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Realities Toolkit #06

After the Ethical Approval Form: Ethical considerations of working in research teams

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These notes are drawn from a panel session at a training workshop on "Real Life Ethics"[1] which explored the ethical considerations of research beyond the ethical approval form. Panel members were Carol Smart, Jennifer Mason, Brian Heaphy and Vanessa May. The focus was on working in qualitatively-driven research teams though much of this document also applies more widely.

1. Ethics and relationships within the research team

Ethics are considered in detail when they relate to research participants, but there are plenty of ethical considerations within the research team that should be taken into account. Often these centre around the differing levels of experience and status within the team, with researchers and junior team members most often at risk.

Just as working ethically with research participants can have as much to do with personal morals than ethical approval forms, taking an ethical approach to working in a research team depends less on paperwork and more on recognising and valuing the importance of acting fairly.

All team members should be aware of ethics within the research team and should all feel able to raise any concerns with colleagues. Though all team members have a responsibility to reflect on the ethical implications of their actions, there may be occasions where researchers and junior team members feel less confident about raising these issues. Researchers might feel they are in a more precarious position: they are usually less experienced and on temporary contracts which may make them less confident about "rocking the boat". They are also usually the team members working most closely with research participants, at the complicated interface between what counts as ethical on an approval form or in a team meeting and what feels ethical in practice. Note that there are two types of ethical concerns that a researcher should be aware of: ones that might have negative effects for research participants and ones that might have negative effects for the researcher themselves.

[1] "Real Life Ethics" was organised by Realities, part of the ESRC National Centre for Research Methods at the University of Manchester. The workshop was held on 12 February 2009 at the University of Manchester. See www.manchester.ac.uk/realities/events/training/ethics/ for more details.

We discussed the experiences of a skilled, early career researcher working on a project exploring children's residence and contact after their parents had divorced. The original plan was to interview both parents, usually by interviewing one parent and then asking to be put in touch with the other one. When the interviews began, it gradually became clear that not only did this approach have ethical implications for the participants because many of them did not have an easy relationship with their ex-partner and some had been prohibited by a court injunction from being in touch with their ex-partner. Because the study was aimed at capturing the effects of a court case on broader family dynamics, the project aimed to also interview grandparents. Asking to be put in touch with grandparents was however putting the researcher into an awkward position. Some participants felt as though this request discredited what they had said in the interview by implying that it needed to be checked with a third party. In cases like this, a researcher might not want to raise doubts or concerns with the project leader because they are worried it will make them look difficult, weak or just workshy! This researcher realised that the original plans of interviewing the ex-partner needed to be reviewed and reported her concerns to the rest of the team so that the approach could be changed. However, the researcher did not raise the issue about interviewing the grandparents, partly for the reasons listed above.

In this case, the researcher found that the ethical decisions taken in planning meetings did not work in a real life research situation, potentially causing ethical problems for the interviewees as well as putting the researcher into a difficult situation. By raising some of these concerns with the rest of the team the recruitment plans could be adapted for the rest of the project. It is also worth pointing out that, particularly in projects investigating difficult emotional topics like the example above, interviews can be draining and possibly upsetting for researchers. Researchers and project leaders should be aware of this possibility and consider if they need to put any measures in place to support team members collecting or working with disturbing data.

Beyond suggesting the importance of considering ethical issues within the research team as well as outside it we discussed a couple of practical steps to support ethical team working in research projects: mentors for research staff and having a publications strategy.

2. The role of a mentor

Some institutions will have a formal mentoring scheme but if your institution does not then arranging for researchers to have a mentor outside the project team can be a good idea.

A good mentor can provide advice and support when a researcher has questions or issues that they may not want to bring up with their project leader. The majority of these will be relatively straightforward to deal with. For example, a researcher might be worried that they might not be named as an author on a publication they have contributed to, or that the amount of work planned for the project is way too much. Often a mentor will listen to these concerns and then find a way for the mentee to speak to their project leader about them, but having a mentor's support can be useful in these cases.

In more serious cases, for example if the researcher thinks that the research practice in the project is not ethical the mentor can act as the advocate of the researcher, dealing with the project leader or head of department as appropriate. For this reason, it is useful to choose a mentor with enough confidence and experience to act in this way if difficulties arise.

3. Agreeing a publication strategy

Having a publication strategy can help the principal investigator or project leader plan the writing stage of a project more effectively, as well as making sure that any difficult issues about who should be named as an author are dealt with in advance. This means that they can be discussed and negotiated without referring to particular problems, which might help avoid or minimise tensions and problems when the writing starts. A good way to introduce a publication strategy is for the principal investigator to take a draft version to a team meeting for discussion.

A publication strategy can benefit researchers and junior team members in particular. Firstly, having a public document outlining the guidelines for who gets credit means that they might not have to have an awkward conversation with an esteemed professor who has forgotten to include their name on a paper they contributed ideas to. Secondly, planning a publications strategy well in advance can help researchers make sure that they keep on adding to their list of publications. Having a good publication record is, of course, important at all stages of an academic career, but for early career researchers it is has even more importance. Principal investigators who make sure that their promising junior researchers have a good set of publications arising from their project are sure to be thought of by the promising junior researchers as models of good academic management in the future.

Extract from Real Life Methods publications strategy:

Authorship should be based on participation in the writing of each piece, and in the ideas and arguments that it conveys (rather than the medical model where every team member is always named).

Lead authors should normally be named first with the default of alphabetical order for equal authorship (and possibly of rotating the order of authors across a number of equally authored pieces).

Participation in authorship is a process, and can change over time even in the writing of one article, and it is important that co-authors openly discuss and agree their approach and any changes at all stages.

Research staff are more likely to be on fixed term contracts ending at the official project end date so it is also a good idea to plan *when* publications will be written. Ideally, some publications should be finished or nearly finished by the end of the project. It is likely that writing will continue after researchers' contracts have ended so it is worth thinking about what will happen, for example, if they move to a different institution or even have a gap without work before their next contract. Your publication strategy can address this so that their input is still recognised after their contract ends. It may be that researchers will want to carry on writing up project data after their contract ends so it is a good idea to cover this in the publication strategy (eg How will this work? How will they access project data?).

Extract from Real Life Methods publications strategy:

… researchers must each have the opportunity and support to develop area(s) of specialism (substantive and/or methodological), and to sole author one or more publications, as well as to participate as co-authors in jointly authored publications.

Other team members and team leaders should also have those opportunities.

A publication strategy can also address issues arising from team members writing publications from the same dataset. For example, you might want to include a point to make sure that four different people don't produce their own papers all based on the same quotations:

Extract from Real Life Methods publications strategy:

Where team members are drawing on the same data sets to write different outputs there needs to be good communication not least so that we don't inadvertently publish several different pieces using exactly the same pieces of data.

A publication strategy is a good place to remind all team members using project data that they have the responsibility to make sure that they are using the data within the consent agreed with participants for future use.

Feedback welcome! If you have any comments on this toolkit or if you can tell us how you have used it in your research or teaching please do drop us a line at realities@manchester.ac.uk and let us know.

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