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An ethical handbook for Researchers conducting research with children.

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Introduction

Before the 1980's, children were viewed as being incompetent to voice their opinions on what affects them (Taylor 2000). However, in 1989 the Children act was introduced so that children's voices were listened to (Mukherji and Albon, n.d.). In addition, The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1992) was introduced to the UK to aid children's voices and their protection (UNCRC). When conducting research with children, there are always going to be ethical difficulties (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004). The World Medical Association (no date) view ethics as the consideration to make moral choices that will help to achieve the better outcome of the activity (Pitak-Arnnop et al., 2012). This handbook will address the ethical dilemmas researchers face when conducting research and the systems of support that are in place to help them. It will also include systems that support the protection of children in research.

Informed Consent/Assent

Before any research is conducted, it is pivotal that participants are fully informed about what the research requires from them. This ideally gives the participant the option to decide whether to proceed with the research or to decline the offer (Oliver, 2010). This can reduce the power imbalance between the adult and participant as the child can answer for themselves rather than being pressured into a decision from their parent or the researcher (Munford and Saunders 2001, as cited in Harcourt, Perry and Waller, 2011). Gaining informed consent should be the 'norm' before conducting any research. Informed consent is when the participant has acknowledged their role and has consented to take part. (British Education Research Association). However, gaining a child's consent/assent can cause difficulties since adults hold more power. An example can be when a parent has given their consent to a school. This consent doesn't mean that the child has automatically agreed to the research, therefore, it is essential that the researcher informs the child that he/she can withdraw at any time (Nairn and Clarke, 2012). This can also be agreed by (Kellet, 2005, as cited in Palaiologou, 2012) as it is desirable to approach children for their consent. In addition, it is important to build a rapport with the participant so that they don't feel forced into the research due to them wanting to please the researcher. This would violate their consent from being 'free and voluntary' (Dorn, Susman and Fletcher 1995, 188 citing Koocher and DeMaso 1990, Itlis, 2013). Researchers must also be aware of body language when obtaining consent from children. A child might agree to participate, but their body language suggests otherwise (Nairn and Clarke, 2012). It's also important to be aware of body language whilst conducting the research. For example, Little Albert showed many signs of distress in the experiment which obviously indicated he didn't want to participate. However, because informed consent had been given by his parent, the experiment carried on (Watson and Rayner 1920 as cited in Palaiologou, 2012). The UNCRC Article 12 combat this by emphasising the need to always consider a child's views and feelings. Children who are immigrants may be deemed as more vulnerable in the consent process because their parents may not be advanced in the language that is represented in the research (Cowell, 2011). Researchers should find a way in which the basics of the research can be understood (Oliver, 2010). This can be implemented through a consent form containing the participants language or using a translator. (Cowell, 2011). However, each child is different and therefore the

researcher may need more than a single assent form (Ungar et al. 2006, as cited in Dockett and Perry, 2010).

Confidentiality/Anonymity

Maintaining confidentiality and anonymity is also considered as the norm of conducting research (Bera 2011). (Sapsford and Abbot, 1996: 318-319 as cited in Fincham, 2013) define confidentiality as a ‘promise that you will be identified or presented in identifiable form’ whilst also defining anonymity as a ‘promise that even the researcher will not be able to tell which response came from which respondents’. However, these promises can be broken if the researcher finds out that someone could be in danger (Alderson, Morrow and Alderson, 2011). When sensitive issues may arise in an interview, it is vital that the researcher thinks carefully on how to respond. For example, the researcher may pass on issues to a third party, thus, breaking the participants right of confidentiality and anonymity (Oliver, 2010). However, if a child shows any distress whilst revealing sensitive topics, then the research must be stopped. This complies with article 3 (UNCRC) which emphasises the importance of making the best interests of the child a priority. (Bell, 2008 as cited in Nairn and Clarke, 2012) also agrees with this by claiming that the well-being of a child overrules the objective of the research. It is important that researchers abide with the Data Protection Act (1998) when storing data collected from research (Bera 2011). Today, parents are now more cautious about their children being represented through photographs. This is simply because of the concern of who will be able to access these images (Alderson, Morrow and Alderson, 2011). Therefore, those who choose to conduct research through the Mosaic approach must be careful so that participants aren’t identified. However, although a participant’s face can be blurred, it may impede the research since the facial expressions used might play an important role to the data (Robson, 2011, as cited in Mukherji and Albon, n.d.) Furthermore, the use of digital media can worry participants as they may feel that they are less in control over the data (Flewit 2005, as cited in Dockett and Perry, 2007). At the same time, it must be noted that the mosaic approach gives the child a voice in which they can freely express their thoughts and feelings through photographs, drawings, etc... (Harcourt, Perry and Waller, 2011). Again, this corresponds with article 12 UNCRC. Participants can always check their confidentiality as they are able to collect their data through the Freedom of Information act 1998 (Alderson, Morrow and Alderson, 2011). When including participants in research, it is important to use fictional names unless the individual has given permission to use their real name. This follows article 8 of the UNCRC in which a child’s identity must not be changed unlawfully. If the participant changes their mind, then the researcher can easily edit the data

so that a fictional name is used. The researcher must choose appropriate names to ensure anonymity. For example, the researcher should be wary of using male names when conducting research in an environment that consists of very few males (Oliver, 2010).

Competence/Power

When conducting research, it is important that a good relationship exists between the participant and the researcher. This will allow the participant to have a better understanding, thus, leading to a better contribution to the research (Harcourt, Perry and Waller, 2011). (Cohen et al. 2007, as cited in Nairn and Clarke, 2012) argues that all children must be considered as competent before being approached for informed consent. However, children are perceived as vulnerable and the need to protect them is outlined through the Market Research Society guidelines which addresses issues regarding the data collection process (Baxter, 2012). If a participant's responses are restricted due to vulnerable circumstances such as SEN, then it is essential for the researcher to carry out processes which will allow the individual to respond accordingly (Bera 2011). An example of this process could be using a painted handprint that represents their correspondence. In addition, involving parents to this process can be useful as they will be able to 'translate' feedback from the child (Palaiologou, 2012). However, it should not be ruled out that those with disabilities or limited speech cannot communicate. If the researcher carefully listens and asks in the correct manner, then he/she can expect an answer from the individual (Department of health, 1991: 14, as cited in Rose, 2012). Since research seems to focus on those who have suffered with negative experiences, protection is needed to stop this exploitation of vulnerable individuals (Morrow and Richards, 1996). A participant can be exploited through 'methodological grooming' (Bengry - Howell and Griffin 2011, as cited in Rose, 2012). This is where researchers take advantage of an individual to participate. This kind of incentive is risky as it may cause distress to the participant as they may feel like they have been used, especially if the researcher has stopped contact after the research. Therefore, it is important that the participant is aware of the benefits of why they should participate (Rose, 2012). Accordingly, Bera (2011) emphasise that persuasion to re-engage a participant must be treated carefully. In addition, they also state the need to inform a participant of their rights to withdraw.

Methodology/Best practice

Before any research is carried out, researchers must be assured that their plan is well prepared to reduce the risk of harm to participants (Goredema-Braid, 2010). Therefore, researchers must choose the correct methodology that is suitable for the participant. For example, group interviews may be more beneficial for those who feel vulnerable on their own (Nairn and Clarke, 2012). (Lewis 1992, as cited in Cohen, Manion and Morrison, n.d.) found that group interviews can develop a participant's understanding as individuals will challenge each other's views, thus, leading to a further discussion. This can provide a wider range of data for the researcher. However, it must be noted that too many participants may result in the research losing focus and their voices not being heard. A researcher can use a multiple of methods when collecting data. This is known as triangulation. Piaget (1959) used observations and interviews to get an insight of children's experiences (Harcourt, Perry and Waller, 2011). Carrying out observations in settings which a child is familiar with can make the child more at ease, and the risk of the individual being distressed is lessened. Moreover, building relationships in a school can allow the participant to express when they want to stop and want to interact with their class mates (Dockett and Perry, 2007). (Hatch, 1995 as cited in Mukherji and Albon, n.d.) On the other hand, if children are participating in a school setting, they may feel that the need to participate is compulsory as most tasks in school are this way (Morrow and Richards, 1996). Therefore, the child might be unaware of their right to withdraw. (Mudaly and Goddard 2009, 277–8, as cited in Flanagan, 2012) outlines the importance to practice the dissent process with children. It is also important to be aware of observing participants at their home. A child can become distressed if research is conducted in their bedroom as it is invading their privacy. Gaining an agreement from the child and parent is essential in this process and the bedroom door must be left open (Maddock, 2006, as cited in Nairn and Clarke, 2012). Including children as researchers can encourage more children to participate in research. This is because they might feel more comfortable talking and sharing information to someone of similar age. This can also reduce the power imbalance between the researcher and participant. (Powell & Smith 2009, as cited in Nairn and Clarke, 2012). Using questionnaires in research is another way to collect data from children. (Baxter, 2012) found that groups of children considered the method as 'fun' because of the 'inability to be wrong'. This links with Article 12 of the UNCRC and shows how they are not

responding to what they believe the researcher wants to achieve (Cohen et al., 2000, as cited in Dockett and Perry, 2007).

Conclusion

It is clear that the imbalance of power between the researcher and participant poses an ethical dilemma. Therefore, a researcher must understand that they play a big role in protecting those at risk and it is their duty to put the child's needs before their research whilst always remembering 'do no harm' (MacNaughton and Hughes, 2008) and (Morrow and Richards, 1996). (Oliver, 2010) displays the support researchers are given from ethic committees to demonstrate good practice within research. These arguments suggest that Children are vulnerable individuals, therefore, the need for protection is essential (Gill, 2004).

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