of Wollongong

Publication Details

Chapter

Conducting Ethical research

Jan Wright, Gabrielle O'Flynn, University of Wollongong

> The year 5 children erupted into the room with its strange machines and people.
> Fitness testing! Eyes alighted on scales, lung capacity tester .., exercise bikes,
> benches, and before teachers organized queues, the boys were blowing, poking,
> questioning, pushing. The girls tended to huddle apprehensive, eyeing each
> other … Perhaps one was viewing them through pre-programmed eyes but most
> of the boys seemed boisterously competitive , while the girls were more
> hesitant, even anxious, with some reluctance to try hard … In no other test were
> the differences more noticeable that in the simple weighing of the children. The
> boys seemed either indifferent, with the odd self-conscious body-hugging from
> both the skinny and the really chubby, while most easily bounced on and sent
> the machine's arm swinging. The girls moved up in tight groups, and while one
> stepped on the others gathered to read the result even before the tester. (Burns,
> 1993, p.78)

This scenario was oft repeated in the past in nationwide fitness testing of children. It
is less likely to be repeated now, why is that so? What are the ethical issues evident
in this scenario? By the end of this chapter it should be apparent that this is not a
practice that conforms with key tenets of ethical research as they are currently
conceived.

Over the last decade there has been a growing awareness and discussion of moral
issues implicit in research. National governments and research institutions, including
universities have instituted in some case legislation and in others more voluntary
institution of guidelines and mandatory practices for ethical research. For the new
researcher (and often for the experienced researcher) these may seem onerous and
intrusive, however, there are always moral issues in human research. Researchers
are intruding into people's lives asking them, for the most part, to do things that
they would not otherwise have done; and collecting information that that they might

not otherwise have given. With children and young people, this is even more so the case.   In this chapter, we will try to assist new researchers both to understand ethical research and to provide a guide to the various aspects of ethics applications. We will use 'stories' from our own and our colleagues' experiences to illustrate some of the dilemmas and the strategies for managing the application process. The stories will however go beyond the technicalities prior to conducting the research to the ethical/moral dilemmas that can confront researcher while conducting their research.

On what basis of experience do we write this chapter? Jan Wright has been conducting research with young people in the area of physical education and physical activity for over twenty years. Gabrielle O'Flynn completed her PhD on the place and meaning of health and physical activity in the lives of young women. Since completing her thesis, she has conducted health and physical activity research with young women and older women. Their work has been informed by poststructuralist and other social theories that are concerned with the operation of power. This means that it is difficult to avoid thinking through issues of the power relations between participants and the researcher and the responsibilities that go with that. From this perspective one of the first questions is: what are our responsibilities to our participants in relation to protecting them from harm? Harm can take many forms and in the kinds of research conducted in the area of physical activity, emotional harm can be a very real risk.

What is ethical research?

If you are in the academic community, in most countries you cannot conduct research involving human subjects without meeting the requirements of a university ethics committee or research ethics board, which itself is usually subject to national or state guidelines. Research ethics boards have been established in institutions to manage the balance between potential benefits and harms of research.

Applying for approval to ethics boards can seem onerous, but it can be very beneficial in helping researchers think through their research choices of sample or participant selection, forms of data collection and even the nature of interview and survey questions. Every researcher needs to identify the possible harms and potential benefits to participants and to their organizations (for example, clubs, and schools) of their research. It is about responsibility and rights. How this is interpreted is often a point of contention. On one hand, researchers and research students want to address a knowledge problem that they think is very important. To do so, however, may mean collecting data from people who do not, or whose parents do not, share the researcher's point of view. Parents, for example, may see that time completing a survey or participating in an interview is time out of class, time away from learning. They may regard some questions as intrusive or a topic irrelevant or even harmful to their child. The task of the researcher is then to ensure that research will do no harm, and to convince the ethics committee and the participants that the research is worthwhile and that it will have some benefit for them personally and for the greater good. This can sometimes be a challenge. In the areas of health, education and sport, research is usually conducted to make a difference in the quality of children and young people's lives. This more general benefit, however, may not be immediately obvious to participants.

Protocols and expectations vary from university to university and sometimes within universities, so it important to find and read the guidelines carefully for any particular institution. For example in Canada, all research including undergraduate interviews for a term paper need to be scrutinized by the University Research Education Board (Haggerty, 2004). In the United States ethical approval is sometimes contingent on completing training offered by the CITI Program (Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (https://www.citiprogram.org/Default.asp?), a subscription service offered to affiliated institutions, which provides research ethics education.

When completing the ethics application form, it is often very useful to seek assistance from supervisors and from others who have gone through the process.

The ethics application can be interpreted by ethics boards as an indication of the researcher's capacity to do the research so it is worth taking care over the application and asking another person to read through it before submission, right down to the spelling. Templates for consent forms and information sheets are often available on institutional websites and again it can save considerable time if examples of completed ethics forms are available from those who have already gained approval for their research for similar projects. Further information about the meanings of sections of the application form is available below.

Conducting research in schools

Much of the research that involves children and young people and physical activity will take place in school contexts. This poses an additional set of expectations in relation to ethics. Schools and school systems do not see their major purpose as providing a site for research. Some schools and some systems are much more accommodating than others, but all will want to see what the benefits of the research will be for their school, for their system or for children and young people more generally. Schools and education systems will be particularly concerned that the research will not distract teachers and students from the main purpose of the school – that is, student learning and well-being. Some forms of research conducted in schools, such as case study research, also raise issues of reputation, of schools or systems. The state system of education with which the authors are most familiar, for example, is very reluctant to support research that looks like it might compare schools from one system with another (i.e. the catholic or independent system). In case study research, confidentiality is often very hard to guarantee when the 'rich context' of the case study or the ethnography is important to the quality of the analysis. This will sometimes restrict the kind of research that can be done. In these cases there are a number of strategies including: a collaborative approach where the participants are more involved in planning the research and may also be involved in its writing up; ensuring that in the reporting of the research that individuals are not characterized in ways that would cause them harm; and in cases where none of this

can be avoided a thesis may be mandated (withdrawn from public access for a stipulated amount of time).

Conducting research in schools can be a tricky road to negotiate. An example is provided in one of the case studies below and the following is an email response from Peter Hastie, an experienced classroom researcher (see chapter xx) when asked how he manages entry into schools:

> different school systems have different requirements for entry - but in most cases, personal contacts can expedite the process - viz, if you are a good citizen and have worked in the school before and have good relationships with the admin and teachers, you usually don't have much of an issue in the first instance ... thereafter, it depends upon how intrusive your stuff is … many have issues with video, but less with direct observation as an example.

Comments from Gabrielle (not sure how to head this)

The intention in conducting research is always to improve the lives of children and young people. However, this intention does not always guarantee the absence of harm. It also does not guarantee that the community will share the benefits of the research, or individuals we want to involve in the project. As researchers we need to consider these things. This involves putting ourselves in the 'shoes' of potential participants and questioning, 'What *effect* will participating in the research project have on my life, my learning, my anonymity and my sense of self?' In relation to schools, it involves asking, 'What *impact* will the research have on the school's daily business? What immediate *benefits* are there for the school?' This reflection process should be part of the formal ethics approval process. It should also be a continuous part of *how* we research.

How to successfully seek approval for ethical research

The basis for the following section is the various applications forms and guidelines from universities in United Kingdom, United States, Australia, Ireland and Scandinavia. They are all very similar in what they require. This is because there are some agreed upon key concepts that always need to be attended to in conducting ethical research, that protect participants and are indicative of the balance between benefit and harm. All university ethics applications ask questions about these key issues and the success of an ethics application (i.e. having the application accepted first time round) is contingent on understanding what these concepts imply and how to address them in research planning. This means explaining your actions clearly and explicitly when completing ethics application forms. Some of these requirements may seem onerous or obvious. There is however a history as to why such questions are asked, a history where research has not always respected the benefits and especially harm to participants. One powerful illustration of this is described below under 'Informed consent'.

There are often several sections to an application form: one dealing with the researchers, and their 'competence' to so the research; one about the research design; and another about the participants and their protection from harm. The section dealing with researchers is about the capacity of the researchers to undertake the research. This may seem strange in an ethics application, but committees need to be assured that participants will not have their time wasted in research that may not be completed or where the researchers do not have sufficient experience to conduct themselves responsibly. For research students this often means that a supervisor may be expected to take responsibility for the ethical conduct of the research by being named as the Chief Investigator or Principal Researcher. Some applications ask for evidence of experience in conducting research. In this section there may also be questions about funding sources.

The section about the research itself usually requires an explanation of the purpose or rationale for the research and a description of the research design, including in some cases how the data will be analysed. This section can be a good opportunity for thinking through questions like why am I conducting this research? Who will benefit?

What contribution do I make and to what/to whom? It can also be useful for thinking through why decisions have been made about the research design: why these people; why this method of data collection? While it may seem that the research methodology should not need to be scrutinized by a research ethics board, the quality of the research is part of the balance between harm and benefit for participants. As an example the following rationale is provided in the guidelines from the ethics committee at the authors' university.

> In order to assess the ethical acceptability of a research proposal the HREC needs to consider a number of features of the research methodology and procedures. These include:
>
> - o whether the research question is one likely to advance understanding or knowledge;
> - o whether the research methodology used to address the question is likely to achieve the stated aims;
> - o whether the value of the research justifies the risks, discomforts, inconvenience or intrusion of privacy that may be experienced by research participants
>
> (University of Wollongong, 2008, p.8)

If the research involves 'specific communities' (UOW), 'vulnerable populations' (children, adolescents, economic disadvantage, people with physical/intellectual disabilities), there is usually an expectation that, i) there is a very good reason that the research should involve this group and ii) some additional care has been taken in planning the research. With some indigenous communities such as Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders in Australia, Aboriginal communities in Canada and Native Americans/First Nations people in the United States there are national guidelines that must be addressed. Again an example from the authors' university:

> If the research involves specific communities, when describing the research design you should mention whether you have discussed (or will discuss) the proposal with members of the community and whether community members

will be involved in oversight of the project – such discussions are **required** for research involving Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders (see the NHMRC *Values and Ethics: Guidelines for Ethical Conduct in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Research*). It is also helpful to indicate whether some members of the research team have particular skills or experience which may make them more sensitive to the ethical issues which may come up in the research, or better able to identify and respond to potential problems.

(University of Wollongong, 2008, p.8)

In preparing an ethics application, researchers may be asked to detail the possible risks and benefits. Risks can include the risk of emotional upset because of sensitive questions (for example questions which might ask about body image); embarrassment if students are to be measured in any way; the embarrassment of failing to complete particular physical tasks or skills, particularly in front of peers. This section offers the opportunity to think through possible harms and how these might be minimized. In some case if questions may cause emotional distress, it may be required to have counseling on hand or to provide access in some way, or a debriefing process. The following quote exemplifies the ways in which committees make a decision about the research

The Committee will weigh the harms/burdens relative to the potential benefits of the research, the nature of the agreement to participate in the project, and any protections for participants put in place by the research team. The possibility or existence of harm or burden resulting from participation does not mean that a project cannot be approved. Most research involving human participants involves some risks and burdens. Participants who are adequately advised of the nature (including the risks and burdens) of the research and who are sufficiently

free to make the decision to participate of to refuse to participate may

well be prepared to take on those risks and burdens.

(University of Wollongong, 2008, p.9-10)

The section which is concerned with the benefits and harms to the participants usually asks about participant recruitment, the nature of the agreement to participate in the research (e.g. informed consent) and any protections put in place for participants if required.

Confidentiality and anonymity

The protection of the privacy of the individuals (and sometimes institutions or organisations such as schools and sports clubs) is an important expectation in conducting research. That is, the identity of research participants or institutions will not be revealed – without explicit written approval. Babble (2010, p.67) distinguishes between anonymity and confidentiality. He defines anonymity as the situation when not even the researcher knows the identity of the participants, as is the case in an anonymous survey. Confidentiality is then the non-disclosure of the participant's identity publicly.

In the collecting and processing of the data (transcription, supervision feedback on drafts) processes must be in place so that the information provided by participants or collected about participants (e.g. in the form of photographs, interview notes or recordings, surveys) is protected. In the case of qualitative data, pseudonyms are usually assigned or chosen by participants. But this also means how data might be talked about to friends and colleagues. Researchers have been provided with information in a context of trust and it is important not to abuse that trust.

Most surveys are collected anonymously, however, if there is a need to correlated the results of one questionnaire with another, or with results from other tests (e.g.

accelerometer measurements) then data bases making the links between assigned numbers and xxxx

Confidentiality extends to how the research will be published and presented. As well had changing names of individuals and sites, other identifying information should be handled with care. Preserving confidentiality when the context of the study is important is a not a straightforward issue, however rich description of the site – 'a large primary school, in an inner city neighborhood with large immigrant population' can often serve as well. If photographs are to be used in publications (including the thesis) or presentations then written consent must be provided by the participants and their parents (if participants are categorized as children) and all people in the photographs whether or not they are participants in the research.

Informed consent

The requirement of informed consent is one concept which can be traced back to research which took no account of the rights of research subjects. In the following quote, Haggerty (2004) describes how the atrocities conducted by German physicians in the name of 'science' prompted the drafting of a code that emphasized the importance of voluntary, informed consent from competent subjects.

> Contemporary concerns about research ethics would undoubtedly be quite different were it not for the almost incomprehensible cruelties of a group of German physicians in Nazi Germany. Drawing their "research subjects" from the concentration camps, these physicians subjected Jews and Gypsies to "experiments" that included immersing them in freezing water, and injecting them with poison, diseases, and even gasoline—in an effort to learn how the body responds to such extreme manipulations (Annas and Grodin 1992). Twenty Nazi doctors were ultimately indicted for their actions, and appeared before the Nuremberg War Crimes Tribunal in 1946. This tribunal condemned the sheer barbarity these experiments and repeatedly emphasized that the experiments were conducted without the consent of the participants. In an effort to establish the basic principles that must be adhered to in conducting

research on human subjects the tribunal drafted the famous Nuremberg Code. The requirement that researchers must secure the consent of research subjects, and that this consent must be voluntary, competent, informed, and comprehending is the very first item on that code. (Haggerty 2004, p. 404)

What does informed consent then require of the researcher? Usually ethical guidelines are quite explicit about what is required. The research will need to be explained in terms that are understandable by the people being researched and for children by their parents. In some cases this may mean translating the information into the language spoken by the participants or their parents and also presenting it orally. The information provided to participants needs to include: the aim of the research; the methods used and what this require of the participants; the benefit and risks; the fact that the participation is voluntary and that the participants can withdraw from the research (and if possible withdraw their data from the research) at any time without negative consequences to themselves. This last requirement means that research needs to be planned from the beginning to take this contingency into account.

Working with children

Children are regarded as a particularly vulnerable population and there are usually specific expectations about how children need to be protected in the research context. For example, children (the age of consent varies from country to country) in some cases are deemed not to be able to provide informed consent and so parents or guardians must provide consent. The capacity of children to provide consent is debated in the literature and researchers committed to participant child research argue that children should be involved in the project and are quite capable of providing informed consent. If children are to be full participants in the research it seems like a good idea to fully inform even quite young children of the nature of the project and ask them to sign a consent form if they are willing to participate, even when only parental consent is required by the institution.

There are number of other issues when conducting research with children. Child protection legislation impacts on researchers wanting to work with children. In most countries, researchers are expected to report on any cases of abuse and neglect. In some countries researchers are required to complete police checks before conducting research with children. The following guide from Loughborough University on instances when a criminal check will be required is indicative also of the kinds of situations in which extra care in needed when researching with children. For example, researchers should organize their data collection so that they are not out of sight of others when collecting any data from children. However, there may be instances for the child's privacy when this needs to be the case.

5.1 The University has produced guidelines to identify situations in which it is necessary to check an individual's criminal record through the Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) Disclosure procedures. In terms of research involving children/young people, it is likely that the following scenarios will require a CRB disclosure to be undertaken:

a)   Investigators with unsupervised access to child participants (ie if an investigator is likely to be alone in a room with one or more children/young people).
b)   Taking physical measurements from child participants.
c)   Requirement for child participants to remove any clothing.
d)   Recording child participants on video.
e)   Testing of new equipment.
f)   If requested by the sponsor of the research.

http://www.lboro.ac.uk/admin/committees/ethical/gn/wwccop.htm

Internet research

Internet research is increasingly common for youth and child researchers because of young peoples active use of the web as a means of communication with each other. If using the Internet to collect data, confidentiality or security precautions in place to protect (or not collect) identifiable data need to be considered? These include protections used during both the collection and transfer of data. These are often listed on a server's website. In the following quote Haggerty discusses the kinds of

debates that are taking place in the research community about using data from posted by individuals on the Web.

> How informed consent provisions will shape Internet research is a particularly pressing concern. Discussions are currently underway in the global research community about what ethical protocols should govern Web based research. Opinions on this issue can be roughly divided into two camps. On the one hand are those individuals who equate Web postings with public pronouncements, comparable to letters to the editor, and as such amenable to academic analysis without the necessity of ethical review (Kitchin 2002). Others, however, accentuate how some Internet users operate with an assumption of privacy and confidentiality. These individuals are more inclined to suggest that Internet research should undergo ethics review and adhere to the *Policy,* raising difficult questions about the practicalities of acquiring informed consent. While this matter is far from resolved, if the latter view becomes dominant the academy risks becoming the only social institution that cannot routinely quote and analyze information posted on what will likely become the dominant social communication system.

(Haggerty 2004, p.405)

Collecting data from the web is clearly not a straightforward issue. There are still a number of ethical considerations that will confront researchers as they undertake research using the internet. Most institutions and ethics boards will have their own guidelines about how to deal with these issues.

Case studies

This section of the chapter presents three case studies. The purpose of each case study is to examine the ethics process – both in relation to the formal ethics approval and as a continuous part of *how* we research. As defined in this chapter, ethics relates to reducing harm and making explicit the benefits of the research. Harm relates to direct injury (physical or psychological). It also relates to the *impact*

the research process may have on an individual's life or sense of self, and on a school's core business, including the time and expectations involved in participating.

Each case study below is an example of research in the areas of health, education and sport which has been conducted in the context of schools. In examining the ethics process, each case study presents possible situations (or dilemmas) that might occur for researchers in the fields of physical activity or physical education. Each highlights particular ethical conundrums, with the intention to offer some insight into how such dilemmas might be overcome or worked through.

As a starting point, the first case study examines Lou's experience. For Lou, the formal ethics approval process was quite seamless and smooth. Once he received the tick that he had completed the formal 'ethics training', and that his research was 'non-invasive', he seemed to have no trouble undertaking his physical education research in schools. To facilitate Lou's smooth ethics process, most of the faculties he was employed in had developed reciprocal relationships with local schools. As such, he did not always need to seek approval from state education bodies; and in some cases, parents' general consent for their child's participation in research by the university was received at the commencement of the school year, resulting in Lou not needing direct parental consent.

Case Study 1: Working in schools - When things run smoothly

Lou's research involved working in schools to examine the affective and social domains of physical education lessons. His experience with conducting research within higher education spanned across multiple universities in the USA. At each of the universities, it was required that all lead researchers complete some type of ethics training, which was commonly on-line. In addition, each university had a standard ethics application process that was completed and reviewed by a committee. Most of Lou's work was defined as 'exempt' and 'non-invasive'. As such, the process was quick and involved few points of clarification from the review panel.

Once ethics was approved, it was time to obtain consent from all participants and begin the collection of data. For Lou, informed consent was conducted in two ways. The first was the need for school board and sometimes district approval. Once this was granted, Lou was allowed to gain consent from the students and teachers who were part of the study. This sometimes required consent from parents or guardians

for under-aged students. The second process to obtain consent involved the school, and parents/guardians providing consent at the beginning of the year that basically stated that research could be conducted with students as long as the university had provided approval.

What does Lou's story tell us? His story is not the 'horror' ethics story that we maybe expecting. His story demonstrates how it is an advantage to have good relationships with schools that are already set up through the university. However, it is worth noting that such relationships sometimes have their own disadvantages. Whilst Lou could access schools easily, it did not mean that he could undertake the research that he always intended. This is described in Lou's comment below:

"As an untenured junior faculty member, there was a focus on conducting research that could be turned over in a quick and efficient manner. As such, it focused much of my research attention on the development of exempt projects with schools that had university partnerships. This in turn caused a dilemma between what I would term high quality research (which could be non-exempt and longitudinal) and feasible research to keep your job."

Many researchers do not have access to the same university and school relationships as Lou. This means that in addition to acquiring formal ethics approval from asn affiliated university, approval from state or district education bodies, such as the district, department of education or, in Australian, religious education offices is also required. This may mean more uncertainty about how and when the research can be conducted.

The added layer of applying for approval from state education or district bodies is, for many, just a 'hoop' to jump through. The process can be quite seamless, especially if one's research supports the department's broader agenda, aims and perspectives. But what if your research challenges the department's policies and practices? And what if, unlike Lou, you do not have access to established university, school relationships? Many researchers working from a socio-cultural perspective may fall into this category. The next case study examines this dilemma. It is an example of when research challenges or runs counter to current policy. What is interesting here, is the way Rob navigates the situation. He wants to do his research, but it may not take the shape that he had originally intended.

Case Study 2: Working in schools – when things run not so smoothly

Rob's research involved examining 'curriculum change' in HPE. He worked with teachers to develop and implement units of work based on a new syllabus document. For Rob, getting approval from a state education authority was challenging. While he had no trouble with the feedback from the university ethics review, one of the problems with the state education body was that he had to wait over two months to receive a response. As part of this process Rob thought it would make him look 'organised' and 'thorough' if he submitted a draft of the unit plan he would be using in his work with teachers. It had taken considerable time and effort to develop a plan that emphasized and achieved his research purpose. However, according to the state education ethics review his unit did not reflect 'best practice' in programming, it did not 'reflect the main messages' promoted in planning the rollout of the new syllabus and it contained 'busy work' and activities that didn't 'explicitly link with the outcomes of the syllabus'.

At the time, Rob recalls contemplating: "Had the curriculum officer really taken to my application with a red pen like it was an assignment that she wasn't impressed with? None of the ethics bodies had any concerns about my information sheets, or the justification for the research, or the plans for disseminating the findings. Was it really within their jurisdiction to decide whether my reading of the syllabus was legitimate? And how long would it take to turn all of this around, would my PhD timeline be irreparably damaged?"

So how did Rob resolve this situation? Basically, Rob more or less complied with all of the requests for changes to the draft unit plan. Obviously this was partly because he desperately needed to get the approval to continue his research without damaging his PhD timeline. It was also because he felt that it was not negotiable – he must accept the changes or risk not undertaking his research. Rob went on to adopt the changes and conduct his research. The process became part of his interpretation and analysis of the context of curriculum change in HPE for a successful PhD. On reflection, his story demonstrates the difficulty of conducting research that challenges the status quo. It demonstrates how various stakeholders can interpret research in schools so very differently – interpretations that are not just related to the research method, but also the application of the syllabus and learning materials designed. From the state education body's perspective, students' learning and time must explicitly relate to the syllabus. This presents a possible challenge for research that pushes the boundaries of a 'syllabus' and endeavors to promote innovation.

Our final case study examines a situation when the 'ethical' issues emerged through out the process of the research. Here, Gabrielle describes experiences she faced when conducting her PhD research on the place and meaning of health and physical activity in the lives of young women.

Case Study 3: Talking with young women – interviewing or intervening?

Interestingly, the ethics application process for my PhD was quite straight forward. From memory, there were no major concerns or misunderstandings. Approved with a tick, I set out to recruit and talk with young women about health and physical activity in a longitudinal project. So why I am writing this story? What is there to learn? Well, this tick of approval didn't guarantee that 'ethical' conundrums would not emerge. It seemed that the more the 14 young women talked about health and physical activity, the more I felt uncomfortable about the whole process. Here I was, interview after interview, providing a context for the young women to examine their bodies, selves and lives in relation to THE very problematic notions of health and thinness I set out to analyse. For example, one young woman regularly asked me 'how do you stay so thin?' and others would point to and grab the parts of their bodies (tummies, arms and thighs) which they wanted to 'tone up'. Was I producing a context for the young women to scrutinize their bodies? And what about the production of guilt and dissatisfaction with their bodies? I know I was feeling guilty for intervening into their lives! And then there were the tensions around writing about the young women from a critical perspective. As I wrote about the young women I couldn't help wonder how they would feel if they read my critical representation and reading of their talk?

These may seem like minor 'ethical' conundrums. At the time, however, they were extremely important to how I experienced the research process. I was deeply concerned about the impact the interview process had on the young women's sense of selves and their bodies. So, how would I deal with this in future research? As a starting point, I would consider the balance between the potential 'harm' and benefit of the research. I would weigh up the important understandings and knowledge gained in talking with young women about their bodies and health. On reflection, I think I would ask the 'why' question more often. I would probe the young women to think about 'why' they feel their bodies are too fat, flabby or in need of toning. This could open up the possibility for the young women to reflect on their own meanings and understandings of their bodies.

In terms of writing about the young women, an obvious starting point is to maintain confidentiality through the use of pseudonyms and removal of identifiable information. But what about 'harm' that could be done if a participant read the interpretation of their talk? To overcome this, there are ways of representing participants' talk that work to remove the focus on specific individuals. These include the use of plays, narratives, and stories or composite fictions (Richardson, 2000). Such approaches are useful in reducing the 'harm' in writing about an individual, especially when writing from a critical approach, using case studies and longitudinal research. Some researchers may critique such methods of representation, saying that these are not 'authentic' representations; however, as has been argued for many years by quantitative researchers, stories and narrative representations provide an advantage of allowing us to highlight the themes across the data. They also provide the opportunity for us to read our own lives against narratives and to reflect on the ways particular discourses operate in our own lives.

Conclusion

Meeting all of the requirements of research ethics committees may at time seem burdensome. These requirements however have evolved to protect participants, and particularly participants who may be vulnerable. In the past researchers have not always taken on their moral responsibility and perhaps been motivated rather too much by their own desire to increase knowledge or enhance their own research record. Ensuring that research benefits are maximized and research risks minimized and managed is an integral part of becoming a morally responsible researcher. It is important to include sufficient time to plan ethically appropriate research and to have research approved by institutional ethics committees and boards. Carefully reading guidelines and using the experience of colleagues and peers can help avoid a lengthy process of rejection and revisions. However as Gabrielle's example points out, our moral obligations to ethical issues do not stop with institutional ethics requirements. Researchers need to be constantly alert to how participants respond to data collection and to anticipate any possible harms, emotional, social and physical.

Confidentiality, benefits and harm/risks, informed consent, morally responsible research

References

Babble, E.R. (2010) The Practice of Social Research, 12th Ed, Wadsworth, Cengage Learning, Belmont, CA

Burns, R. (1993). Health fitness and female subjectivity: what is happening to school health and physical education. In L. Yates (Ed.), Feminism and Education. Melbourne: La Trobe University Press.

Haggerty, K. D. (2004). Ethics creep: Governing social science research in the name of ethics. *Qualitative Sociology, 27*(4), 391-414.

Richardson, L. (2000). "Writing: A Method of Inquiry", In. N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (eds) Handbook of Qualitative Research (2nd Edition). Thousand Oaks: Sage, pp. 923-949.

University of Wollongong (2008) Guidelines for completing the initial application for approval to undertake research involving human participants, http://www.uow.edu.au/research/rso/ethics/UOW009383.html (accessed 22/10/2010)