

# **Ethics in Action (Research)**

**2004 AES Conference  
13 October 2004**

# Agenda

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- Overview: ethics and action research
- Work groups: ethics in action (research)
- Feedback, discussion, synthesis
- Next steps

# Ethics and Action Research (AR)

- Evolution of ethics
- Role of ethics in research
- Ethical principles
- Characteristics of AR
- Work groups: identifying tensions between ethics and AR

# Evolution of ethics

- Ethics has grown out of medicine
- Positivistic assumptions underpin research ethics
- Does this constrain interpretative enquiry?

# The role of ethics in research

- Consider moral questions and principles in research to protect:
  - Rights of participants
  - Researcher/s and their institutions (and funder/s)
  - Outputs of the research
- What else?

# Ethical processes and procedures

- Formal ethical approval (tertiary institutions; Health Research Council [NZ], others...)
- Codes of practices / ethics (e.g. AES Code of Ethics, The Code of Ethics of the New Zealand Association of Psychotherapists etc...)
- Legal requirements (e.g. in New Zealand: Official Information Act 1982; Bill of Rights Act 1990; The Mental Health Act 1992; Code of Health and Disability Services Consumers' Rights 1996, Privacy Act 1993 etc)

# Ethical principles

# Ethical principles

- Validity of research
- Respect for persons
- Informed and voluntary consent
- Minimising risk of harm
- Respect for privacy and confidentiality
- The avoidance of unnecessary deception
- Avoidance of conflict of interest
- Social and cultural sensitivity
- Distributive justice



# Defining action research

- An interactive social science research approach
- A collaborative approach to inquiry or investigation that provides people with the means to take systematic action
- Combines dual goals of action (change) and research (information and understanding)

# The action research cycle

- Identify problem area
- Imagine a solution
- Implement the solution
- Evaluate the solution
- Change practice in light of the evaluation



- 2 intertwined spirals develop to yield:
  - A better understanding of the situation being researched
  - Better processes for researching the situation, more penetrating questions

# Characteristics of AR

- Open ended, iterative process
- Reflection is central to this process
- Non linear
- Evolving research questions and methods
- Participation is key
- Participant is active not passive in the research process
- Commitment to change

# Ethics in action

- Work groups of 6 people (mixed teams)
- Participate in ethical reasoning to identify tensions with AR
- Select one or more of two scenarios (or your own)
- Select a chairperson to report back
- Everyone contributes
- Be open; be challenging; no 'one' right answer

# What are tensions between ethics & AR?

# Tensions between ethics and AR

- Non linear and iterative process:
  - Informed and voluntary consent
  - Minimising harm
  - Anonymity & confidentiality
- Researcher / participant or active participants
  - Validity of research if using 'novice' researcher / participant
  - Respect for persons (complexity of relationships)
  - Conflict of interest
  - Respect of privacy
- What else?

# Active ethical reasoning

- Codes of ethics provide general ethical principles and practical rules to guide practice
- But formal ethical approval does not guarantee an ethical research project
- Ethical reasoning is an active process throughout an action research project

# Active ethical reasoning

- Active and self questioning approach:

*“It is because of the complexities of research ethics, and because there is unlikely ever to be one clear ethical solution, that a practical approach which involves asking yourself difficult questions – and pushing yourself hard to answer them – is particularly important.” (Mason, 1996)*

- Action research 3 intertwined spirals
  - Better understanding of the situation
  - Better processes for researching
  - Better ethical reasoning



# Next steps

- Further comments on ethics and AR to Ngaire Bennie at [ngaire.bennie@minedu.govt.nz](mailto:ngaire.bennie@minedu.govt.nz)
- American Journal of Action Research is putting out a special edition on ethics and action research in 2005 (Ministry of Education have submitted a paper)
- Others?