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An examination of ethical issues pertaining to educational research

Greg Gallagher

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Abstract

The social sciences in general and educational researchers in particular have become more and more conscious of ethical propriety and the need for universally acceptable codes of ethical conduct in recent years. This newfound interest stems in part from criticisms of innovative contemporary research methodologies, and the fear that they may be at odds with certain fundamental ethical principles. This, in turn, has resulted in the integrity and validity of some of these new contemporary styles of research being held up to scrutiny and debated by adherents to the more conventional research methodologies.

This paper begins by tracing back to the origins of ethical philosophy in an attempt to put in perspective the underlying principles behind the rules governing ethical behaviour, and what exactly we mean by the term today. The application of these principles to rules governing sound ethical research practice is reviewed from both an epistemological and ontological perspective. Some contemporary methodologies (namely, covert research, ethnographic studies and action research) are defined and interpreted with a view to reviewing their compliance or otherwise with the accepted principles of ethical practice within the field of research.

Finally, conclusions are drawn from the matters alluded to within the paper with a view to reconciling some of the inherent ethical inconsistencies that appear to exist. Definitive answers are not proffered, as the author believes that no definitive answers are possible, merely prescriptive contingent discriminations to resolve the current impasse.

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Introduction

The need to ensure that the practice of research within the social sciences is based on sound ethical principles is not open to debate. Such principles are essential in order to ensure that conclusions drawn from research are valid and that the integrity of the methodology used in arriving at these conclusions is beyond reproach. But what exactly are these principles, where did they originate from, who should safeguard them, and how can they be policed?

There is growing concern within the field of educational research that contemporary approaches to methodology subvert certain ethical principles and, as a result, bring the entire educational research discipline into disrepute. This paper attempts to analyse the origin and importance of ethics within the field of educational research. The ethical principles that we have come to expect of researchers are reviewed and commented on, drawing from the current literature and luminaries on this topic. Immanuel Kant's contribution to this debate is reviewed in light of some of the contemporary approaches to research methodology that are now in vogue within the field of educational research.

This paper does not attempt to answer all the questions that arise within the topic discussed, nor does it attempt to resolve all the apparent inconsistencies that appear to be irreconcilable. The objective of this paper is to reflect on the main issues, as the author perceives them, and to draw conclusions as to how some of the more contemporary approaches to research methodology can coexist with the traditional methodologies while at the same time ensuring that their techniques reflect the sound ethical standards that will retain the integrity essential for their continued acceptance and intrinsic validity.

1. The philosophy of ethics

> *I do not believe in the immorality of the individual, and I consider ethics to be an exclusively human concern without any superhuman authority behind it.*
>
> Albert Einstein (1879-1955)

Before examining ethical behaviour and the topical issues pertaining to the subject, it is probably best at this juncture to briefly explain what exactly we mean

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by 'ethics'. The very nature of moral philosophy or 'ethics' is such that its very definition gives rise to much heated dialectical debate. That said however, it is important to attempt to define this field within the context of this paper, but bear in mind that no definition will find universal approval.

Fieser and Dowden, (2004) in their *Internet Encyclopaedia of Philosophy,* offer the following definition: they assert that 'The field of ethics, also called moral philosophy, involves systematizing, defending, and recommending concepts of right and wrong behaviour'.

Marshall (1998), in his *Dictionary of Sociology,* attempts the following definition: 'Ethics is often defined as the concern with what ought to be, whereas science (including social science) is concerned with describing reality as it actually exists'. He goes on to state that social science *should be* 'value free' or 'value neutral'. He acknowledges however, that the practice of social science investigation (both the means and goals) is 'intrinsically bound up with ethical considerations'.

As pointed out by Raphael (1980: 1) in the introduction of his book *Moral Philosophy*, 'the main purpose of philosophy, as practised in the Western tradition, is the critical evaluation of assumptions and arguments'. He goes on to point out that all societies and cultural groups tend to simply accept 'without question', beliefs and conventions inherent within those societies. Raphael (1980) uses the example of the beliefs held by primitive tribes or societies believing in witchcraft to highlight the point that some societies believe in things far removed from the mainstream current Western belief system. The point is well made and accentuates one of the fundamental purposes of philosophy, which is to examine all of our underlying assumptions and inherited beliefs, and to consider whether we have good reason to follow them. It may well be that we have: but at least we will have used reason and self-reflection to give personal meaning to what we believe in. If however, we find that we cannot support the underlying assumptions, then we must either suspend judgement or else find a new framework of belief.

Questioning traditional assumptions that underlie our culture, and the ability to reach new ones is part of the evolution of humankind. It is the ability to do this that has enabled humankind to progress to the level that we have, and is one of the key characteristics that differentiates us from all other animals. Philosophy has greatly assisted this process.

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Philosophical analysis today tends to refer to a loose family of practices, or styles that maintain a dedication to consistency, clarity, rigour, some degree of scepticism and a careful examination of language to assist us in being more adept in understanding important aspects of our lives and the nature of humankind as a social animal.

Each and every one of us that is capable of rational thought, to some degree has engaged, whether consciously or unconsciously in philosophical thoughts. It should be remembered that the term 'philosophy' is made up of two Greek words, namely, *philo*- meaning love of and *sophos*- meaning wise. This point is mentioned to help us understand the nature of philosophy and what it ultimately stands for.

Although the terms 'moral' and 'ethical' tend to be used interchangeably as synonyms, it is important to point out that there is a technical difference within the field of philosophy. Namely, 'moral' or 'morality' is a broad descriptive term. In the philosophical literature, the most general term for the consideration of what we ought to do, think, feel or be is 'ethics'. The term 'morality' in philosophical literature refers to a subset of ethics that notably came to prominence in Europe, and which focuses on our obligations and what is right. That being said however, no such distinction will be made in this paper, and both terms will be used interchangeably to include the broad and narrow sense outlined.

Philosophy, in all matters attempts to be rational and in this regard it shares a common objective with science. Raphael makes an interesting point in describing how philosophy differs from science when he notes:

> the practitioner of a particular science is not so likely to see, or to be able to cope with, apparent inconsistencies between two general fields of science ... or between his field of science and some other well-established body of thought.
>
> (Raphael 1980: 6)

The philosopher by his or her nature must adopt an overall view on a topic of analysis relative to all of the components of reality. This is sometimes referred to as a 'helicopter view' in that the philosopher must rise above any given situation and view the full picture in a holistic, thorough and concise manner. Questions must be answered, but answers must be questioned. The philosopher will question

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matters both epistemologically (how we know what we know) and ontologically (the way we understand the world). This distinction is important and is a key determining differentiation between the scientist and the philosopher.

According to Guthrie, 'moral and political philosophy first arose in Greece (which means that it first arose in Europe) in an atmosphere of scepticism' (1978: 67). This scepticism is explained by Guthrie (1978), as a mistrust of the possibility of absolute knowledge. Prior to the arrival of Socrates (469-399 BC), Plato (*c*.429-347 BC) and Aristotle (384-322 BC) (Guthrie 1978: 67 refers to these three individuals as the greatest of the Greek philosophers), theories of physical science attempted to explain everything that was capable of being explained. After all, the foundations of physical science were based on immutable laws, which gave stability and permanence. The public however, reacted to this arrogance and the choice, as Guthrie (1978: 65) infers, of either accepting the theories of Parmenides [who advanced the view that non-existence was impossible, that everything was permanently in a state of being] or the atomists [who believed that everything had a materialist explanation]. This in turn gave rise to a more humanistic approach to explain reality as proffered by the itinerant teachers of the day called Sophists. Around the second half of the fifth century BC according to Guthrie (1978: 68), an Athenian called Archelaus; a pupil of Anaxagoras is reputed to have made the link between material laws and moral laws. Guthrie, describes this rational moral link as follows:

> If hot and cold, sweet and bitter, have no existence in nature but are simply a matter of how we feel at the time, then, it was argued, must we not suppose that justice and injustice, right and wrong, have an equally subjective and unreal existence? There can be in nature no absolute principles governing the relations between man and man. It is all a question of how you look at it.
>
> (Guthrie 1978: 68)

Almost two and a half thousand years later and some would argue that nothing has really been added to this interpretation. However, others would assert that the argument has been augmented and refined taking into account the various doctrines and schools of thought that exist within the field of ethical philosophy – intuitionism, naturalism, emotive theory, moral psychology, psychological

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egoism, existentialism, utilitarianism to name just a very small number of the myriad of those that exist.

The ethical debate received many contributions during the twentieth century, a period that saw the birth of many social sciences, which sought recognition in their own right as autonomous bodies of knowledge. The social sciences were also intertwined with ethics and the ethical debate predominantly as it affected the realm of research within their fields. How could the social sciences ensure that their integrity and valuable contributions would not be compromised by research, which was deemed to be unethical?
We must now look at the impact that ethical theory had on the social sciences and educational research in particular.

2. Ethics and social research

> *Science cannot resolve moral conflicts, but it can help to more accurately frame the debates about those conflicts.*
>
> (Heinz Pagels, *The Dreams of Reason* (1988))

The origins of concerns about research ethics are to be found in medical research, but this has broadened to include all research with human subjects. It is interesting to note that Marshall, in his *Dictionary of Sociology,* defines 'research ethics' very comprehensively and succinctly. For him research ethics consists of:

> The application of moral rules and professional codes of conduct to the collection, analysis, reporting, and publication of information about research subjects, in particular active acceptance of subjects' right to privacy, confidentiality and informed consent.
>
> (Marshall 1998: 566)

He goes on to state that until only recently both sociologists, and social scientists generally, often displayed 'arrogance' in their treatment of research subjects and justified this approach on the grounds that it was necessary to uncover the truth. Marshall (1998: 566) points out that this trend is ***now*** being addressed within

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industrialized societies by the adoption of formal codes of conduct and greater emphasis on ethical research procedures. The point is made by Marshall that:

> Public opinion now resists invasions of privacy for genuine research purposes just as much as for publicity seeking mass media stories, as evidenced by periodic increases in survey non-response, despite the fact that anonymity is effectively guaranteed in large-scale data collections.
>
> (Marshall 1998: 566)

The importance that ethics now has within the field of social science is evidenced by the array of books devoted totally to the subject of ethics both for research students in general, for example Oliver (2003) and educational researchers specifically, for example McNamee and Bridges (2002) and Sikes *et al.* (2003) to name just two. Published books, solely devoted to the topic of ethics within these fields would not have been available several years ago as demand would not perhaps have justified their indulgence. It is interesting to note that such is the proliferation of ethics within the social sciences that the Illinois Institute of Technology has a Centre for the Study of Ethics in the Professions, and offers codes of ethics online (see Illinois Institute of Technology 2004). This point both elucidates and is testament to the recent increase in interest in ethics within the sphere of social research.

As Christians points out: 'The theory and practice of mainstream social science reflect liberal Enlightenment philosophy, as do education, science and politics' (2000: 135). Under the subtitle - *Codes of Ethics* – Christians informs us that: 'By the 1980s, each of the major scholarly associations had adopted its own code, with an overlapping emphasis on four guidelines for directing an inductive science of means toward majoritarian ends' (2000: 138). Christians (2000: 138-140) goes on to tell us and explain in detail what these four guidelines are, namely:

1. Informed consent
    a. Subjects must agree voluntarily to participate
    b. This agreement must be based on full and open information
2. Deception
    - Deliberate misrepresentation is forbidden
3. Privacy and confidentiality
    - Primary safeguard against unwanted exposure
    - Made public only behind a shield of anonymity

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- No one deserves harm or embarrassment as a result of insensitive research practices

4. Accuracy

Apart from this fourth guideline, which Christians (2000: 140) deems 'cardinal', he explains circumstances in which each of the other three guidelines can be breached, and are breached with some element of justifiable entitlement.
Christians goes on to inform us, under the subtitle *–Institutional Review Boards –* that where government funding is sought for research purposes, certain conditions are also put in place: 'Three principles, published in what became known as the Belmont Report, were said to constitute the moral standards for research involving human subjects: respect for persons, beneficence, and justice' (2000: 140-141). To some degree these principles reiterate the guidelines outlined above and this point is acknowledged by Christians (2000: 140).

If it is the case, as it appears to be, that many of the principles, guidelines, codes, procedures and policies do not have universal approval, and if by strict enforcement of ethical standards we restrict the freedom of researchers to uncover truth which in turn assists us in understanding our world, how can we ensure that ethical standards will be upheld and that research findings can be relied upon?
Perhaps the answer to this question is a bit like the unanswerable religious question – we must have faith. But faith in what or faith in whom? The answer to this question might be explained in the term 'value judgement', so let us now look at exactly what we understand by this term, which is in itself imbued with meaning.

3 Value judgements

> *To spend too much time in studies is sloth; to use them too much for ornament, is affectation; to make judgement wholly by their rules is the humour of a scholar.*
>
> (Francis Bacon (1561-1626), *Essays 1, 'Of Studies'*)

In all of our lives we have choices to make between and among competing values. This is what ethics is about, and what distinguishes ethics as a theory of decision-

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making from morality, which concerns right and wrong, not `right' from `right'. As May explains: 'Value judgements are dependent on beliefs and experiences in everyday life. They also concern what we would like our experience to be' (2001: 49).

In attempting to understand morals we must view them as rules, effectively describing desirable and undesirable states. They describe right and wrong. Ethics effectively represent the rules for deciding how (desirable and undesirable) states are to be achieved or avoided. Ethics are, in essence, rules for making rules of conduct and action. That is, ethics are not codified in laws or nursery rhymes; they are principles or civic virtues that guide how we will choose between and among different values. They give us flexibility, with limits. To be effective, therefore, ethics must have a centrality based on a rational understanding of the 'common good'. Sauer defines the common good in the following way:

> The common good, by definition, goes beyond material, instrumental, or utilitarian forms of co-operation, because it embraces far more than the common goals produced by such patterns of co-operation, namely, the kind of community, the civility or civic temperament, brought into being and sustained through these patterns of interaction and co-operation, which is the goal of civic life. Viewed in this manner the common good is the normative dynamic of the way of life of a community, conditioned by and conditioning the growth and replacement of the structures and systems of socio-co-operative existence.
>
> (Sauer 1997: 1184)

But what exactly are virtues and values that will maintain the common good?

Virtue theory, which is one of the oldest normative traditions in Western philosophy, has its roots in ancient Greek civilization. Plato emphasized four virtues in particular, which were later called *cardinal virtues*: wisdom, courage, temperance and justice. Other important virtues are fortitude, generosity, self-respect, good temper, and sincerity. In addition to advocating good habits of character, virtue theorists hold that we should avoid acquiring bad character traits, or *vices*, such as cowardice, insensibility, injustice, and vanity. Virtue theory emphasizes moral education since virtuous character traits are developed in one's youth. Adults, therefore, are responsible for instilling virtues in the young.

Individual ethics can only be understood when they are juxtaposed with the society within which they are practised. Therefore by extraction we can deduce that individual ethical behaviour is far more likely to flourish within a just and equitable society. It might be argued that in order to lead an ethical life one must

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work to build a just society, which forms our values even as we shape its structures.

As Sauer notes:

> Most of our self-understanding as civic, communal selves has lapsed into a positivistic, utilitarian idiom in which only `hard' and `realistic' assumptions about human nature are allowed. In this idiom, human action is likened to a game in where each player is trying to maximize his or her self-interest or is concerned only with the quid quo pro in an exchange network. But there is evidence, if inadequately assessed, that this paradigm is incomplete. Human beings are indeed selves capable of interaction with others to express what a good person in a good society ought to be. This is the realm of public philosophy that inextricably links civic behaviour, public policy to social progress or decay.
>
> (Sauer 1997: 1184)

The fact that all research is carried out within a particular cultural, social and political climate means that to some degree this inherent climate will have an extraneous influence both epistemologically and ontologically, on the overall research process and resultant findings. As Nixon *et al.* point out: 'Educational research, like all educational activity, is politically driven and value saturated' (2003: 102). This point is also made by May who asserts: 'Values do not simply affect *some* aspects of research, but *all* aspects' (2001: 56).

Christians endorses this observation when he states that: 'Moral duty is nurtured by the demands of social linkage and not produced by abstract theory. The core of a society's common morality is pretheoretical agreement' (2000: 147).

In his definition of 'value', which is quite extensive, Marshall goes on to note that on a philosophical level:

> the issues for sociology would seem to be twofold. First, since society itself is partially constituted through values, the study of sociology is in part the study of values. Second, since sociologists are themselves members of a society and presumably hold values (religious, political, and so forth), sociological work may become embroiled in matters of value – or even (as Marxists might put it) matters of ideology. Indeed, some have argued that, for this reason, sociologists may be incapable of value-neutrality expected of scientists more generally.
>
> (Marshall 1998: 690)

We must also remember that the end use that research findings are put to (if any) may also be value laden. For this reason it is suggested by Marshall that 'sociologists should make the underlying debates explicit' (1998: 690).

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Pring refers to the importance of the influence of virtues, which he defines as: 'general dispositions to do the right thing at the right time' (2001: 150). Pring reminds us that these virtues embody 'the values which prevail in a social or cultural tradition' (2001: 150). As a syllogism from these points, we can deduce that all researchers have virtues, and these will have been inherited from their social or cultural tradition. Pring sees the researcher as a person that 'requires very special sorts of virtue, both moral and intellectual' (2001: 151). Pring goes on to name some of these virtues: 'the disposition to search for the truth', 'impartiality', 'openness to criticism and co-operation', 'resistance to the blandishments or attractions which tempt one', 'courage', 'honesty', 'concern for the well-being of those who are being researched', 'modesty', 'humility', 'trust', and the 'ability to keep promises' (2001: 151-152). Pring fully accepts the difficulties in ensuring that all researchers possess these qualities but states that such qualities and dispositions would seem to be essential for any researcher or would-be researcher.
The aspect of the positionality of the researcher cannot be ignored. Each researcher has a position by virtue of their race, class, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, and so on. All of us to some degree wear 'rose-tinted glasses'; the only question is really the extent of the tint. As Nixon *et al.* (2003: 102) exhort, that because of this positionality, researchers are required to exercise 'deep and vigilant reflexivity' and ensure that they are 'attentive to the effects' of their 'own peripheral vision'.

Some of the more contemporary approaches to educational research have come under attack from the more conventional schools of research on the grounds that their methodology and approach to research inherently contravenes some of the basic and fundamental principles of ethics. It is important therefore to look specifically at these nuances of approach within the field of educational research.

4 Non-traditional methods of research

> *A little sincerity is a dangerous thing, a great deal of it is absolutely fatal.*
>
> (Oscar Wilde (1854-1900) *Intentions*)

Recent nuances of approach to the method of data collection for research purposes have added significantly to the growing debate regarding research ethics. Covert

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research, ethnographic studies and action research have all contributed to the question of what methods of data collection are ethically acceptable. Do some methods of data collection by their very nature contravene certain ethical principles?

Marshall defines ‘covert observation’ thus:

> Participant observation carried out without the explicit awareness and agreement of the social unit being studied. This entails finding some self-explanatory role within the research setting in order to mask the researcher’s true purpose. It may be used because research access to the social unit would normally be denied, or to ensure that the researcher’s presence does not affect the behaviour of those being observed.
>
> (Marshall 1998: 124-125)

Scott and Usher explain the rationale behind covert research thus: ‘The principle behind this strategy is that participants in the research will behave unnaturally if they are aware that they are part of a research project’ (2003: 129).

There are arguments against covert research and a tension between the public right to know and the protection of the individual's privacy and confidentiality. Guidelines need to be formulated for the use of secondary data where informed consent of the participants is obtained, even if retrospectively.

Punch (1986) presents an argument that covert research in social science is justifiable in some circumstances. Ethical issues which he raises include the idea that some research areas are 'beyond the pale' as topics of social research. Although he gives some examples, Punch (1986) points out that there is no consensus in social science about what these areas might be and likens some kinds of social research to investigative journalism where an exposé of a practice or organization has some public benefit.

Other writers on qualitative research argue for the centrality of a special relation between researcher and researched, and consequently reject covert research as an appropriate method. The perspective on covert research put forward by Punch (1986) seems to have little relevance for educational research, and is both explicitly and implicitly challenged in much of the other literature.

In action research, persons conducting the research act as citizens attempting to influence the political process through collecting information. The goal is to promote social change that is consistent with the advocates' beliefs. Marshall confirms this interpretation in his definition and adds: ‘The research subjects are

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invited to participate at various stages of a relatively fast-moving sequence of research-action-research-action' (Marshall 1998: 4). This type of research is ultimately an iterative process with an end goal or specific solution to a problem as the ultimate objective.

From the perspective of ethical principles, surely the objectivity of the researcher is questionable. By the very nature of this process, the researcher is intrinsically participating in all stages of the research and actively contributing to the outcome. Robson, openly accepts that action research 'goes beyond the usual concerns for consent, confidentiality and respect for the participants' interests' (1997: 33). To compensate for this fact, Robson (1997) offers thirteen alternative ethical principles specifically for those engaged in this type of research.

Ethnographic study is yet again, another research methodology, which, by its very nature, appears to contravene ethical research principles. This form of research is commonly linked with the research techniques of social anthropology and is often referred to as fieldwork. Marshall informs us in his definition of ethnography that: 'the principle technique of ethnographic research is participant observation' (1998: 202). The researcher effectively finds their way into a social milieu (by whatever means), and then proceeds to write up a report giving the 'inside' perspective of the group. Pring (2003), in his article entitled `The virtues and vices of an educational researcher', gives clear examples of the nature of ethnographic research. In describing this research methodology, Pring (2003) specifically draws our attention to the many dilemmas and dangers facing researchers carrying out this type of research. Pring states his objective from the outset, which he acknowledges, is to question 'whether it is sufficient to think in terms of principles, codes and rules' (2003: 52). Pring goes on to state that: 'It may be more important, from an ethical point of view, to consider much more carefully the virtues of the researcher than the principles he or she espouses' (2003: 52).

His point is well noted, but this still brings us back to the difficulty of reconciling this type of research (and the other types noted above) with the tenets and principles of ethics that have been both adopted and are considered sacrosanct by many within the research community. Perhaps, by including too broad a range of activities under the rubric of research, we may be enlarging our definition to such a

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degree that it loses meaning. Called into question here is the traditional notion of the researcher as objective.

As Eisenhart points out:

> some funding agencies, confused by the proliferation of qualitative methods and debates surrounding them, are poised to deny ethnographic research proposals -- along with other forms of qualitative research -- on the grounds that the methods are not `reliable and rigorous'.
>
> (Eisenhart 2001: 17)

One of the 'muddles' confronting ethnography, according to Eisenhart, is how to reconcile this form of research 'with both the conditions of postmodernity (the economic and social conditions of late 20th century capitalism) and postmodernist ideas about truth, knowledge, values, and ethics' (2001: 17).

Bearing these facts in mind let us now look at one of the key ethical resolving formulas, namely, the categorical imperative.

5 The categorical imperative

> *The conception of worth, that each person is an end per se, is not a mere abstraction. Our interest in it is not merely academic. Every outcry against the oppression of some people by other people, or against what is morally hideous is the affirmation of the principle that a human being as such is not to be violated. A human being is not to be handled as a tool but is to be respected and revered.*
>
> (Felix Adler (1851-1933), *The Ethical Philosophy of Life*)

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) argued that when we are choosing how we should act under certain circumstances, we should apply criteria, which are capable of becoming universal principles. In other words, under comparable circumstances, other people could apply the same principles. Kant termed this approach to ethical problems the `categorical imperative'. Based on Kant's moral philosophy, individuals cannot be used as a means to an end. Kant points out that each person thinks of himself or herself as a rational creature that is entitled to dignity and respect. Consistency then requires that each person recognize the rational nature of other persons and thus recognize that other persons are also entitled to be treated with dignity and respect. This is why Kant argues that one cannot use another as a

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means merely to an end. In yet another formulation of the categorical imperative Kant argues that in a community or organization we are bound by rules but by rules that we ourselves would accept as rational legislators. Thus in such communities, which Kant calls kingdoms of ends, the members are all equally subject and sovereign.

This is, in effect, an ethics of respect for persons. In order to make sense of what is ethically permissible, it is necessary to point out that general ethics is theoretical, moral philosophy is practical and a code of ethics elucidatory. To paraphrase Evans and Jakupec (1996: 73): Research conduct is judged by the extent to which it is aligned to the moral agency recognizing the principle of respect of persons. It is not ethically permissible to violate participants' self-purpose or self-determination.

There are four questions to be asked of researchers' conduct to ascertain whether research is ethically permissible:

1. Does the researcher treat the individual as self-conscious, autonomous, free and rational?
2. Is the purpose of the research in the interests of the research participant?
3. Could the research data and findings be used for other than the intended purposes and do the participants understand this possibility?
4. Does the research potentially make the participant an instrument of the research and/or the researcher?

Researchers in education need to be aware of the principles of free informed consent. Having made this point, May reminds us that this principle has inherent difficulties, specifically, concerning research on the Internet. He observes:

> Not only do the bounds between the public and private aspects of life have the potential to become somewhat blurred, but also in seeking consent from respondents from whom should this be obtained? When a group is 'virtual' and subject to routine changes in its composition this creates problems for those seeking to follow such a doctrine.
>
> (May 2001: 60)

Where there are conflicts, which need to be settled, guidance is required from codes of ethics, from colleagues, and direction from our institutions in the form of policies, procedures and guidelines.

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If we accept the importance and legitimacy of having rules and guidelines to assist the process of research, then we must accept that researchers to some degree must be held accountable for the methods they use and also to some degree, for the relevance of the research carried out in the first place. But how exactly can researchers be held accountable, and what constitutes relevance?

6 Accountability and relevance

> *Good people do not need laws to tell them to act responsibly, while bad people will find a way around the laws.*
>
> Plato (*c*.429-347 BC)

The many stakeholders involved in the process of educational research would tend to imply that researchers have many masters to whom they are ultimately accountable. Because of the impact that some educational research may have and by a process of extraction, society in general stands to benefit from any progressive advance that such research can uncover. As Winch reminds us, the overall objective that educational researchers are concerned with include: 'pursuit of the truth, enduring worth, clarity and enlightenment, however these are conceived' (2002: 152).

Researchers are faced with both growing internal professional critics as well as external critics both influential and otherwise. Winch goes so far as to say that: 'It is evident that educational research has powerful enemies, both within and without education, and that it can only defend itself if it develops a proper perspective on its own nature and purpose' (2002: 153). While, this comment may appear paranoid, there may be some justification behind it.

One of the many criticisms that some ethical approaches to educational research are accused of today is a failure to be 'pragmatic'. Pragmatism is a school of philosophy, which is based very much on the work of William James and John Dewey. The essence of pragmatism is that purely theoretical analysis of philosophical problems is insufficient, and that it should be complemented by a very practical approach to issues. The pragmatist would laud the many schools of ethical thought and the principles behind their thinking. However, the pragmatist would not subscribe to any one school, indeed the pragmatist would warn against

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the viewpoint that one school has a superior approach to ethics than another. No one school can have the answer to all of life's ethical dilemmas and to adopt such a stance would be both erroneous and dangerous. Moral principles evolve and change, and such developments demand that a contingent and open ethical position be adopted based on codes, policies, procedures and guidelines.

While relevance may be the desired outcome of any research undertaking, it is a difficult term to define. This point is endorsed by May who attempts to refine our understanding of what constitutes relevant research. He states: 'It is usually taken as that which serves the ends of particular interests. In such cases, the social researcher should ask the questions ``relevant for whom and why?'" (May 2001: 51). May goes on to advise us that we should bear three other factors in mind, namely, 'culture, history and power' (2001: 51). There are competing forces at work within these three factors and adherents to the different perspectives will view 'relevance' in different ways.

Winch (2002), provides us with a number of headings under which we can adjudicate the degree of relevance that a particular piece of research has. These include: the production of knowledge about education, the formulation of educational policy, the promotion of improvements in educational practice, and the promotion of radical change in society. While Winch (2002) sees these pursuits as four clearly identifiable aims of educational research, and spends time explaining each one, he also points out that these are also the responsibilities of educational researchers, and outlines exactly what each responsibility entails.

On the other hand, as Nixon and Sikes point out: 'Educational research is grounded, epistemologically, in the moral foundations of educational practice. It is the epistemological and moral purposes underlying the ``usefulness" and ``relevance" of educational research that matter' (Nixon and Sikes 2003: 2). They make the valid point that 'usefulness' and 'relevance' are not just 'a matter of impact and influence'. For Nixon and Sikes (2003: 2), we need to radically reconceptualize what is educationally worthwhile in what we deem to be 'useful' and 'relevant'.

There are those who see the current interest in ethics as a passing fad, a simple and superficial expression of a deeper crisis within the educational field, a consequence of the decline in ideology and religion, and the apparent failure of

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philosophy to produce laws that will be universally acceptable, or as a knee jerk reaction to the failures of strong leadership and stable political climates. Others may view ethical imperatives as a way for researchers, and the institutions that they belong to, to reduce their exposure from both a legal and a social perspective. If the researcher goes outside the rules in the pursuit of truth and fails, then the institution can distance itself from the individual researcher. On the other hand, if the researcher succeeds then they can simply ignore the fact that a few rules were broken. Others may view the recent upsurge in interest in a more constructive light, as a combination of all these aspects, but also a search for truth and the genuine need for direction. A direction, which is both needed and practical and will assist and not hinder genuine researchers in their unrelenting attempts to uncover truth to assist our understanding of the world we live in. The profession of a genuine educational researcher is a noble one, and must be above any accusation of unethical behaviour.

7 Conclusions

> *Reason guides our attempt to understand the world about us. Both reason and compassion guide our efforts to apply that knowledge ethically, to understand other people, and have ethical relationships with other people.*
>
> Molleen Matsumura, Church-State Activist and Outreach Director of the National Centre for Science Education (NCSE)

It must be accepted that the society of today is replete with ethical lapses and moral ambiguity. Any attempt to resolve the inherent inconsistencies, obvious contradictions and cognitive conundrums that are pervasive within the minefield of ethical dilemmas researched for this paper would be a Herculean task beyond mere mortal ability and fraught with tautologies. For this reason, no definitive answers are proffered, as the author believes that no definitive answers are possible, merely prescriptive contingent discriminations to resolve the current impasse. To assist in this process allusion will be made to some of the conclusive points made by some of the authors already cited within this paper.

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Eisenhart (2001) has no specific answers to the dilemmas confronted by ethnographers. In her final remarks she concludes:

> ethnographers will rarely, if ever, be in leadership positions. Instead, we will have to participate, along with others, with one perspective or voice among many. We will have to be clear about our own agendas and commitments. We will have to speak what we know and believe in, but we will also have to listen, deliberate, negotiate, and compromise around the knowledge and beliefs of others who are involved. Perhaps needs identified out of everyday experience, such as for adequate nutrition, medical care, or educational opportunity, should be the basis for intervention. Perhaps agreed-upon principles, such as justice or equality, should be the basis. Perhaps some combination of the two or some others. Specific plans for change will have to emerge from local deliberation and collaboration around the various possibilities.
>
> (Eisenhart 2001: 24)

The point made by Christians tends to reinforce this very issue when he says that: 'Only a reintegration of autonomy and the moral order provides an alternative paradigm for the social sciences today' (2000: 135). Perhaps, the very ethical principles that are currently so much in vogue are outdated and need to be reviewed in light of current circumstances and actual practices.

As Punch observes: 'a strict application of codes' may 'restrain and restrict' a great deal of 'innocuous' and 'unproblematic' research (1994: 90). Punch goes on to say that encoding privacy protection is meaningless when 'there is no consensus or unanimity on what is public and private' (1994: 94).

Christians asserts that:

> the moral task cannot be reduced to professional ethics. How the moral order works itself out in community formation is the issue, not first of all what practitioners consider virtuous. The challenge for those writing culture is not to limit their moral perspectives to their own codes of ethics, but to understand ethics and values in terms of everyday life.
>
> (Christians 2000: 147)

Cohen *et al.* deduce that:

> However inexperienced in these [ethical] matters researchers are, they will bring to the world of social research a sense of rightness on which they can construct a set of rational principles appropriate to their own circumstances and based on personal, professional, and societal values.
>
> (Cohen *et al.* 2001: 71)

Eisner and Peshkin remark that:

> Clearly, researchers need both cases and principles from which to learn about ethical behaviour. More than this, they need two attributes: the sensitivity to

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> identify an ethical issue and the responsibility to feel committed to acting appropriately in regard to such issues.
>
> (Eisner and Peshkin 1990: 244)

Gomm exposes that:

> the difference between researchers adopting a value-neutral policy towards research and those who adopt a politically committed position underlies important differences in interpretation of what is ethical conduct for researchers.
>
> (Gomm 2004: 321)

May warns that:

> Overall, rigid and inflexible sets of ethical rules for social research (deontology) could leave us with undesirable consequences. Going so far down this ethical road, we might also conclude that the only safe way to avoid violating principles of professional ethics is to refrain from doing social research altogether.
>
> (May 2001: 61)

Pring attests that:

> the values of a democratic community would seem to be essential for the tradition of educational research which serves the many interested parties and which can give assurance that, through openness to criticism, it will at least approximate to the truth.
>
> (Pring 2001: 155)

Smith rationalizes that:

> The core of the resolution of value conflicts is to treat the values as dimensional concepts and ask oneself how much of one value one is willing to give up for how much of another value. And that is a very difficult intellectual process in complex practical situations.
>
> (Smith 1990: 274)

Soltis expounds that:

> Whether codes of proper professional conduct are made explicit or remain implicitly embedded in the practices of the group to which one belongs is not the point, even though making such norms explicit may be desirable. The point is that membership in a professional community carries with it binding collective obligations and forces us to view ethics from a shared perspective.
>
> (Soltis 1990: 250)

It must be fully accepted that the more contemporary approaches to educational research do not meet all the principles or guidelines that have been the ethical tenets used by the profession to date. However, it must also be stated that these approaches have added to our knowledge within this field and in the majority of

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cases no actual harm has been caused as a direct result of the process. This being said we effectively have choices. We can outlaw these approaches on the grounds that they contravene certain ethical principles. We can adopt the principles to incorporate these new approaches. We can give a dispensation to these new approaches, which will allow them to continue, but with a clear conscience, or we can avoid taking any action and hope the problem goes away. Obviously the latter solution is not a real solution but appears to be the main stance adopted by many institutions that have not attempted to reconcile the current dilemma. Perhaps some combination of the first three solutions might be a more plausible approach and would ensure that all the vested parties directly affected by any resolution could be appeased. Care must be taken to ensure that any constraint placed on the researcher will not be unduly onerous or impede the functionality of their undertakings. Flexibility would have to be a key factor in the negotiation of any universal approach to resolving the current impasse.

As stated earlier, perhaps it is impossible to realistically resolve all of the dilemmas that the problems with these conventional approaches to research present. However, the noble nature of the profession alluded to earlier and all those entrusted with its governance owe a duty of care to those working in this field and the general public who are guided by their wisdom to resolve this current impasse and restore full confidence in all research methodologies being practised by its agents.

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