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Book review: 'university research ethics committees: their role, remit and conduct' and 'researchers and their "subjects": ethics, power, knowledge and consent'

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processes in their daily practice' (e.g. in the research interview; in health settings). 'Recognising trajectories of disempowerment' – this part 'takes a critical look at biographical work as a source of empowerment by raising questions about professional practice where biography has been used as a resource'. Here examples include work with lone mothers, hospice settings and work with the homeless. Issues include the relations between the setting, the wider agency and the degree to which biographical work hinders or supports a marginal grouping and assessment of need. Finally, 'Biographical resources in education and training' – 'explores biography as a quality resource in the education and professional practice of teachers, social researchers and doctors'. Included here is work from France, which examines the interrelation between private life and the professional practice of teaching and research on the 'emotional life' of doctors in their stressful daily work London's East End.

The editors have performed a major task drawing together such a rich range of biographically informed research on a variety of professional contexts across differing national contexts. The comparative analysis could have been developed somewhat in relating the main themes and the individual contributions, perhaps in the Introduction where in fact the UK and Germany are contrasted or as short additional introductions to sections. In turn this could have strengthened the conception of professional practice being offered and how a biographical approach can contribute to professional practice and social policy. However, the volume succeeds well in establishing the relevance of biographical research for social policy in relation to professional practice and its a broad comparative intent should be commended. It is also very useful companion to P. Chamberlayne, M. Rustin and T. Wengraf (eds) (2002), *Biography and Exclusion in Europe*, Bristol: The Policy Press.

BRIAN ROBERTS

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Anthea Tinker and Vera Coomber (2004), *University Research Ethics Committees: Their Role, Remit and Conduct*, London: King's College London, 52 pp., ISBN 1-872342-22-1.

Marie Smyth and Emma Williamson (eds) (2004), *Researchers and their 'Subjects': Ethics, Power, Knowledge and Consent*, Bristol: The Policy Press, ix + 227 pp., £23 pbk, ISBN 1-86134-514-3.
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Issues associated with research ethics have recently been propelled up the agenda as part of an emerging preoccupation in the UK with 'research governance'. These two quite different, but equally important, books are a direct product of that process. One is a research report. The other is an edited collection.

Tinker and Coomber's report relates to a questionnaire and telephone interview study funded by the Nuffield Foundation into the functioning of University Research Ethics Committees in the UK. The findings would indicate that four in five of the universities responding had established a Research Ethics Committee, though nearly half had done so only since 2000. Practice varied considerably between institutions. It appeared that scrutiny did not extend to all the research being conducted within or by the universities. Two thirds of the institutions made no special arrangements for the social sciences. The authors select ten

criteria by which to assess the level of scrutiny of research, including:

- Whether scrutiny is centralised or devolved.
- Whether scrutiny extends both to staff and to student research.
- The inclusiveness of the membership of the committees (and, in particular, whether they have lay members).
- Whether the committee has a dedicated administrator, and the standard and extent of the documentation, codes of practice, etc. published by the committee.

While they refrain from presenting a league table that names and shames under-performing institutions, the authors explain how they scored the universities for which sufficient data were available against these ten criteria. One in ten scored 10 out of 10, and six in ten scored 8 or better. However, one in ten scored 4 or less and two institutions scored 0 out of 10. As the report acknowledges, this is not a wholly satisfactory way to assess the effectiveness of ethical scrutiny, but the results are none the less telling and should rightly attract a great deal of attention from across the academic research and university administration communities.

The critical question that is raised in a foreword to Tinker and Coomber's report by Sharon Witherspoon, Deputy Director of The Nuffield Foundation, is whether the increased attention that is now being given to research ethics scrutiny is 'simply moral panic or a bureaucratic imperative?' (p. 6). Does the research ethics debate reflect a set of concerns about the dangers posed in particular by social scientific research, or a commitment to better regulation and procedural safeguards? The contributors to Smyth and Williamson's edited collection on research ethics touch upon this same question in a variety of different ways, though not always explicitly.

Smyth and Williamson's collection contains 11 substantive chapters contributed by a total of no fewer than 26 different authors (including the editors). The book was inspired by the seminar on 'Ethics and Research Guidelines', organised in February 2002 by the Academy of Learned Societies for the Social Sciences. The collection is arranged in three parts. The first is concerned with 'Participation and inclusion', and includes accounts of research conducted on research participants as well as examples of participatory research initiatives. The second part of the book is concerned directly with 'The review and governance process' and demonstrates, *inter alia*, how the established research ethics scrutiny process that applies within the UK's National Health Service (namely, its own Local Research Ethics Committees) can fulfil a gate-keeping function that does not protect the interests of service users so much as prevent critical scrutiny by social researchers of the practices of service professionals. The third part of the book is concerned with 'Researchers' relationships with participants' and contains several powerful accounts of the ways in which social researchers and even journalists can – on a principled basis – give voice to vulnerable service users and marginalised or oppressed social groups. The editors provide an introduction and conclusion in which they attempt valiantly to establish the themes that bind this extremely diverse collection together. Several of the more stimulating individual contributions, however, stand on their own and clearly deserve to be included as such on the reading lists for research methods courses, particularly at postgraduate level.

Reading these two books has encouraged me once again to reflect upon the ethics of Social Policy research in particular. I am reminded of two kinds of danger. First, in Social Policy we should understand better than most that the proliferation of protocols relating to such matters as informed consent and confidentiality can drive researchers – just as much as service providers – into defensive modes of practice and a culture of risk management or counterproductive blame avoidance (e.g. Hood *et al.*, 2000). The underlying principle that has informed medical and social research ethics is the Kantian imperative that human beings are to be treated as ends in themselves and never as means to an end. Research that involves

human 'subjects' or participants should do them no harm. There is a danger, however, that the procedural injunction that a researcher must do no harm might become so restrictively interpreted and applied as to inhibit researchers from exploring ways of achieving substantive benefits for people.

Second, there is conversely a danger that Social Policy research can become a business for 'voyeurs, narks and do-gooders' (see Mann, 1996). This is why it is so important that research that relates to the users of human services and to the needs of vulnerable or disadvantaged people should seek to engage its human 'subjects' as participants in the research process. It should aim not merely to spare them from harm, but to empower them as the creators of knowledge. However, giving them a say, for example, in how research is to be conducted is not easy. There is a fine line to be drawn between, on the one hand, an inclusive approach that ensures that the people involved in research are regarded not as means but as ends and, on the other, a process that shifts responsibility from the researcher to the researched. The danger at one extreme is that participants are subject to a benign form of manipulative co-option; at the other that extraneous demands may be allowed to displace or undermine the integrity of the researcher's scholarly judgement.

In all the discussion of research ethics there really is very little attention given to what we understand by ethics – as opposed, for example, to morality. A customary code or moral consensus, whether it is promoted by a professional or academic body or espoused by a service users' or community group, is not the same as an ethical paradigm. Perceptions of what is or what ought to be good for (other) people do not necessarily coincide with what is *right*. Ethics after all relate primarily to purposes, not processes, and the purpose of research is to contribute to knowledge. Social Policy research, I would contend, requires an ethical commitment to knowledge that promotes human well-being. Research processes and protocols must serve and should be commensurate with that ethic: but they cannot of themselves define it. We may possibly infer the ethic that informs research from the processes and protocols with which it complies, but such compliance does not necessarily make research ethical. This may be stating the obvious, but amidst the administrative turmoil that attends the rolling out of University Research Ethics Committees, and in the light of the increasingly challenging and intellectually absorbing debates about the propriety of different research methods, I thought it worth reiterating.

References

- Hood, C., Rothstein, H. and Baldwin, R. (2000), *The Government of Risk*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Mann, K. (1996), 'Who are you looking at? Voyeurs, narks and do-gooders', in H. Dean (ed.), *Ethics and Social Policy Research*, Luton: University of Luton Press/Social Policy Association.

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Nick Ellison, Linda Bauld and Martin Powell (eds) (2004), *Social Policy Review 16: Analysis and Debate in Social Policy*, Bristol: The Policy Press, 298 pp., £24.99 pbk, ISBN 1 86134581X.
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The fact that all members of the UK Social Policy Association receive this book as part of their membership puts me in a different position to the other contributors in this book review section, as a good number of you will have read this book. Not the whole book as it is only