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Running Head: TEACHING RESEARCH ETHICS

“You’re in cruel England now!”: Teaching research ethics through reality TV

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Abstract

This paper reports findings from a one-year research project funded by the Higher Education Academy (HEA) Psychology Network. The research aimed to explore the use of 'reality television' in teaching research ethics to Psychology undergraduates and in this paper we report on those findings that have particular relevance for qualitative research methods. Experience of teaching research ethics suggests that students can find the process of thinking through ethical issues in qualitative work quite challenging. Ethical issues in qualitative research can be subtly different from, or more complex than, those raised by quantitative studies, and yet most text books that deal with research ethics tend to focus on the latter. We will present findings from our research project which suggest that using familiar material such as TV programmes, and in particular 'reality TV', can be effective in helping students address ethical issues in qualitative research. Fifteen second year psychology undergraduates were shown an extract from an episode of *Big Brother* (Channel 4). They were then asked to discuss in small groups the ethical issues they felt it raised, and these discussions were audio recorded. Subsequently, they were asked to apply their thinking to a research brief by discussing the ethical issues it raised, suggesting ideas for design and then writing a research proposal. In this paper we report findings from the first stage of the project. We present evidence from the discussion groups indicating that the TV material had promoted an in-depth consideration of some ethical issues that can be challenging for students to address in relation to qualitative work, notably informed consent, confidentiality and risk of harm.

Background and Rationale

This paper is an outcome of a one-year research project funded by the Higher Education Academy (HEA) Psychology Network. The research aimed to explore the use of 'reality television' in teaching research ethics to psychology undergraduates. In this paper we report on those findings that have particular relevance for qualitative research. Further information can be found on the project website at:

<http://www2.hud.ac.uk/hhs/capr/research/HEArealitytv.php>.

Teaching Ethical Issues: Previous Research

There is relatively little literature on the teaching of ethics to psychology students. Korn (1984) reported a content analysis of college-level introductory and social psychology textbooks, showing that many texts did not discuss ethics at all and, if they did, it was usually briefly. Vallance (2004) notes that, even at the level of higher degrees, there is relatively little published material relating to the teaching of ethics to social science students. And a survey of HE institutions (Lewis et al, 2007) showed that only 10% of respondents reported that ethics were taught as part of year 2 psychological research methods.

What literature there is tends to focus on the use of classic experiments such as Milgram's obedience study (for example Lucas and Lidston, 2000) and innovative, student-centred approaches have tended to focus on the single issue of deception (Beins, 1993; Zhang and Moore, 2005). However, many psychology students nowadays undertake projects using qualitative or non-experimental quantitative methods, for which such material is of limited relevance. For example, in qualitative

interview studies assuring confidentiality can be more complex than simply anonymising participants with a code number or pseudonym; it may be difficult to ensure protection of identity, and this can be of particular concern where the interview topic is sensitive. Participants cannot know in advance exactly what they will say in the interview, and may later consider that they have revealed information they wish they had not. Protecting participants from harm may also not be straightforward; the potential effects of taking part in research cannot always be determined in advance, and participants may agree to participate only to find that they become distressed during the interview (see King, 2010, for further discussion of these and similar issues). We feel it is important that students be encouraged and facilitated to undertake research that has real-world relevance, and this sometimes means researching sensitive topics where confidentiality, consent and risk of harm are potentially serious issues. For example, we recently supervised final year students undertaking qualitative interviews in areas including the experience of hospice care for cancer patients, the experience of parenting a child with autism and reflections on mortality; these raised substantial ethical concerns needing careful consideration.

Additionally, it is important that students actively engage with the principles underlying the disciplinary and/or institutional ethical codes that apply to their course (for instance, the British Psychological Society ethical code in the UK: BPS, 2009). While didactic techniques is one useful pedagogic approach, we feel it is important that students reflect upon ethical issues in a way that highlights the continuity of ethical conduct in research and everyday life, that their interest is engaged and that they have opportunities for active learning.

One way of addressing these issues is to use as a teaching vehicle everyday materials that are familiar to students and which they find attractive and stimulating, such as television programmes. Previous work within the Department of Behavioural and Social Sciences, University of Huddersfield, has already explored TV material as a way of delivering course content. This work has been positively evaluated by students and disseminated to a wider audience (Burr, 2006). Our project extended this work to address the teaching of ethical issues through the use of 'reality' television programmes, specifically those which might be deemed 'interactive' in their format.

The Ethics Of Reality TV

Reality TV has become staple viewing today. In the UK, shows such as 'Strictly Come Dancing', 'I'm a Celebrity, Get Me Out Of Here', and 'Big Brother' have enjoyed numerous seasons, and many of them are franchised internationally to enormous worldwide audiences. A substantial proportion of these shows involve subjecting people to stressful or unpleasant experiences which must be endured if they are to stand a chance of winning a coveted prize, and the premise of some shows is simply a social experiment- to see what people will do if placed in unusual or challenging situations. It seemed somewhat paradoxical to us, as social scientists, that we would be unlikely to gain ethical approval for similar experiments; a number of ethical issues are raised by such shows that, rightly, would not satisfy a research ethics panel, such as informed consent, right to withdraw, and potential for harm.

Hill (2005) suggests that the popularity of 'reality TV' is due to its appeal to younger adults. A national survey showed Big Brother viewers were likely to have higher incomes and college educations (Hill, 2002 cited in Hill, 2005 p5), suggesting

that reality television programmes are likely to be both familiar and attractive to undergraduate students. Shows such as Big Brother therefore appear to represent potentially fruitful material for engaging students in reflection on ethical issues. Moreover, such shows variously incorporate features which are of direct relevance to the psychology student, such as placing people in unusual circumstances, manipulating their behaviour, deception, covert observation and of course power relations between researchers and participants. There is a growing literature demonstrating that material from popular TV can be an effective component of undergraduate teaching, including psychology. For instance, Poonati and Amadio (2010) used examples from TV programmes to help students understand operant conditioning, while Eaton and Uskul (2004) used clips from The Simpsons to teach social psychology.

Method

Fifteen second year psychology undergraduates were recruited to the study (12 women and 3 men). They were shown a 15 minute extract from an episode from season 9 of 'Big Brother' (Channel 4), broadcast in 2008. This involved a challenge for the housemates modeled directly on a game testing attention and manual steadiness familiar from funfairs. Players have to pass a metal loop over a convoluted wire from start to end in a set time. Touching the wire sets off a buzzer, requiring the player to start again.

The Big Brother challenge used similar apparatus but on a much larger scale and with important variations. Two of the housemates were given the task of jointly passing the loop over the coil- much harder than for one person alone. The 'feedback' was not just a buzzer but an electric shock, and this was not delivered to

those doing the task but to the rest of the housemates. At stake was the housemates' food budget for the coming week- if they failed the task the whole house would have to live on a budget of £1 per person per day.

Having watched this clip, our students were then split into three small groups of five and asked to discuss the ethical issues they felt it raised. Each of the group discussions was facilitated by a member of staff and was audio recorded. The students were also given some guidance as to the key ethical issues they should discuss, based on BPS guidelines: informed consent; confidentiality, right to withdraw; use of incentives and risk of harm.

Analysis

We analysed the transcripts of the group discussions using Template Analysis (King, 2004) This approach is well-suited to applied research, and has been used in many studies in research and organizational settings. It allows the use of a priori themes to focus the analysis, drawn from the existing literature and/or real-world concerns of the particular project, which are then modified and added to in response to a close and critical reading of the research data.

Findings

We found that students were often able to recognise the complexity of the ethical issues raised by the material from 'Big Brother'. In particular, they showed engagement with the issues of informed consent, confidentiality and risk of harm, discussing aspects of these that are often of particular relevance to qualitative researchers. We present the findings below as themes under these three headings.

Participants are coded by group (A, B or C) and by number (for example, A1 is participant 1 in group A). L refers to the lecturer facilitating that group.

Informed consent

As outlined above, informed consent can sometimes be difficult to ensure in qualitative research. Students spent considerable time discussing the question of whether the housemates had given, or could in principle have given, their informed consent to take part in the task assigned to them. On the one hand, they often expressed the view that, in agreeing to take part in the series, the housemates knew in general the kind of treatment they might expect, and in this respect had given their informed consent. However, they also showed awareness that housemates may not have anticipated some of the consequences of taking part in particular tasks:

C4: But how much do you take into consideration that these people know what Big Brother is? They know the games that they play on Big Brother and they know they're going to be in a group.

C1: yeah but you don't know the full consequences of something do you until you get into it? You might know right that's a car, it's got seats, it's got seat belts, this, that and the other, but you don't know the consequences of any damage or any speed or anything that can happen until you're in a situation, so they will not know the full extent of anything until they have all these different interactions and all these different tests and tasks and stuff.

C4: But they know that tasks are part of Big Brother.

C3: But they don't know which kind of tasks. Like I'm sure when they're signing in they don't say "Ooh we're going to have an electric shock today" so....

C1: If you haven't experienced it before, you're not going to know; you do not know until you're in that situation.

Participant B1 was clear that 'informed consent' would mean that the housemates would have to know exactly what they would be required to undergo each week :

B1: I still think there is a responsibility because yeah they want the money, but I think at the beginning we were saying about...they sign up for the show and they know it's going to be mean because that's how it's been advertised and things like that, but I don't think that that constitutes informed consent. Informed consent means you know what's going to happen and so if at the beginning they said "right, there's going to be nine tasks and task number seven is going to involve electric shocks" that's informed consent because people know, right this is a game show...it's like when they go on Gladiators, they know it's not Wheel of Fortune where you just stand behind the thing, you know it's going to involve people crawling and doing physical activities and getting hit with rubber hammers and stuff like that but they know before they start and so the consent they give is informed and if they get hit and hurt themselves, they know because they've signed up...

Students showed particular concern for the possible consequences for the housemates of taking part in the task. Participants in Group A noted that the housemates may not just be affected in the short term, but that relations between them may suffer in the future:

A5: It was like...there was like the psychological harm, though, to the two people giving the shocks because they saw that their friends were crying and they were getting pressure either to do it right or just stop. So it wasn't very fair on them.

A4: Yeah because they've got to live with them for 'X' amount of weeks, so they both know what's happened, so...

This group also noted possible consequences for housemates' families:

L: You talked about relatives maybe being upset by what they see. What about what they might hear? Things that people might say about their family or about their lives?

A5: Yeah because you get a lot of newspaper stories while they're in the house. Like if someone's being particularly...like Alex I think she got really bad reviews in the papers while she was in there and it might just be that she was provoked by people in the house and she's not normally like that, but for her family, I suppose, to read about their daughter being really horrible to people and aggressive and...

A3: And she has no way of defending herself

A4: She actually got chucked out for being aggressive so that would have had a big impact on the family. People may have seen the family differently after that.

Therefore, although students were inclined to feel the housemates knew what kind of treatment they would in general receive by consenting to take part in Big Brother, they were aware that this felt short of giving their informed consent to participate in specific tasks and that this participation could, and did, have unanticipated consequences for housemates.

Confidentiality

Making assurances of confidentiality in qualitative research can often be challenging. Qualitative researchers must take steps to minimize the risk of participants suffering negative effects from taking part in the research, as could happen for example should people they know recognize their contribution and take issue with what they have said in an interview. However, due to such things as their status or position in an organization, it can sometimes be difficult to protect their identities.

Students recognized that the reality TV format cannot in principle offer confidentiality for housemates. Indeed, as with informed consent, they sometimes initially dismissed the idea that confidentiality was an issue of concern; they were aware that at least some potentially sensitive material is edited out before transmission, and felt that the housemates would know what to expect:

A2: The confidentiality, I don't think it's a big issue because they've volunteered at the end of the day...

A5: To be on live television

A2: And they've seen seven series before the one they went on and they've been given chances and been told about it. Alright they might not have been

told about that exact task, but they've been told like vaguely, like they'll have known the kind of things that go on.

However, students were also able to appreciate the possible negative effects on housemates from information about them being made public. In the following quote, participant B1 points out that, although the issue of confidentiality might be principally construed as a matter of what the housemates may or may not wish to reveal to each other, their words and behaviours inevitably become part of the public domain, and she implicitly regards this as potentially problematic:

B1: I think what you said before as well about when they go in the diary room, because even then there's no way for them to have confidentiality. A confidential speak to Big Brother and there's still the rest of the world watching...

Furthermore, students recognized that, in the heat of the moment and as housemates become accustomed to the presence of the TV cameras, they may find themselves revealing more about themselves than they may have originally intended:

C1: There's not much confidentiality really...

C4: Visit me in the bathroom, how much confidentiality do you have?

C5: That lady who was upset, she ended up divulging details about her personal life, about three tattoos and...

C4: A baby and...

C5: ...childbirth and...

C4: I think confidentiality is non-existent.

C1: Yeah I see what you mean that through the dynamics or through things they then divulge personal information so confidentiality or things that they hold to themselves....and I imagine that when you get into Big Brother you forget that the cameras are there and you then just become yourself and you....whatever pressure you're under you act or react to that and you forget that the cameras are there...

Therefore, despite confidentiality appearing on the face of it to be a non-issue, students were able to appreciate that the lack of confidentiality for Big Brother housemates could potentially be damaging for them.

Risk of harm

When considering risk of harm, students were able to identify issues that went beyond that of immediate harm to the housemates (due to the apparent strength and painfulness of the electric shocks they received) and discussed further matters to do with reputational damage and effects on housemates' friends and families, as outlined above. However they also discussed the adequacy of the support and 'after care' offered by Big Brother. It is recognized as good practice in qualitative interviews, especially where the topic is potentially emotive, to supply participants with the contact details of appropriate support groups. The students in our study clearly felt that some recognition of the housemates' needs in this respect was required, and showed concern for their welfare. For example, Group C considered that access to therapy would be an appropriate measure:

C4: I think they're all at risk of PTSD, all of them.

C1: PTSD?

C4: Yeah, traumatisation.

[lines deleted]

C3: But when they finish Big Brother they have the opportunity to see therapists and stuff right?

C4: I'm not sure. I'm sure they have some kind of debriefing after the show but I don't think it's....

C3: I know with most American reality shows they will have that opportunity when the show is done, to visit psychologists for a set number of sessions.

C1: But you're in cruel England now.

Group A speculated that the minimal level of support perceived to be offered to housemates may still have been of some benefit:

A3: They go into the Big Brother room afterwards and talk about it and Big Brother asks them questions. Like that girl went in - I don't know their names...

Group: Kat...Katreia

A3: And Big Brother was like, "I'm always here for you" So that would be like protection.

A5: I suppose, but they can talk about anything to Big Brother, but Big Brother rarely like tells them anything.

A2: It's not exactly a person either is it? It's just a screenPA5: Yeah. They sort of ask them little questions like "how are you?" and "how do you feel about that?" They don't give them any help, they just ask them questions to sort of get...to get them to talk about it.

A3: But that might help in a way....

A5: By talking about it? Yeah.

However, students in group B were clear that they considered this support inadequate:

B1: yeah I found that the diary room gave a kind of ridiculous response kind of like "I'm really in pain...", "what's the weather like today?" you know the responses don't really acknowledge any of the things, but then with the second woman it gets really over the top, the woman was clearly upset and its just like "well we're here for you". Well it's not going to do anything really, there's still the peer pressure there for that woman who's just dying to get out of that shiny suit...

B2: I think you get given ...rehabilitation? No, not rehabilitation, but you know...you're meant to offer services...

B1: A debrief?

B2: No, not a debrief, you know afterwards if you've obviously upset someone...

B3: After care?

B2: Yes

B5: The only thing they did was to say "Big Brother is always here for you", but it's not....

B3:...in what way? In what way, shape or form are you there for me?

Students thus explicitly made reference to the need for debriefing and support provision, and their spontaneous use of the term 'debriefing' suggests that in their thinking they were already making connections between the Big Brother extract and the research methods context familiar from their course.

Incorporating lessons from this study into teaching

We have focused here on the findings from our study that are particularly relevant to qualitative research. However, we should briefly note our further finding

that students in the study were able to apply their learning from their discussions of the Big Brother extract to a psychological research context. When research proposals written by this group were compared with those written by students from a previous cohort they were judged to be better, and in particular to show a more in-depth examination of ethical issues.

The findings encouraged us to apply this approach in our delivery of research ethics teaching to undergraduate psychology students. Two cohorts of first year students were taught in this way. The material was delivered over a two week period; in the first week students watched the Big Brother clip and discussed it, as reported above. In the second week they were given a research brief and asked to discuss possible research designs in the light of their experiences in week 1, focusing on the ethical issues that their design raised. All the discussions took place in small groups, facilitated by teaching staff. As with our research participants, feedback was invited and students agreed that they found this mode of delivery engaging and relevant. We developed our teaching materials to make them suitable for use by other psychology teachers, and made these available on the internet. They have since been successfully used by staff at other institutions.

Conclusion

Through discussing the Big Brother extract, students were able to identify a number of ethical issues of particular relevance to qualitative research. The TV material enabled students to consider the extent to which people are capable of anticipating the effects that participation may have upon them, the difficulties of ensuring confidentiality and the problems arising from the absence of this, and the need to ensure that any harm or distress caused by participation is addressed by

offering adequate and appropriate support afterwards. By engaging students in activities with material that is familiar to them from their daily lives we feel that we were able to 'bring to life' these complex research ethics issues and encourage students to explore these in depth more readily than is usually achievable through more didactic methods.

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