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Teaching research ethics through reality TV

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Abstract:

Given the success and popularity of reality TV, particularly with young audiences, we felt there was an opportunity to use this material in teaching. There is a growing literature demonstrating that material from popular TV can be an effective component of undergraduate teaching, including psychology. The idea was to show students a brief extract from a reality TV programme, to ask them to discuss the ethical issues they think it raises, and then to give them opportunities to apply their thinking to psychological research. The students evaluated these sessions very positively. The students commented that they found this a very engaging way of learning about research ethics, and we have since used this material in teaching research ethics to our psychology undergraduates as part of their Research Methods course. The findings from both our qualitative and quantitative analyses give support to the view that students can indeed benefit from using TV material. We intend to continue using this material in our teaching and to monitor its success.

Keywords: research ethics, psychology, reality TV.

Introduction

So-called 'Reality Television' has become staple viewing today, with shows such as 'Strictly Come Dancing', 'I'm a celebrity, get me out of here', and 'Big Brother' enjoying numerous seasons. Many of these shows involve subjecting people to 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 that, as social scientists, it would be highly unlikely that we would be able to gain ethical approval for similar experiments; there were a number of ethical issues raised by such shows that would not, quite rightly, satisfy a research ethics panel, such as informed consent, right to withdraw, and harm

Given the success and popularity of reality TV, particularly with young audiences, we felt there was an opportunity to use this material in teaching. 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. The study we are reporting on today is a pilot study which was funded by the HEA Psychology Network.

The idea was to show students a brief extract from a reality TV programme, to ask them to discuss the ethical issues they think it raises, and then to give them opportunities to apply their thinking to psychological research.

Research materials

We chose Big Brother (Channel 4) for our source material, partly because of its likely familiarity to students and partly because we felt it regularly pushes the boundaries of ethical acceptability. We chose an episode from season 9 broadcast in 2008, which involved a challenge for the housemates modeled directly on a test of attention and manual steadiness familiar from funfairs, which involves passing a metal wand 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 (show picture).

The Big Brother challenge involved similar apparatus but on a much larger scale and with important variations. Two of the housemates were given the task of jointly passing the wand 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.

Method

Fifteen second year students were recruited to the study, which comprised two sessions, one week apart. Twelve students returned to take part in the second session.

Session 1

In the first session, the students were shown a 15 minute extract from the 'Big Brother' episode. They were then split into small groups and asked to discuss the ethical issues that they felt had been raised by the programme. The group discussions were facilitated by members of staff and audio recorded. The students were also given some guidance as to the key ethical issues they should discuss (for example informed consent, risk of harm and confidentiality).

Session 2

In session 2, the students were again split into small groups and each group was given a research brief; they were asked to consider possible research designs to answer the brief and to discuss the ethical issues that these raised. The briefs were designed to raise similar ethical concerns to the Big Brother extract. For example, in one of the briefs a school wants to commission a piece of research to examine the potential improvement to problem pupils' behaviour that might be gained by punishing the whole class when one person misbehaves.

These discussions were also facilitated by a member of staff and audio recorded.

At the end of the study, the students were invited to give verbal and written feedback on their experience of taking part.

Analysis

In order to evaluate the extent to which the students had been able to transfer their thinking about BB to the realm of research ethics, we did two things:

Firstly, we analysed the group discussions to see if we could identify occasions where the students showed awareness of ethical issues and drew on the TV clip when discussing possible research designs.

Secondly, students were each asked to submit a research proposal in response to the research brief their group had discussed, focusing on ethical concerns. These proposals were designed to be similar to those submitted by our yr 3 students in preparation for their final year project. To gain some measure of whether the volunteer students had written better proposals than students who had not taken part in the research, their proposals were compared with a control group of 12 randomly-selected proposals written by previous Yr 3 students. The proposals were double blind marked by two people unconnected with the research, according to 4 criteria:

- The **range** of appropriate ethical issues addressed on the proposal

- The **depth** of analysis and discussion of the ethical issues addressed.
- The **application** of appropriate ethical issues to the specific requirements of the study
- The **clarity** and structure of the proposal.

Students were given a mark out of 5 against each of the criteria.

Findings

Research brief discussions

1. References to BB

During the discussions of the research briefs, the students showed that they were drawing on their experience of watching and discussing the Big Brother clip in their thinking about the research ethics issues. For example, this is a quote from a group discussing a research brief about the timing of a stressful alarm in a Fireworks Factory:

B1: I think you have to factor in the distress...if it's unexpected people are going to jump, but I think we need to be realistic as well and this is a fire alarm for ten seconds, it's not electric shocks that we saw last week [*in BB extract*]

Here, the student is directly comparing the likely level of stress to the factory workers with that observed in the BB task. In response to a different brief, this time about pay incentives for apple pickers, students in another group similarly make a direct comparison, drawing on their previous experience:

A5: It's not like it's a competition, is it? It's just as many apples as you can pick, that's what you get paid for.

B4: In Big Brother, if one person went out, everyone else failed so it was more...

Lecturer: So you think that makes the right to withdraw less of an issue here than it was for the programme?

A5: I don't think that many people would withdraw...[if] people saw each other's results anyway then people probably wouldn't be bothered and it's everyone for themselves really.

The third group discussed the school punishment brief, and although they did not make explicit reference to the Big Brother clip, they picked up an issue that had been very visible in the clip- that making people bear the consequences of other's behaviour can lead to conflict. The first student also raises the issue of the researcher's responsibility:

C3: ...but once they're in the lab. You're responsible for them so if some of the kids don't like the fact that they're all being punished for one person...they might just get violent...

Lecturer: In the lab?

C3: In the lab.

C1: Because it's more contained?

C3: Because – well, firstly yes...

2. Key Learning Moments: Sophisticated ethical reasoning

The group discussions also showed instances where the students seemed to show a sophisticated understanding of the ethical issues. In this quote, the student is talking about the number of complaints that were received from viewers when Shilpa Shetty was the victim of allegedly racist comments from Jade Goodey. The student compares this with the electric shock test, showing that they have made an ethical connection and comparison between two distinct BB issues:

A2: The thing is, how many people in that [*i.e. Shilpa Shetty racism row*] were jumping on the bandwagon? I wonder how many people complained about the electric shocks?

What's really the difference? It's still someone being harmed.

In the next quote, the student shows they are thinking about the possible psychological impact of the abuse created by the housemates' task in the context of the longer term dynamics of the group:

B1: I think psychological impacts comes...after when people start to withdraw and you get this whole kind of shouty thing where "you're just a baby, so you say you're a strong woman, but you're just a baby!" and that is going to live with that woman for the rest of her time in that house, and perhaps after.

Discussing the effect of the incentives to take part in BB, another student shows an understanding of the potentially far-reaching effects of incentives:

C2: They want to win that [prize money etc] so they're changing all their own values and what they believe in just to win. Some of them didn't seem to care about the well-being of others, they just cared about themselves. It's like the incentives have changed who they are as a person.

Research proposal marks

Mean scores for the two groups of students are as follows, with probability values from one tailed t-tests:

Table 1: comparison of mean ratings for ethics proposals

Criterion	Research group n=12	Control group n=12	1 tail t-test
Range	3.75	3.66	p =.42
Depth	3.00	2.08	p =.04
Applicability	3.08	2.75	p =.21
Clarity	4.00	3.25	p =.06
Overall	13.83	11.70	p =.07

Mean scores for the research group were higher than for the control group for all criteria. In the case of "depth" this was significant (p=.04) and it was close to significance for "clarity" (p=.06) and for the "overall" score adding the four criteria together (p=.07).

The student experience

Students rated their experience on three 5-point scales and also supplied further comments. The feedback was very positive:

1. How interesting did you find the sessions? Mean response **4.75**
2. How useful did you find them in enabling you to learn about research ethics? Mean response **4.7**
3. How appropriate do you feel it is for students to learn about research ethics through these teaching methods? Mean response **4.8**

Comments included:

"Although I have been taught about ethics many times before I thought the sessions had a new and more interesting way of teaching ethics."

"Taking part in the research study was incredibly enlightening because it sort of re-assured me that there was a way for learning to be fun and interesting since it involved things that I find interesting on a normal day ie watching reality shows. It is actually mind boggling when you have to think about the number of ethical issues that are raised in a single episode of a reality show. "

"[the sessions] helped me to understand ethics in a more applied manner, making me think of the ethical issues in a wider context rather than how they are taught in a research methods lecture."

Conclusions

The students evaluated these sessions very positively. They commented that they found this a very engaging way of learning about research ethics, and we have since used this material in teaching research ethics to our psychology undergraduates as part of their Research Methods course.

Previous research using TV as a teaching tool reports that students generally like this approach, and that although, statistically, the effects on learning may be slight, these may well translate into crucial extra marks in assessments (Poonati and Amadio, 2010). The findings from both our qualitative and quantitative analyses give support to the view that students can indeed benefit from using TV material. We intend to continue using this material in our teaching and to monitor its success. We'll also shortly be putting our research materials on a website, so that other teachers can access them, although for copyright reasons we can't include the BB clip in these.

References

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