

Sensitive topics and vulnerable groups

Position Paper

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|--|---|
| Introduction | 2 |
| Sensitive topics and vulnerable groups in research | 2 |
| Definition of sensitive topics and vulnerable groups is ambivalent | 2 |
| Vulnerability may affect researchers as well as participants..... | 2 |
| The role of insider research | 3 |
| Research sensitive topics and vulnerable groups may not make research high risk..... | 3 |
| Conclusion..... | 3 |

Introduction

In the spring of 2022, the British Educational Research Association undertook a detailed review of the 2018 ethical guidelines for research (4th edition). In connection with this review, Dr Nicole Brown and Dr Aimee Quickfall were commissioned to compose a position paper in relation to sensitive topics and vulnerable groups.

Sensitive topics and vulnerable groups in research

Research ethics committees and ethical guidelines often distinguish research in categories of low-, medium- and high-risk, one of the determinants for which is whether or not any given research project covers sensitive topics and/or deals with vulnerable participant groups. While we acknowledge that such a distinction may be useful, we would like to take this opportunity to call for a much more nuanced approach, for the following reasons:

Definition of sensitive topics and vulnerable groups is ambivalent

In many instances in our experiences, we have found that the definitions of what makes a topic sensitive and/or a group vulnerable tends to lie with the researcher, the grant funder and/or the ethics committees and their agendas. Proper consideration is not always given as to how an issue could be sensitive to others, and also vulnerabilities that may not be perceived at first. Typically, children, prisoners, disabled people and/or individuals with learning difficulties are automatically categorised as vulnerable. This deficiency-model of viewing individuals does, however, not take into account that any and every participant may be made vulnerable by a topic, by the research process or by the researchers themselves.

Vulnerability may affect researchers as well as participants

Another concern is that often vulnerable groups and sensitive topics are discussed only in relation to the research participants. Naturally, as researchers it is our responsibility to ensure that research participants' circumstances are taken into account. However, ethics committees and grant funders tend to overlook the fact that vulnerabilities and sensitive topics also affect the researchers themselves. The researcher is generally considered the more powerful, strong, and objective side of the relationship, with the participant the vulnerable, taken advantage of, weaker partner. However, in the practice of research there are substantial factors at play that make researchers vulnerable. For example, an early

careers researcher could be very confident in working with young children through prior experience, yet, an experienced researcher may be made vulnerable when working with new methods, participant groups or as an insider researcher.

The role of insider research

A topic that is often disregarded within the context of vulnerability is the role of insider research. Naturally, researchers who are insiders to their participant groups and experiences, will use this knowledge when developing the research process and methodologies. Unfortunately, with this intimate knowledge comes an increased need for considering the duty of care and harm. Insider research, whilst a very powerful way to research, may lead to real-life conflicts and reputational damage.

Research sensitive topics and vulnerable groups may not make research high risk

In relation to ethics committees, there appears to be a general consensus that researching vulnerable groups and sensitive topics makes a research high risk. However, this is a fallacy. For example, if a psychotherapist/counsellor was researching participants with anxiety, that would be their everyday role and part of their professional training, so it would not constitute a high risk at all. However, a researcher who is a mathematician or statistician researching participants with anxiety may be different. The concern we have is that often research relating to vulnerable groups and sensitive topics is subjected to additional verifications and checks as they are considered high risk without taking into account the researchers' professional backgrounds, experience and life-skills.

Conclusion

As outlined above, the consideration of sensitive topics and/or vulnerable groups is not as straightforward as we may hope. In the throes of research and practice, it is often difficult to for a research ethics committee and/or grant funders to consider all of these aspects in detail before drawing conclusions. As a consequence, a certain oversimplification happens that is not necessarily in the best interest of the research, the researcher or the research participants.

We therefore urge that for a revised edition of the British Educational Research Association ethical guidelines, a statement of a general principle would be included that addresses the importance of contextualisation. Researchers must become part of the guidelines, and this can be achieved if the researcher experience and competence are considered in relation to a research project. The same researcher's proposals may be high risk or low risk depending on the specific context, expertise and circumstances. Making the ethical approvals process particularly difficult because a researcher's expertise is not awarded the credit and weigh it deserves is as wrong as is considering that the researcher themselves is not vulnerable. Vulnerability in the context of research is particularly important, as individuals often feel they may put their projects at risk by "admitting" weakness. As such, an important part of the guidance must be on how a researcher, ethics reviewer and/or supervisor can assess risks within their specific remit. After all, everybody has a responsibility for the welfare of the participants and researcher/s.

We also strongly recommend some clarification around insider research. It should be made clear that insider research, particularly researching one's own workplace/social groups comes with additional risks and using other participants should be considered. Insider research should not be undertaken simply because a participant group is the easiest to recruit, such as a friendship group at work. Instead, the role and benefits of insider research needs to be explored and explained more transparently. Researchers might assume that work colleagues or other existing social networks are not a vulnerable group, yet, the potential for individuals to be identified in the data, pressure to report in a certain way and issues with consent mean that participants can easily be made vulnerable.