

A critical reflection of some of the ethical issues concerning qualitative research with student participants

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Abstract

This presentation reports on some of the ethical issues arising from the presenter's doctoral research. The purpose of the study is to explore and analyse the problems associated with the implementation of formative assessment practices within a BSc (Hons) Occupational Therapy programme.

A number of ethical issues are considered in relation to the study, particularly in relation to the use of qualitative data collection methods comprising focus group and semi-structured interviews with student participants. In qualitative research, the nuanced nature of ethical matters means that decisions on how to deal with them often come down to 'gut feelings' concerning what is right or wrong.

The use of the presenter's own students as participants will be discussed, taking into account the hierarchical relationship between a lecturer and their students. The concept of informed consent and the voluntary nature of participation for students will be explored. The sufficiency of standardised participant information sheets and written consent forms in achieving the ethical principle of informed consent will be evaluated. This will be followed by a discussion of how the purpose of research is articulated. Whilst research is likely to lead to the development of knowledge and advance the interests of specific groups, it usually includes factors associated with personal gain for the researcher, in this case the pursuit of an academic award. The presentation will also consider how codes of conduct are often written in a way that establishes only a basic minimum in ethical practice. The requirement of researchers to follow these in making ethical decisions about their research can have the detrimental effect of encouraging them to concentrate on protecting their own interests, thereby directing attention away from the interests of participants.

The ethical issues explored in the presentation resonate with some of the examples of 'faking' as described in Macfarlane's think piece, as well as demonstrating complicity in exhibiting his notion of 'emotional performativity'. In taking up Macfarlane's challenge for researchers to add their own examples, the following admissions are offered:

- A naïve supposition that students will not feel coerced into participating in their lecturer's research because a formal, approved participant information sheet informs them of this;
- A belief that receipt of institutional ethical approval and related standard documentation is sufficient evidence that ethical responsibility has been met.

Keywords

Ethical issues, qualitative methods