

Cracking the ethics code: What are the ethical implications of designing a research study that relates to therapeutic interventions with children in individual play therapy?[☆]

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Abstract

When designing a research study it is imperative to consider the ethical implications of the project. This paper discusses the nature, definition and development of ethical practice within the field of health research and the evolving role of ethical codes and committees. The development of international standards is examined but the focus is principally on practice in Great Britain. The author draws upon Greek mythology and makes a comparison between the quest for ethical approval and Psyche's journey into the underworld. The ethical impact of including children within research is considered with particular reference to play therapy practice. It is concluded that ethical codes may seem to be encrypted but they do not need to be "cracked;" rather, they exist to guide and inform the researcher when faced with moral dilemmas. Indeed, despite the safeguards and guidelines in place this article suggests that we must still rely on the integrity of the individual to ensure that research is carried out in an ethical manner.

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Introduction

Designing a research project in an ethically acceptable way can seem like trying to crack an enigma code. Unravelling the mysteries of the ethical guidelines available and applying them to the investigation can be a daunting task. Even with the intent to prioritise the needs of client participants or "subjects" it can seem a gargantuan undertaking that requires the genius of Alan Turing and his code-breaking colleagues at the clandestine

[☆] The author would like to use this forum to create debate about the efficacy of involving children in research in play therapy and what alternatives we can ethically consider. She is interested in creating a dialogue with other interested parties and researchers and would value response to this article either via the journal (as an article or letter) or by personal correspondence.

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Bletchley Park.² In the process of formulating my own research project to explore the impact of play therapy I have encountered a number of ethical issues that have caused me to research the subject of ethics more fully. This paper begins by exploring the definition and nature of ethics. This is informed by the historical perspective of the evolution of ethical practice and the establishment of international standards to protect research participants. Recent reforms in policy and practice relating to the inclusion of children in research are outlined. The difference between consent and assent is established and some of the practical implications of gaining consent/assent from a minor are detailed. Particular considerations of including children in play therapy research are explored.

What are “ethics”?

Undoubtedly a major consideration when designing a research study that involves human subjects is to ensure that the project is conducted in a way that considers the needs and rights of the research participants and the impact that it may have on them. Codes of ethics have developed to guide researchers in appropriate ways to conduct research.

It is difficult to define “ethics” in a way that truly expresses its nature. Loughlin states, “ethics is one of those subjects so controversial that the attempt to characterise the subject matter is itself a matter of controversy” (Loughlin, 2002, p. 29). Current lexicographic attempts to define ethics have moved away from the idea that it is the “science of morals in human conduct” as it was previously described in 1991 (Allen, 1991, p. 401). Nevertheless describing it as the “moral principles governing or influencing conduct” (Soanes & Hawker, 2005, p. 340) has done little to convey the complexity of issues and dilemmas that consideration of ethics may raise and still suggests that ethics is a system of objective principles that can be adhered to. Similarly, psychologist Robson who draws upon the work of Reynolds subscribes to a rather linear viewpoint when he describes ethics as “rules of conduct; typically to conformity to a code or set of principles” (Robson, 1993, p. 29). Again this implies a clear definition of “right” and “wrong” ethical decisions. Many professional associations do have specialist codes of ethics for research and practice but the British Sociological Association, for example, suggests that such codes are not meant to be regarded as rules or “recipes” for ethical conduct, rather, choices should be made on “the basis of principles and values, and the (often conflicting) interests of those involved” (British Sociological Association, 2002). Accordingly ethical principles cannot be regarded objectively but involve subjective decisions that may be guided by morality.

It seems that ethics codes are neither encrypted communications nor are they intended to prescribe conduct. Rather they exist as useful guidelines and considerations to advise researchers and help them navigate the seas of research. Indeed Seedhouse suggests that it may be detrimental for practitioners to believe that they are following a set of ethical rules as it may give them a false sense of security that practice within these codes will necessarily be within “ethical conventions” (Seedhouse, 2002, p. v). Rather he advocates, “what is really needed is a perpetual questioning of circumstance and self” (Seedhouse, 2002, p. v). However, if codes are open to interpretation this may cause conflict and disagreement. It certainly presents complications when submitting a research proposal to an ethics committee that will be made up of a number of individuals with a variety of experience, not necessarily in either the research subject or the methodological approach, who may hold differing opinions. It is conceivable that individuals will hold differing ethical viewpoints and will each be able to justify their position.

There seems to be a potential risk that having a formal code may distance a researcher from their personal accountability for their conduct and from using their own opinion and moral view. Loughlin proposes that an unnecessary distinction is often made between morality and ethics: the former is often recognised as something pertaining to “personal, private and subjective” issues and the latter to “public, legalistic ‘codes of practice’” (Loughlin, 2002, p. xvi). Conversely he suggests that ethics and morality are synonymous and offers the following description:

“Ethics” is the systematic study of morality and morality concerns the way we live our lives, the choices we make, the sort of people we are. To ask moral questions is to ask questions about how to live and practise: it is to search for good reasons for the way one behaves. (Loughlin, 2002, p. xvi)

² During Second World War cryptanalysts were based at Bletchley Park, Buckinghamshire, U.K. It was their remit to decode enemy messages; this included being involved in breaking the codes created by the Enigma machine that Nazi Germany was using to encrypt their wartime communications. Most notably it was the work of Alan Turing, mathematician and logician, that was instrumental in achieving this task and reputedly foreshortening the war by 2 years.

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