

A fully ethical study
would mean that all
ethical issues are
fully resolved essay...



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Ethics are very much a part of everyday life, with us all having a certain set of morals and values we live by. It therefore makes sense that ethics should play a major part in any research, be it with adults or children. This ensures that the utmost care and consideration is taken regards those involved.

However, when it comes to children and young people, the researcher has to further consider the fact that those whom they are researching, may not be fully aware of the implications, and the effect that research may have.

Of course, as each person is different in what they interpret as ethical', we can expect to encounter differing attitudes and methods being used, but as society as a whole becomes more responsible, and research findings become more and more accessible to the masses, it is important to ensure that as many ethical issues as possible are resolved. As the course progresses, I find myself becoming increasingly aware of the sheer volume of research appears in the press, and is, therefore, being undertaken every day.

In a recent Channel five documentary, ' Extraordinary People', in an episode entitled ' The girls with too much skin', we were fortunate enough to meet two sets of iblings suffering from an extreme skin disease known as ' Harlequin Ichthyosis'. These remarkable children, all of differing ages, were all equipped with full knowledge of their condition and its implications.. However, recent research involving the girls had led to a breakthrough in tracing the faulty gene responsible. This news meant that a treatment could possible soon become available.

The parents, medical team and the girls were all fully involved in the decision process regards taking part in the research, and with the possibility

of further studies to be undertaken, Il freely discussed any concerns they may have. Here was a situation where all ethical issues appeared to be have been resolved, with the girls ultimately taking on the decision regards their own lives. However, when the parents and medical team were interviewed as separate entities, both parties expressed concerns as to whether it was right to have children taking on such a role, and whether they could be deemed as being truly aware of the consequences.

Was it right for them to take part at all and could it be giving them false hopes? As well as this being a great example of power elations at play, it also highlights the complexity of trying to resolve all ethical issues. Unit 6 of the Study Guide sets out a framework for research ethics, taken from the book ' Listening to Children: Ethics and Social Research' by Alderson et al. By looking at these frameworks and how some research we have studied may fit into this, will we be able to surmise that a fully ethical study would mean that all ethical issues are fully resolved?

A Duty-based framework emphasises the equal rights and importance of every person involved in research.. Regards research with children and young people, their rights re of equal importance as that of adults. The researcher has a moral ' duty' towards the participants and shows respect, sensitivity and fairness wherever possible. When Samantha Punch took on research in rural Bolivia, she entered a place where power relations are extremely evident, with adults tending to dictate the boundaries within which their children live.

Looking at the duty-based framework, this immediately highlights the fact that, as with all research, it is hard to stick to a definite method and to work to a set ethical mind set. The way ethics work in this country as opposed to other countries can really differ, and you have to be considerate to other cultures. Punch is very sympathetic to this, taking time to build relationships with parents, teachers and, of course, the children themselves.

In this scenario, it is very hard to pinpoint the ethical status of the children participating, due to language, culture and social issues, but it is evident from Punch's report that they are active participants and enjoy the experience of this outsider entering their world, despite any hint of adult suspicion. Looking at gender relations, it may be that as a woman, the children found it easier to relate to Punch than they would a man, but the parents may have found her involvement more of a threat. However, such sweeping generalisations have no place in the complex world of research, and indeed each project has its own difficulties.

As stated in Unit of the Study Guide, ' it is not always easy to find the right balance between ethical purity and research design', but it is clear that Punch takes her duty as a researcher very seriously, with ethics very much on the agenda. However, I do have one concern about Punch's research, and that is regards the benefit of the research she has undertaken. When looking at the Harm/Benefit-based framework, the researcher considers whether the possible benefit to the child is worth the risk of any possible harm that participating in the research could cause.

Naturally, this has far more relevance in the world of medical research, where research can be dealing with life and death, and it would be highly relevant to examine this framework using my 'The girls with too much skin' TV documentary scenario, but I have found myself questioning what Punch's research would ultimately achieve. It is evident that no harm came to the children during the research process and that Punch was making every effort to ensure the rights of the children were met, but ultimately, what definite purpose did the research paper serve?

It was unlikely to improve the lives of the children in rural Bolivia as one assumes there would be a deep resistance to an outsider 'criticising' their culture and way of life, and it is unlikely that the said society would have the resources to change anyway. Whilst it is, no doubt, a very interesting piece of research, and gives a fascinating insight into the workings of a child's mind within another culture, as Punch's academic history is of Spanish and Latin American studies, I feel it could also be seen as self gratifying.

I am unaware if this was funded research or undertaken for personal development, but I do not feel that this research resolved all ethical issues, although the researcher was very considerate of her ethical obligations.

Barrie Thorne's research titled 'Gender Play: Girls and Boys in School', is an ideal paper to illustrate the topic of gender relations. Not only does it give insight into the differing ways in which boys and girls interactions can differ, but also raises some very interesting ethical issues.

In Chapter 9 of 'Doing Research with Children and Young People', Rob Pattman and Mary Jane Kehily discuss gaining access to the social worlds of

children and young people, and clearly state that to understand the world from their perspective, the researcher has to recognise that the respondents know more about it than anyone else. This is an issue that is obviously not only relevant to research, but is also what both my teenage son and books on teenagers say is the most important issue between adults and teens.

Naturally, being a parent gives you first hand knowledge and even practise of the approach, but like there are good and maybe not so good parents, can perhaps the same be said for researchers? When I first read Thorne's paper, albeit abridged, I was immediately struck by a sense of unease. Phrases like 'I was struck not only by kids' rapid movements but also by their continual engagement with one another's bodies', gave me a sense of voyeurism, purely as the wording appeared quite explicit.

This probably says more about myself and my prudish attitude than those of the researcher, who is indeed highly respected and credited and whose morals are not in question, but it also raises the question of how ethical issues can be viewed differently depending on your own personal viewpoint. My feeling here is that the language used is typical of an American styling, whereas in the United Kingdom we are more reserved and wary of offence, and this shows how ethics can vary, even between similarly modern societies.

I was also concerned that Thorne's target groups were to some extent, unwilling objects of research. She mentions obtaining permission to use the school for research purposes by going through 'adult gatekeepers', and there is no direct mention of the children having given consent or truly knowing

what Thorne is doing there. One girl expresses her concern as to what Thorne is writing down, concerned that Thorne is gaining information that may get the children into trouble.

This raises the question, based on the Harm/Benefit-based framework, as to whether those children were truly comfortable with Thorne's presence, or indeed whether they felt slightly threatened and anxious. My feeling of unease was further emphasised when I read " but of course that I wrote was not under their control, and, like all fieldworkers, I lived with ambiguous ethics. " Thorne seems very aware of the ethical issues, but seems almost blasé about not having to consider it to great extent, as she is a researcher and there for a purpose.

She further writes, " I guarded the information from local exposure, but intended it, with identities disguised, for a much larger audience. I was the sole judge of what was or was not reported and how to alter identifying information. " On the surface, this paper may seem to defy all three frameworks I have previously identified, with Thorne not taking her duty as a researcher responsibly enough, not considering the rights of those involved and not weighing up the harm to the children versus any benefit.

This paper was first published in 1993, and we have to bear in mind that the world and its values were very different even then, as well as considering the other issues of culture I have previously stated. However, in my opinion, this is not a fully ethical study, and there seems to be only sporadic attempts to resolve ethical issues. In contrast to Thorne, the research by Alison Clark entitled ' The Mosaic Approach and Research with Young Children', very

clearly demonstrates that a lot of effort has been taken to try to resolve ethical issues.

As she had previously taught 4-7 year olds, it is clear that she already had an inbuilt set of ethics towards children and a desire to both know more about them, leading to potentially improve their lives in some way, however small. This fits in some way with the Rights-based framework, taking into account the aims and effects of research, and the benefits it might bring. Clark also states that she acknowledges that children have “ important perspectives to contribute about their lives in an early childhood institution’.

This is a good example of a researcher using a duty-based framework, treating them as unique people with value, or as Langsted (1994: 42) states, ‘ experts in their own lives’. It is on reading Clark’s commentary on the paper, that you get a real insight as to the extent she takes her ethical obligation seriously. Throughout the paper, it is clear that Clark is keen to involve parents and their views wherever possible. As she rightly acknowledges in the commentary, the parent’s involvement was of benefit to both parties.

The parents were keen to hear about their children’s experiences, and they in turn could also help Clark by providing more information about their own child and their recent experiences. This approach shows Clark working very much within all three ethical frameworks as previously discussed. When we consider whether Clark managed to fully resolve all ethical issues within this study, I would imagine that as she had not initially trained in research, the

mixture of her two career paths led to her being able to resolve issues without directly concentrating on doing so.

It is clear that many ethical issues have been resolved, and his paper is perhaps the best example of doing so out of the three papers I have chosen to discuss. However, there is a highly interesting point contained within the 'Questions that arose' section of the commentary. Clark states that colleagues in Scandinavia were concerned that by Clark listening in to the children, their privacy was in some way being invaded. Clark herself admits that these comments took her back, and led her to re-examine which elements of acquired knowledge she used.

It is armed with knowledge of this scenario that I have made my decision on the question posed at the beginning of this assignment. So, does a fully ethical study mean that all ethical issues are fully resolved? Based on what I have studied, I would have to say no. Researchers can be very aware of their duty towards respondents and act with their interests in the forefront at all times, and this is a good framework to work within. However, as Alison Clark's Scandinavian colleagues show, there will always be somebody who sees your efforts very differently than you intended. This happens just the same in research, as it does in life itself.