

Reply to Robert Dingwall's Plenary 'Confronting the Anti-Democrats: The Unethical Nature of Ethical Regulation in Social Science'

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Dingwall's paper, challenging the mushrooming of ethics committees and their power over social research, hit a sore nerve in many researchers in the audience. The NHS research ethics application process has become bureaucratic, time consuming and generally restrictive. Whilst the scope of NHS Local Research Ethics Committees has expanded over the past decade include not only research conducted on NHS patients, but also on NHS staff and research conducted on NHS premises. There is mounting pressure on researchers from the UK funding councils, (e.g. ESRC, MRC) the larger non-governmental funding bodies (e.g. the Wellcome Trust) and to a lesser extent academic journals to acquire some kind of ethical permission.

Many UK universities have had "in place some limited ethical review, usually in the form of one or two 'psychosocial' or 'behavioural' research ethics committees to oversee non-clinical human subject research" (Williams-Jones & Holm 2005: 400). Several institutions have moved to a university-wide ethics committee (or committees) for human subject research, such as for example Cardiff University (Williams-Jones & Holm 2005: 39), or the University of Dundee.

The increased emphasis on research ethics by funders and universities alike is far less driven by ethical considerations of research subjects and more by the perceived risk to organisations, such as the funding bodies and universities. In our risk-averse culture such organisations obviously perceive the 'need' for more control over social researchers. Consider for example, the opening sentence under the heading 'What are the main principles governing good research?' in the University of Dundee's *Code of Practice for Research Ethics on Human Participants*. This sentence is not related to potential harm to research participants, but to the potential harm to the organisation: "We expect that all staff and students of the university conduct themselves at all times in a way that does not bring the university into disrepute."

One point I would like to challenge is Dingwall's comments that sociologists do not do harm in their research. Of course, most of the time we do not harm, because as sociologist we are very sensitive to the needs of our research participants, we are more open-minded and reflective, etc. More likely we do no harm because those in power largely ignore our research findings. But occasionally we do harm our participants, not just in the conducting of 'unethical' in the infamous Humphrey tearoom trade study. I put 'unethical' as some have argued that Humphrey study made significant positive contributions to his study population (Lenza 2004). On a much smaller scale I have upset people in my interviews. If I had not been raking up old issues they unlikely have been thinking about it at the time. We need to consider this psychological harm (or at least emotional) we put research participants under. We often prepare small handouts to give to interviewees stating that if talking to us

about XXX has upset you or raised particular issues, you can always contact your GP (for health care studies), a genetic counsellor (for genetics studies), your teacher (for school-based studies) and/or organisations such as ChildLine (for studies with young people). Where possible we try to give precise details, such as names and telephone numbers of genetic counsellors who have agreed to speak to participants at short notice or the telephone number for ChildLine.

However, the fact that we might put psychological stress on participants is something social scientists need to be aware of, it does not mean we need more ethics committee to vet the proposed research in more and more detail. What we do need is a realisation that doing ethical sociological research is the responsibility of each and every one of us! And that making research ethics (or at least the process of applying for it) a bureaucratic tick-box process can be counterproductive!

Finally, there a positive side to the process of applying for research ethics permission, whilst there “is considerable work in preparing an ethics committee application and this can at times seem onerous, however, it should be remembered that quality of the research proposal will be improved by early consideration of these details” (Van Teijlingen & Cheyne 2004: 210).

References

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