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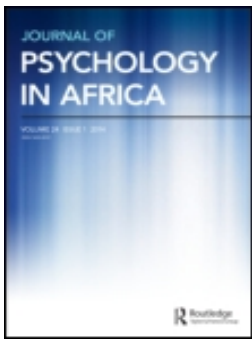
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PROFESSIONAL ISSUES

The role of educational psychologists in promoting ethical research conducted with children: an exploratory study

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This study explored perceptions of educational psychologists on their role in promoting ethical research involving children. Participants were 10 South African educational psychologists (females = 60%; males = 40%) from mostly public services (90%). Data on their perceived roles in research ethics monitoring and implementation were collected through individual interviews and a brief questionnaire. The data were thematically analysed. Findings suggest that educational psychologists have a role in protecting children from harm during research participation while also monitoring benefits due to the children. A social justice perspective appears to explain the role of educational psychologists in research protection for children.

Keywords: African context, children, ethics, qualitative research, educational psychologists, social justice

Educational psychologists by virtue of being child support personnel need to be mindful of the impact research could have on the lives of children (Floyd, 2013). This entails being active agents in protecting the rights of children who participate in research activities (Covell, Howe, & McNeil, 2010; Franklin, 2001; Mangold, 2002). Educational psychologists have a role of being custodians of children's rights which have been enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, from now referred to as UNCRC (Detrick, 1999) and also the African Charter on the Welfare and Rights of Children, referred to as ACWRC (Gose, 2002). However, violation of children's rights still remains a contentious issue in most parts of Africa, even though the UNCRC and ACWRC are legally binding (Kasirye, 2007; Machel, 2000; Mawson, 2004; Sewpaul & Matthias, 2013).

The emphasis placed on children's rights through the UNCRC and ACWRC necessitates the strict adherence to ethical measures that should be taken into consideration when research involves children irrespective if it is direct or indirect. According to Graham, Powell, Taylor, Anderson, and Fitzgerald (2013, p. 11), "ethics is not just about procedural compliance, but more about the application of rules and conduct" especially in the research context. This is evident in the Code of Ethics and Conduct (British Psychological Society, 2009), Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct (American Psychological Association, 2002) and the South African Code of Ethics for Psychologists (Department of Health, 2006) as well as the documents produced by Schenk and Williamson (2005) and Graham et al., (2013).

Educational psychologists might assist children and families identify the contradictions between valuing the contributions made by children in research about their own lives, and the ethical frameworks used that actually limit their chances to participate (Graham and Fitzgerald, 2010). They also can act to create a safe and inclusive

research context for children, and especially those with vulnerability. There is need from a social justice theoretical framework to promote the human rights and dignity of all children, treat them with respect, and provide them with fair and equal opportunities to develop and function optimally in society (Pillay, 2014a). Educational psychologists should be instrumental in promoting social justice in their line of work and in their respective communities (Pillay, 2014b). The social justice theoretical framework compels researchers to view children from a rights-based paradigm rather than a needs-based one (Bartolo, 2010; Benedetto & Olisky, 2001). A social justice approach is for children to participate in research activities geared to enhance the quality of their lives. (Pufall & Unsworth, 2004; Woodhead, 1997).

Goal of the study

This study aimed to explore the role that educational psychologists practising in an African setting perceived to play in promoting ethical research with children. The main research question was: what role do educational psychologists perceive to play in promoting ethical principles which apply to child research participants?

Method

Setting and participants

Ten practicing South African educational psychologist were purposively recruited for the study. The participants covered a range of positions, such as chief educational psychologists ($n = 3$), academics ($n = 4$), policy analysts ($n = 1$) and directors of children's centres or government departments ($n = 2$). All the participants are active researchers fully familiar with human research ethics protocols. Virtually all the participants had exposure to educational psychology in various international contexts, including the African continent. Consequently, their

participation in this study added both an international and an African dimension.

Data collection

Data on their perceptions of roles by educational psychologists human research ethics compliance were collected either through individual interviews ($n = 4$ participants) or the questionnaire ($n = 6$ participants).

Credibility and dependability of data was achieved by extended contact with the participants of over 6 months and with discussion of the research focus issues. Verbatim responses from the participants were used to confirm the authenticity of the data collected. In order to promote dependability, an educational psychologist not involved in the study served as an independent external coder.

Ethical procedures

Ethical clearance was obtained from the Faculty Ethics Committee at the University of Johannesburg where the author is employed. Participants individually consented, and were still reminded that their involvement was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any point without penalty. In order to maintain confidentiality and anonymity no names of participants are mentioned in the study, even though some of them voluntarily indicated that they had no problem with their identities being revealed.

Data analysis

Data were thematically analysed using the approach proposed by Merriam (1998; 2002). The analysis approach sought to identify the main themes and patterns that emerged from the data. Repetitive words and thoughts of participants were coded and identified as the main themes reflecting the four major research ethical principles that emerged during the literature review process.

Results

Table 1 summarises the themes and sub-themes from the analysis. The findings are presented in the actual words of participants according to the four major research ethical principles identified through the document analysis process, namely; harms and benefits, informed consent, privacy and confidentiality, and payment and compensation.

Harms and benefits

All participants perceived likely harm and also benefits from child research participation for which ethics protections were necessary. The first concern risk for harm identified by the participants was related to the researcher himself/herself imposing own values on the children. Researchers might “believe that their perspective of being prudent or helpful or uplifting is shared by the sample/community” (P#1, Indian female, chief school psychologist). The objectivity of psychologists who conduct research was also questioned in relation to their dual roles: “there can be a lack of objectivity as a result of being both a therapist and a researcher” (P#4, White female, director of psychological centre). More importantly, it was noted that in an African context role confusion might arise from “a researcher may be viewed as a healer according to the participants or community’s

understanding and expectations. So, you are expected to assist depending on what the need is” (P#3, Black female, lecturer). All participants perceived harm resulting from the lack of cultural sensitivity or imposition of Western cultural values on children. In the words of one participant: “some research, especially, dealing with culturally sensitive matters (such as mourning; rituals, abuse, etc.), take on Western practices, which fails to resonate with the beliefs and practices of different cultures within South Africa” (P#5, Indian female, director in education department). Similarly, participant 2 (Black female, director of children’s centre) stated: “psychologists should be sensitive to different traditions. They should note that there are many cultures and traditions in Africa”. So, as researchers they should learn more about the specific community before they do the study” (P#6, Coloured female, lecturer). Another participant wanted researchers: “to be very aware of the potential harm that can result from children talking about matters that should have remained hidden due to cultural norms” (P#8, Coloured male, senior lecturer). In order to safeguard children the participant suggested that community members should be included in research: “as ethics advisors to a project or even to be present in certain parts of the data-offering exercise” (P#8, Coloured male, senior lecturer).

Most of the participants (80%) were critical of ineffective sustainability of interventions, care and support programs that are implemented once research is completed. This concern was clearly evident in the following statement: “post the research/intervention, the sustainability of support cannot be guaranteed leaving participants on their own, without the support provided during the research” (P#5, Indian female, director in government department). Linked to this issue is: “the lack of access to counselling and psychosocial support to participants” (P#10, Indian male, chief school psychologist).

Virtually all the participants emphasised that researchers have to be more vigilant to harm most likely on orphans and vulnerable children (OVC) from research participation. According to P#8 (Coloured male, senior lecturer), “OVC as research participants demand a different take on ethics. The no-harm principle should be extra carefully applied because of the intersectional levels of vulnerability and agency such as gender, age, trauma, grief, poverty, means-making, lawfulness of economic activities, unlawfulness of economic activities, discipline styles, independence, dependence and race”.

Benefits

Participants noted likely benefits for the children and the researchers which educational psychologists could monitor to be ethically delivered. Some of the benefits for participants identified by the educational psychologists were: knowledge management and acquisition of relevant data that can improve lives and increase care and support in communities (P#1; Indian female, chief school psychologist); empowerment and capacity building with regard to skills, knowledge, resource linkages and service networks in the sample/community (P#5, Indian female, director in government department); and access to services/support/resources which

Table 1. Summary of themes and sub-themes

Themes	Sub-themes
Harms	Imposition of educational psychologists/researchers own values on participants Objectivity of educational psychologist/researcher Educational psychologist/researcher viewed as healer Mismatch between Western and African cultures and traditions Ineffective sustainability of support interventions More harm to especially vulnerable children, such as OVC
Benefits	Knowledge management and acquisition of relevant data Improvement of lives of children Empowerment and capacity building of children, families and communities Increase children's access to community facilities Challenge myths and folklores in African communities
Informed Consent	Participants should get clear and detailed information about the research right from the start Permission should be obtained from relevant stakeholders Completion of documents safeguarding children's rights in research participation Use language of participants Be aware of power dynamics
Privacy and Confidentiality	Information should be kept safe and secure Participants should see the findings Extra care for OVC who are open to exploitation
Payment and Compensation	Support for payment and compensation of research participants, especially OVC No bribes In African culture payment and compensation may be seen as an act of goodwill Can be a safety risk for OVC

were otherwise inaccessible to children particularly those in rural and previously disadvantaged communities (P#7, White male, private practice).

Participant 9 (Black male, chief school psychologist) stated: "information and program interventions assist in harm reduction and enables systems of care and support to be established in the local settings. It creates access to health, social welfare and livelihood networking of assets in the community of the research sample".

Participant 10 (Indian male, chief school psychologist) stated: "research creates awareness and 'buy in' of key stakeholders to shift attitudes and enable community dialogues to commence". Also it was pointed out that research, "allows for the mobilisation of the sample and communities to lobby for care and support programs to effect policy changes" (P#1, Indian female, chief school psychologist).

Lastly, but probably one of the most significant benefits to participants in an African context was the possibility that research could be a good way of "debunking myths and folklore paving the way for therapy and healing. For example, HIV can be cured by having sex with a virgin; mental disorders are the consequence of the ancestor's anger" (P#5, Indian female, director in government department). Participant 8 noted that research could have benefits to OVC: "Through interaction with researchers OVC can become aware of ways to alleviate their situation through, e.g. network-building; joining communities-of-practice; becoming aware of economic participation opportunities; claiming statutory rights like grants and other state assistance; decreasing, eliminating or avoiding exploitation where it occurs or can occur" (Coloured male, senior lecturer).

The benefits of research to participants were summed up in the words of participant 2: "good research can be a catalyst to positively change the lives of affected communities". (Black female, director of children's centre). The findings also noted benefits to educational psychologists

engaged in research. They have the opportunity to gain, "first-hand experience of delving into personal spaces, that is, individual's thoughts, feelings and experiences; homes; families; and communities, which provide a contextually and culturally relevant research experience" (P#9, Black male, chief school psychologist).

As a result of research: "they are able to add to the current body of knowledge thereby providing greater insight into lived experiences with due consideration to the diverse cultural and social practice" (P#1, Indian female, chief school psychologist). Educational psychologists: "have the potential to provide accessible, non-stigmatising, culturally appropriate psychological support" (P#6, Coloured female, lecturer).

Informed consent

Participants (95%) observed monitoring of informed consent process and documentation an important role for educational psychologists. For instance, P#3 (Black female, lecturer) was of the view that: "It's critically important that participants and key stakeholders are given full disclosure of the process, benefits and risks as well as briefed on voluntary participation and withdrawal". Most participants (90%) considered it mandatory that permission to conduct research is obtained from the relevant education department, if the sample is recruited from schools. It was also pointed out that this process does not always occur: "school support services are only contacted when a crisis occurs" (P#6, Coloured female, lecturer). Participants noted a need for all documents safeguarding children involved in research to be completed by educational psychologists so that "all [child] participants fully understand the requirements of the research project" (P#4, White female, director of psychological centre), including audio and visual recordings, and photography and video footage. They also noted the need for cultural-language translators to avoid harm from poorly

implemented consent procedures due to language barriers. The participants reported that it is critical in an African context for: “customs, protocols and language issues to be accommodated, that is, meeting with the chief of the community and the use of translators” (P#8, Coloured male, senior lecturer).

It was also suggested that if parents were not available “extended family/grandparents act in loco parentis” (P#5, Indian female, director in government department). Complexities with meeting cultural consent were noted “when working with/conducting research with marginalised or vulnerable children or groups” who might not understand their rights to consent. (P#9, Black male, chief school psychologist). Participant 8 (Coloured male, senior lecturer) provided a possible solution to the power dynamics by stating: “that, a statutory guardian or state-mandated official, the child in charge of OVC should co-sign informed consent agreements as recognition of the shared adult responsibilities”. However, he was well aware that his suggestion is not acceptable in terms of the current legislations.

Privacy and confidentiality

All the participants in this study emphasised the point that educational psychologists should assist in monitoring the privacy and confidentiality ethical requirements. For instance, Participant 6 (Coloured female, lecturer) observed: “child participants have a right to know that their information is safe and secure and that they will not be identified or exposed in any way”. Participant 2 (Black female, director of children’s centre) noted that: “all raw data should be destroyed after two years of publication and five years if no publications emanate from the study”. Furthermore, it was noted that “participants have a right to see the final research document before it is published” (P#4, White female, director of psychological centre) as one way of ensuring privacy and confidentiality. Serious concern was raised about privacy and confidentiality issues with regard to OVC: “because OVC may not have any adult supervision there is a tendency by researchers to do with them as they please without respecting the children’s right to privacy and confidentiality” (P#10, Indian male, chief school psychologist).

Payment and compensation

Most participants (80%) were in support of incentivising research participation by children as follows: “research studies may pay youth facilitators or mentors a stipend for their basic expenses and to retain their services for program support” (P#1, Indian female, chief school psychologist). However, it was pointed out that: “payment must not be seen as a bribe or compensation to affect the research outcomes” (P#2, Black female, director of children’s centre), although some kind of payment or compensation is necessary in that: “African culture may require some gifts when meeting the chief or possibly a celebration party at the end of the research for the participants and stakeholders” (P#3, Black female, lecturer). Appropriate incentives noted by the participants included lunch and a transportation fare. However, participant 5 (Indian female, director in government department) raised concerns about what happens if support is still needed after the research is completed:

“do the psychologists now refer the participant to a ‘free services’ agency for additional support or start requesting payment for future support sessions? Costs for OVC from receiving incentives included becoming “targets of not only their fellow classmates but also community members – they are often attacked for their supplies obtained at school. The attention paid to them by external programmes/initiatives often makes them the envy of fellow learners. This negatively impacts on their relationships” (P#10, Indian male, chief school psychologist).

Discussion

Like all other research, this study had its specific limitations. Firstly, it consisted of a small sample of ten participants, which make interpretations and generalisations of the findings more difficult. Nonetheless, the findings on harms and benefits of including children in research corroborates the findings of other researchers (Graham et al., 2013; Schenk & Williamson, 2005) cited in the literature review. The role of educational psychologists is to make certain that children are not harmed in any way from the beginning through to the end of the research project and even beyond. Potential harms and benefits must be identified from the initial planning stages of the research and protocols should be put in place to address all child safety concerns. This would include protection of their cultural rights and capital from imposition by researchers. The sustainability of care and support interventions for children emanating from research often becomes problematic in an African context due to limited financial, human and material resources.

The numerous benefits of including children as participants in research activities have been pointed out in the findings of this study. Some of them, such as improving the lives and care of children have been confirmed in the literature reviewed (BERA, 2011; Shriberg, Wynne, Briggs, Bartucci, & Lombardo, 2011; Smith, 2002, Stainton Rogers, 2004). Another benefit highlighted in this study is the provision of accessible, non-stigmatising culturally appropriate support for children.

Findings suggest educational psychologists should carry rights education responsibilities in informing children about the purpose of the study and what would be required of them (Lundy & McEvoy, 2012). The findings in this study emphasise the importance of customs, protocols and language issues that need to be accommodated within an African context. For example, educational psychologists should consult locally to determine whether there is a need to obtain informed consent from community leaders or other local people (Graham et al., 2013).

Another role of educational psychologists, identified from the study, is to protect children’s right to privacy and for them to ensure that information children share is kept confidential at all times. However, in the work of educational psychologists there may be certain limitations to confidentiality and this must be clearly articulated to children, for example the responsibility of a psychologist when information on sexual or physical abuse emerges during the research (Graham et al., 2013). Safeguarding children’s privacy and confidentiality inadvertently means that information provided by them is securely stored and disposed after its use. However,

privacy and confidentiality is particularly a risk for OVC participants due to their compromised social capital to seek redress for rights violations.

The findings suggest a role for educational psychologists to monitor the implementation of payments to children for research participation. However, if children are to receive appreciation payments for their participation in research, this should be made known to them as a part of the consent procedure. According to Spriggs (2010) small incentives encourage participation without coercing them to participate in research activities.

Implications for educational psychologists practising in Africa

The ethical principle on harms and benefits raises several implications for educational psychologists. Firstly, it alludes to the different roles that they may be assumed to play by the research participants and their respective communities. While their role should be solely that of a researcher, often they may end up providing counselling services and other forms of support for the children they research. It may be difficult for them to separate themselves from being a researcher and their mundane human responsibilities, especially when they are in contact with extremely vulnerable children. However, the onus is upon them to be aware of not confusing their roles as researcher and therapist. One way of doing this would be for them to refrain from playing the therapist role by securing the services of other psychologists to support participants during the research process.

Educational psychologists must ensure that power dynamics are not visible in their research. This could be achieved by making certain that every child has an equal opportunity of being selected to participate in the study and/or benefit from support interventions emanating from it. In particular, they should be aware of the differences between Western and African cultures, as well as how these differences could impact on the research process and findings. Inevitably, this means that they should be careful of not imposing their own cultural values and beliefs on child participants. One way of ensuring this is to include significant community members as ethical and cultural advisers in the research project.

Permission from child participants should also be considered based on their age and stage of development. Informed consent in the case of OVC is often difficult, especially when no adult supervision is available to them. However, what emerged from this study is the importance of someone being available to safeguard the rights and interests of OVC and if this is not possible then the study should not be conducted.

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