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RESEARCH ETHICS AND ETHICAL DILEMMAS IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN CONTEXT

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INTRODUCTION

While I am not an expert on research ethics, the nature of my PhD study has challenged me to put my ethical standing to the test. This chapter explores the complexities of research ethics in the Social Sciences based on both scholarly insights and my own encounters. I will highlight challenging ethical dilemmas that may seem to threaten the success of the research itself.

To enable you to follow my trail of thought, I need to provide some contextual background information. My study is on “Corporal punishment: Socio-cultural practices of teachers in a South African primary school”, with a particular emphasis on a rural village in Mpumalanga as a case study. In this study, I use observations, interviews and document analysis to understand what discipline practices teachers are currently using, how teachers use corporal punishment and how their own childhood experiences influence their views on this practice. I also look at what reasons, if any, teachers give for believing in, or resorting to, corporal punishment, and how learners and parents respond to the practice of corporal punishment. This study has tricky ethical dimensions for both the researcher and the respondents. I therefore use my own study as a practical example from which to explore research ethics as it relates to the researcher’s identity, the institution, the participants and the research context.

“WHO AM I?” THE RESEARCHER IDENTITY DILEMMA

The universal values of respect and care for fellow human beings lie central to research ethics. Due to the fallible nature of mankind, these values need to be pronounced and even inscribed, and hence, as researchers, we need to have ethical

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codes of conduct, like the ethics code for the researchers of the Human Science Research Council (2015). Many professional fields (including teachers, doctors, nurses, engineers and accountants) also have codes of ethics that guide their professional practice.

As a psychologist who is also conducting PhD research, I have become aware of the necessity to define myself as a researcher in a specific profession. For novice researchers this process usually presents an identity dilemma. The crisis stems from conceptualising the research problem – which is usually done from the standpoint of your professional work. For example, in my case, my study is on teachers' use of corporal punishment in South African schools. I conceptualised the research problem while I was working as a psychologist, lecturing and providing counselling to student teachers and teachers. As my study progressed to field work preparation, I needed to reconfigure my position in relation to my research study. This configuration depended on a number of factors: the nature of the study and the research design, my initial relationship with the research field, how I wanted the participants to relate to me during the research process, and the impact that would have on the research outcomes. The two scenarios below clarify my point.

Scenario 1: If I used action research as my research design, introducing myself as a psychologist who is researching the implementation of alternatives to corporal punishment would be appropriate, as the participants would participate in the research process implementing the intervention innovations according to the researcher's professional practice.

Scenario 2: If I used ethnographic observations, emphasising my professional affiliation may impact the observations. For example, if the aim of the study was to determine teachers' use of corporal punishment in the classroom, emphasising my psychologist identity may result in teachers changing patterns of their practice. They may start to engage you, thereby obscuring answers to your research questions. To meet the objective of my study effectively, the emphasis of my psychologist identity may need to be less prominent.

This means there is a fine line to draw in deciding how much one can emphasise a researcher's versus a practitioner's identity. This decision needs to be made before going into the research field to avoid confusing the participants, and yourself. A clear identity definition when you first meet your participants is valuable. It is important to clarify that in the course of the research process, you are a researcher and, therefore, research ethics take precedence. This clarity serves as your point of reference guiding your conduct in the research process, and will help unravel other ethical dilemmas you are likely to encounter. The researcher needs to have clear personal values

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and skills, and self-regulation that form the internal compass for research ethics. For you to engage in research, the assumption is that you are a professional, a knowledge worker, and by implication you have research knowledge, skills and values warranting you the freedom to do credible and valid research within your organisational or faculty guidelines.

HAVE YOU OBTAINED ETHICAL CLEARANCE? INSTITUTIONAL ETHICAL REGULATIONS

As a researcher, you may be conducting your research under the auspices of an organisation or a higher education institution. Institutional ethical procedures are a gate-keeping exercise to control the nature of the knowledge produced, and ensure that studies are executed with minimum or no harm to the participants and the organisations involved. Furthermore, institutional ethical procedures protect the reputation of research in the society at large, because some measure of harm done by one researcher is likely to create an entry barrier for future researchers. Considering that a higher education institution is the custodian of a study, the institution would certainly be implicated by association with any of the unforeseen outcomes of the study, be it negative or positive. The foreseeable positive implication is that the institution can use the results of the study to inform the policy and the current discourse. Research ethics help you as a researcher and the university as the custodian of the study to forge appropriate interventions towards accomplishing the policy intent for the benefit of the greater society.

Most higher education institutions ensure that ethics are taken into consideration by the researcher from the research planning stage, hence ethical considerations have become part of the proposal submission, where you need to demonstrate that you have considered all possible ethical implications. Thereafter, you will receive a letter of ethical approval from the institution, stating that the proposed research meets stipulated ethical requirements. Even though procedures you need to follow and how stringently you need to adhere to these procedures differ from one institution to the next, higher education institutions are held liable for ensuring ethical credibility of all studies undertaken under their jurisdiction. Furthermore, some research funders require the fulfilment of ethical processes before funding a study, and some academic journals will not publish (empirical) research unless the authors can provide evidence of ethical clearance from the institutions involved.

Institutional ethical procedures are also linked to the study participants. If the participants belong to some public organisation (such as a school, a hospital or private company) and are identified as entities who belong to the organisation in

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the study, that organisation is likely to have its own ethical procedures to protect the organisation and its subjects from possible harm that may result from research. For my pilot study, which I have done at a school in the Western Cape, I had to complete ethics forms of the Department of Western Cape Education, and when I was executing the actual research in Mpumalanga, I had to complete similar forms from the Mpumalanga Department of Education. These forms are usually scrutinised by such organisations to ensure that research procedures meet their required ethical standards. This process may take some time, which you would need to configure into the time schedule of your study.

The community as an organised collective, like the case of my research school, also operates as another dimension of ethical consideration. You need to send a letter requesting permission to conduct the study in the community. In some rural communities you may need to negotiate your entry through the chief. It is through this path that you may gain access to your targeted participants. This may seem like a long route but shortcuts may jeopardise your study in the long run. Some South African communities may seem disorganised from the outside, while they are highly organised and sensitive to what may seem exploitative. Ethical dilemmas might arise around how to approach the relevant community. For example, what are the terms of reference for engaging the school in the research? If unforeseen circumstances in the middle of your study change the nature of the study, the terms of reference might change. How would you address that? How do you negotiate going forward?¹ In my study I needed permission from the school governing body to conduct my study. Though schools are the subsidiaries of the departments of education, they also have a level of autonomy. Therefore, the governing body also needed to have a voice in granting the permission for study to take place at the school. Even when the provincial Department of Education gives the researcher permission to conduct the research at a school, the school's governing body and principal may give reasons why the study should not be conducted at their school, in which case the provincial Department of Education has no power to enforce the initial permission given (Wyngaard 2015).

If you are planning to conduct your fieldwork outside South African borders, you may need special permission to enter the particular country as a researcher. You may have to indicate your research intentions when applying for a visa. Different countries have different stipulations and research ethics regulations. For example, when I conducted a study in Finland at an institution situated in the city of Oulu, I had to get ethical clearance from the City of Oulu as well as from the University

1 Also see Chapter 20 by Collum Banda, where he discusses the ethics and responsibility to also make research results available to the communities where research takes place.

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of Oulu, which was my host university. In short, make an effort to find out what the ethical regulations are of countries where you intend to conduct your research.

“I AM NOT YOUR SUBJECT”: ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

Access to participants means being in direct contact with the people who may be influenced by your study. Institutional procedures may have conscientised you to ethical research behaviour and principles, but now you have to put these principles into practice. You are expected to display genuine human respect and dignity, and not see participants as mere subjects of your research. One way of showing such respect is by giving participants an opportunity to make an informed choice to participate in the research project and to give their informed consent. You may feel anxious that participants may not give their consent, and this is a valid concern. If this happens, you need to have a plan B at hand.

In researching a sensitive issue like corporal punishment, I was faced with an ethical dilemma of having to decide whether to do full disclosure, partial disclosure, or use deception in gaining access to the participants of my study. While all these approaches may have their place in research, depending on the nature of the study, even stricter ethical regulations are implemented in cases where deception is the only route to be followed. This usually depends on whether the benefits of the research for the society at large supersede the damage of deception, and whether there are procedures in place for later disclosure and methods to deal with the effects of the deception on the participants (Lugosi 2006). In my research, I provided full disclosure of the nature and purpose of the research, even though this could have influenced teachers' willingness to reveal certain information during interviews. I avoided the contradiction of causing some psychological violation through deception while, on the other hand, I addressed the issues of physical violence through the very same research.

While the personal values and the institutional ethics guide researchers' conduct and the relationship they establish with the research participants, researchers are also obligated to adhere to conditions of openness regarding disclosure of the details of the research, anonymity of participants, security and prevention of harm, as well as informed consent by participants including children as laid out in the Protection of Personal Information Act No 4 of 2013. All participants involved in the research have to be genuinely involved regardless of their level of education and possible language barriers between researchers and participants. It is the responsibility of the researcher to ensure that participants fully understand the intentions of the study.

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Anderson, Solomon, Heitman, DuBois, Fisher, Kost and Ross (2012) advocate for the establishment of community collaborators who are based in the communities and who work closely with the researchers. They assert that community collaborators have an insider's view. If such collaborators receive an appropriate instruction on ethics, they become valuable to close the gap between the researcher as outsider and the community. In my case, I prepared information letters which explained the details of the research and the nature of participation expected from the participants. In my presentation of the research to the participants, I used isiXhosa in the Western Cape and isiZulu in Mpumalanga. When negotiating consent with the participants, I encouraged them to ask questions for clarity. Once the participants agreed to participate, the concept of consent was also explained to them and they were requested to give a written informed consent for their participation in the study by signing two consent forms. Such a consent form was signed at each research contact with the participants, to allowing participants to continuously review their position and willingness for participation.

"I HAVE A SAY TOO": ETHICAL PRINCIPLES IN WORKING WITH CHILDREN AS RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

Can children give consent for their participation in research? Children are considered to be vulnerable subjects in research, and there should be special considerations regarding their involvement. Parents or caregivers also need to be involved. Information letters explaining the details of the study and consent letters should be sent to parents or caregivers. Where necessary, parents or caregivers need to be invited to a meeting where the nature of the study and the processes are explained. In my study, parents or caregivers were requested to consent to the participation of their children by signing a consent letter. It may happen that parents are not willing to consent, or that attempts to reach parents to get the consent forms back fail. If this happens, you again may need to have a plan B at hand.

Children who meet the age and maturity criteria can be allowed to provide consent (or commonly referred to as assent in the case of minors) on their own. According to the British Education Research Association (2011) guidelines, such children can provide consent for their own participation if they are willing to participate. BERA (2011) refers to Article 12 of the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child. These proclamations are also articulated in the South African Children's Act 38 of 2005, which states that "every child that is of such an age, maturity and stage of development as to be able to participate in any matter concerning that child, has the right to participate in an appropriate way and views expressed by the child

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must be given due consideration” (Republic of South Africa 2006:35). Determining maturity is a potential ethical dilemma, but the criteria depend on the conceptual understanding children have about the research topic and the methods of enquiry used for the research. The researcher has to ensure that all child-participants are engaged in an age-appropriate process of informed consent. As David, Edwards, and Alldred (2001) argue, the process of obtaining informed consent from children in itself is a complex one. The researcher should thoroughly consider the methods used to inform children about the research and, therefore, one has to decide whether the process is about “informing” or “educating”. Informing participants assumes that the participants have an adequate knowledge base from which to work. Educating participants recognises that children may have gross knowledge gaps about the focus of the study and for that reason there may be a need to have an education session. In the case of my study, it was necessary to conduct a separate, child-friendly process to inform children about the study and its purpose, and explain some concepts in a language that was accessible to them.

“PROMISE YOU WILL NOT TELL”: THE ETHICAL PRINCIPLE OF CONFIDENTIALITY

Ethical research demands that the identity and confidentiality of participants are protected. Firstly, this means that if participants do not want to reveal their identity, the researcher needs to respect this and undertake not to reveal the identity of the participants in any distinctive identifying information in reports or any other documents related to the research.

Secondly, the researcher should be transparent about where the research findings will be reported, for example in a thesis, academic papers, and/or seminar and conference presentations. This transparency should be accompanied by the assurance to participants that the principle of confidentiality would be upheld and, where the use of names would be necessary, codes or pseudonyms will be used. Further, field notes and recorded interviews should be exposed only to the researcher (and, where appropriate, the research supervisors), kept safely, and disposed of by deleting the files or destroying hardcopies by fire after completion of the study.

Thirdly, though the key ethical obligation and interest for the researcher is to protect the identity of participants, there is a limitation embedded in this principle. The revelation of illegal practices by participants during a study is a difficult issue (Woodhouse, Potterrat, Rothenberg, Darrow, Slovdahl & Muth 1995). Circumstances may arise where the researcher, for example, is subpoenaed by a court of law to reveal details of the data, including participants’ identities. In case of child abuse

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or the child being at risk, the researcher may be morally and legally obligated to report the issue to relevant support structures (Kirk 2006; South African Children's Act 2006). Although this can offset the outcomes of the data, it is only ethical for the researcher to inform participants about this exclusion on the principle of protection of participants' identity from the beginning. The researcher needs to explain to participants that though the identity of participants will be kept confidential, this confidentiality principle has limitations, for example that it cannot be above the law.

The researcher is likely to encounter an ethical dilemma where participants insist that they want their identity to be revealed, for example children who want their photos placed next to their views. As a researcher, you have the responsibility of weighing the short- and long-term effects of such a revelation of identities in relation to the nature of the study. Conversely, as in my study, the openness of my participants was fundamentally based on the principle of anonymity. They did not want to be associated with corporal punishment since it is an illegal practice in South Africa. Although I maintain that revealing participants' identities maybe risky, once decided to reveal identities, the researcher has to ensure that participants are counselled regarding the future implications thereof. Again, their consent should be sought at every stage of the process, including the last draft before the final publication.

"I CAN'T TAKE IT": POTENTIAL HARM TO PARTICIPANTS

One of the key ethical principles is that of safety of the participants from any harm that can be caused by the research. Though not all studies have such a potential negative impact, it is important to consider the possible psychological effects of your questions on the participants. For instance, corporal punishment constitutes a physical and psychological traumatic experience, therefore interviewing children and teachers about their experiences of discipline including corporal punishment may evoke negative emotions and thoughts of their past experiences which they had forgotten about. It is therefore essential to establish the support services necessary for the participants and ensure that participants have access to such services. In my study, I needed to establish support services in the area to provide debriefing (a preventative short-term counselling process after an event that is likely to cause psychological and emotional disturbance to an individual or a group) and counselling to teachers to ensure that all participants received the emotional support they needed.

During focus group interviews there is a risk of group members revealing details of the interview to people outside the group. Such an occurrence may harm the dignity and image of group members, or it may make them feel vulnerable. To prevent this

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from happening, at the beginning of group interviews, the researcher has to facilitate an understanding of the group confidentiality clause for members not to share the group discussions with people outside the group.

Publishing the findings and outcome of the research is another area of vulnerability that is often overlooked. Published expressions or observations of participants may be damaging when participants are not given an opportunity to process and understand the findings before they are published (Tracy 2010), especially when participants are not prepared to see their thoughts and verbal expressions in written format. Therefore, the researcher has an ethical obligation to present the findings to the participants first, before they are published. The verification process whereby interview transcripts are presented to participants before publishing the document may mitigate this damage, while it increases the validity of the study (Tracy 2010).

WALKING ON A TIGHT ROPE: LEGAL QUANDARIES AND HARM TO INSTITUTIONS

Tracy (2010) refers to situational ethics as unpredictable, subtle yet important ethical moments that may arise with some dilemma while you are in the research field. In responding to such ethical dilemmas, it is important to be reflective, asking questions on whether the outcome of this study is more valuable than the unavoidable damage that can occur through the research process, should one confront the situation.

It may not be possible to think about all the possible ethical issues that may arise during the research process prior to the actual research activities. Among a wide array of possibilities in my research, a revelation from my observations was that teachers use corporal punishment to discipline learners, which is in conflict with the South African Schools' Act (1996) – an education policy that forbids the use of corporal punishment in schools. In such a situation it was necessary to highlight this infringement to the participants involved and to their superiors (in this case, the principal of the school). In cases where situational ethical dilemmas arise while conducting fieldwork, researchers have to firstly remember their primary professional identity as social science researchers (Hagan 1982). This will enable them to strike some ethical balance by keeping a moral distance to maintain objectivity, while on the other hand, act with moral ethics as human beings and responsible citizens. In my case, it meant notifying the authorities about my observations with the hope that they would do something to abate the situation. This action would not necessarily constitute betrayal of trust of participants if the researchers informed participants from the beginning that they would deal with unethical behaviour in such a manner. Since corporal punishment is illegal and constitutes a form of child abuse, the law

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requires a researcher and any other adult who observes such actions to report it (South African Children's Act No. 38 2006). My study focussed on the cultural practices that contribute to the persistence of the use of corporal punishment. The intention was not to observe or record incidents of corporal punishment. However, if I observed such actions during the course of the study, I needed to ensure that the school authorities knew about my observations and I needed to warn them about the detriments of such activities while at the same time keep in mind that my role at the school was that of a researcher and not a criminal investigator. However, if the illegal activity continued and placed another person or child's life at risk, I would have had to report it to the relevant law enforcers.

CONCLUSION

While research ethics appear straightforward on paper, this chapter has highlighted possible complexities involved in the actual practice of ethical research. This chapter has also demonstrated how the researcher, on encountering ethical dilemmas, may need to balance internal (personal) values, universal and professional research ethics, while at the same time, ensure credible research outcomes to the benefit of society.

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