Research, criticality and research ethics

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Criticality

- Compare (in Russian) *'krutucheskoe myshlenie' 'analiticheskoe myshlenie', 'kritichnost''*

- A source of innovation and creativity

- A source of challenge to existing beliefs, order (for example, scientific, aesthetic, social, political) and authority – hence essential to the advance of knowledge and understanding

- Uncomfortable to live with?

Criticality in research

- The research question (challenges the sufficiency of existing knowledge)
- Rigorous and systematic inquiry (threatens to challenge existing assumptions and to expose the truth)
- Questioning eg through interviews or surveys (threatens to get people thinking)
- Analysis of data (threatens to introduce a new interpretative framework)
- Publication of results (exposes what is reported in research to 'public' scrutiny – but also exposes the research itself to public and peer critique)

Protecting people from exposure to the critical gaze of the researcher – ethical codes

- Constraints on access to research sites (eg schools and classrooms)
- Clarity about the purpose of the research and the terms of participation – and acceptance of them
- Participant control over the process
- Anonymity and confidentiality
- Validation of data and research reports by participants

Obligations to inform people and to put research in the public domain

- Educational research: 'systematic and sustained inquiry *made public*' (Stenhouse 1974 my italics)
- Educational researchers should not agree to conduct research that conflicts with academic freedom, nor should they agree to undue or questionable influence by government or other funding agencies. Examples of such improper influence include endeavours to interfere with the conduct of the research, the analysis of findings, or the reporting of interpretations. (AERA Ethical Standards V,B,: par. 4)
- 40. The right of researchers independently to publish the findings of their research … is linked to the obligation on researchers to ensure that their findings are placed in the public domain and within reasonable reach of educational practitioners and policy makers, parents, pupils and the wider public. . (BERA 2011)

But the ethical decisions are not always so simple

- What happens to *confidentiality* and anonymity if the researcher observes abusive behaviour towards children – or learns reliably of corrupt practices by the school administration?

- What happens to *'the right to publish independently'* if the researcher concludes that – for what might be a variety of reasons – some new government backed educational programme is simply not working

Where and to whom do the researcher's obligations lie in such circumstances?

Codes are not enough

- 'How can a rule show me what I have to do at this point? Whatever I do is on some interpretation in accord with the rule' (Wittgenstein 1967: par. 198).

- 'At times evaluators may have to resort to their consciences rather than to their contracts.' (House 1980)

- 'Principles require judgement, which in turn depends on character, moral discernment, and a person's sense of responsibility and accountability … Often what counts most in the moral life is not consistent adherence to principles and rules, *but reliable character, moral good sense, and emotional responsiveness'*. (Beauchamp and Childress 1994: 462)

Intellectual virtue

- open-mindedness, wholeheartedness, and responsibility (Dewey 1916).
- three clusters of virtue: intellectual *impartiality*, or openness to the ideas of others; intellectual *sobriety*, i.e. the virtues of the careful inquirer who accepts only what is warranted by relevant reasons, evidence and argument; and intellectual *courage*, which includes perseverance and determination (Montmarquet 1986 1993)
- courage, respectfulness, resoluteness, sincerity, humility and reflexivity (Macfarlane 2009: 42)

A receptive audience

- Research is a waste of time if the researcher does not have the courage and independence to be critical
- It is all a waste of time if the 'audience' is not open minded enough to accept criticism in a good spirit
- It helps the world go round if both the giving and receiving are performed with kindness and generosity of spirit
- 'Critical friendship'

From NIS Code of Research Ethics (2015)

- **4.4 Acceptance of Research as Critical Engagement**

- The organization should acknowledge that research involves questioning and critique and should be welcoming of research reports that provide critical engagement with contemporary developments as well as reassuring endorsement of them.

The discussion extended…

- David Bridges (2017 forthcoming) ***Philosophy in Educational Research: Epistemology, ethics politics and quality***. Dordrecht and New York: Springer

- Chapter 18 *Four issues for ethical code makers*

- Chapter 19 *Research for sale? Epistemic, moral and political drift through the commodification of educational research*