

Ambition, Boredom, Friendship and Love:

What they tell us about research ethics

We are all educated to believe that research is a rational process. We apply methodologies and sampling techniques. We are logical and 'scientific' in our approach. Researchers, we are led to believe, remain calm, detached, dispassionate. But so much for the fiction; what is research *really* about?



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THE WORDS THAT COME TO MIND are ambition, boredom, friendship and love. They are not ones that we might generally associate with the research process. Yet they are all central to understanding its ethical challenges.

Being 'the first' to discover something or gain credit for an idea is the secret wish of many researchers. Establishing a reputation is about carving out a distinctive set of individual achievements. Getting a PhD is about 'making an original contribution to knowledge'. Researchers are ambitious people. They don't just want to satisfy their idle curiosity and then stand back with disinterest. They want recognition, acknowledgment, rewards. *Ambition* is a positive driver of scholarly endeavour but it is also an emotion that leads to research results being withheld from the scholarly community, concealment via data trimming, and exaggerated claims of 'significance'.

Then there is *boredom*. Research work can often be tedious and unproductive. It is hard work. Hours spent in laboratories repeating experiments, collecting endless questionnaires, and conducting repetitive interviews. This reality makes boredom a powerful emotion for any researcher, closely linked to impatience to see some results coming through. Will anyone notice if I do 15 rather than the promised 20 interviews? Do I have enough

associated with collusion in covering up inaccurate or flawed experiments and in the fair allocation of co-authorship credit. Protecting others is part of the reason. This is one of the iceberg issues in research ethics: the true extent of the problem is submerged under the murky waters that surround academic politics. This includes the disempowerment of junior academics and research assistants who can be cheated of sufficient, or of any credit

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questionnaires to generate a set of results yet? These kinds of corner-cutting questions occur to most researchers at one time or another.

While we tend to call our co-researchers 'colleagues' more often than 'friends', *friendship* relations are central to research, especially where large teams operate in the hard sciences. Here, there are significant risks

by more senior colleagues or 'the boss' who got the grant. The claims of friendship are part of what can lead to gift authorship. The dimensions are complex. In Japan many research students need a first authorship credit to gain a PhD. So, when I asked a Japanese professor about how the order of names on a paper was determined, he simply replied that 'it depends

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who needs it the most'.

Love should be a positive emotion and indeed often is. Researchers are concerned to ensure that they advance knowledge in their subject and seek to make the world a healthier, happier and better understood place. However, love of the discipline can also lead to distortions in results where the researchers are investing their emotional selves in their projects. This is a particular problem in insider research, where teachers might be researching teacher stress, for example. Can they draw a line between their professional identity and interests and their integrity as an independent researcher? The supplantive (rather than simply additive) nature of knowledge can sometimes make researchers resistant to recognising evidence that contradicts their most cherished beliefs.

These examples serve to illustrate that, as Aristotle argued, we need to get the balance right between emotions and actions. This is equally true in the research arena. Developing integrity as a researcher (as opposed to completing an ethical approval form) demands that we live out a series of moral virtues, not just espouse them. These might include courage to research an unpopular or poorly funded topic, or to use

a methodology novel to the discipline. Or it might mean having the *courage* to publish at all where research confronts or contradicts widely held assumptions. Darwin faced this challenge in publishing *On the Origin of Species*.

Respectfulness to research subjects has become a mantra in modern research ethics but needs to be thought of, like all virtues, as a mean between extremes of behaviour. It might seem strange to suggest that one can have too much respectfulness, but then it is important to avoid the pitfalls of sponsorism where researchers compromise their independence in order to satisfy the expectations of the organisation funding their work. For example, research sponsored by tobacco companies about the risks of passive smoking came to a different conclusion than independently funded scholarship.

The virtue of *resoluteness* is essential for a researcher and this involves, in part, overcoming the problems posed by the emotion of boredom. But perhaps one of the most important virtues for a researcher is *sincerity*. We all endeavour to get to the truth, even if we think that truth is really a social construct. We rely on the authenticity of the research of others in constructing our

own by referring to previously published work. The whole fabric of academic research depends on trust in other researchers and their sincerity in trying the best they can to get to the truth. Ambition is, unfortunately, often the reason why researchers occasionally fail to be as sincere as they should be.

In making claims about what we have found out we need *humility* in acknowledging the contributions of others. Then, finally, in evaluating our own efforts *reflexivity* is valuable both in thinking through how far we have answered our own research question (epistemological reflexivity) and in honestly assessing our own performance as a researcher (personal reflexivity).

Research ethics is habitually presented as a series of depersonalised and potentially contradictory principles originally applied in the biomedical sciences. Despite their dominance, these principles are of limited value or relevance in helping researchers to connect ethical issues with their personal values and disciplinary context. Here more discussion using a virtue approach can help (see Macfarlane, 2009).

A virtue approach is about character rather than rules. It places an emphasis on understanding the role of the emotions in practice and how these are related to both virtues and vices. Engaging our students and colleagues in a meaningful debate about these things can help us move beyond the hollowed out notion that research ethics is about filling in an ethical approval form. It can also help us better understand the power of ambition, boredom, friendship and love. ●

References

Macfarlane, B. (2009) *Researching with Integrity: The ethics of academic enquiry*, Routledge, New York.