

## Research Ethics and Practitioners: Concerns and Strategies for Novice Researchers Engaged in Graduate Education<sup>1</sup>

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**Key words:**

research ethics,  
practitioner  
research, graduate  
students, ethical  
standards,  
morality

**Abstract:** In recent years, practitioner research has gained prominence in academic literature and in graduate programs. This has led to increased attention to the ethical complexities of research that interconnects with professional practice. Many practitioner-researchers struggle to plan research that simultaneously satisfies their intellectual curiosity, the ethical standards of their professional practice, and their institutional research ethics boards. These struggles are particularly evident for new researchers, including those engaged in graduate study. In this paper, we identify ethical tensions for novice practitioner-researchers enrolled in a graduate research course. The paper is intended to contribute to conversations about teaching research ethics in graduate education.

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## 1. Introduction

*"I find the ethical issues are quite difficult to sort out and make defined boundaries."*  
(Stephanie, a beginning M.Ed. Student)

Beginning researchers have many questions about research ethics and how to conduct research. Teaching and learning about research ethics is therefore an important component of research methods courses (BRINTHAUPT, 2002), especially for graduate students who are expected to complete independent research to fulfill degree requirements. The need for research ethics education may be particularly important in Education graduate programs, which attract students from a wide range of professions (e.g., teaching, counseling, health care, recreation and leisure, business training and development, legal practice)

<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this paper was presented at the American Educational Research Association annual conference, Chicago, IL (April 2003).

who typically plan to conduct research in their professional work settings (i.e., educational institutions, hospitals, industrial settings, clinics, legal offices, etc.). The research community struggles to understand the ethical complexities of practitioner research, that is, research conducted in conjunction with professional practice in a given field (PRITCHARD, 2002; SIMONS & USHER, 2000). The complexities of combining professional practice with research obligations raise considerable difficulties for novice practitioner-researchers as they attempt to simultaneously satisfy their intellectual curiosity, the ethical standards of their professional practice, and their institutional research ethics boards. Overall, this paper is intended to identify ethical tensions for beginning practitioner-researchers enrolled in a graduate research course. The paper is intended to contribute to conversations about teaching research ethics in university settings, particularly Education graduate programs. [1]

## **2. The Complexities of Research Ethics in Education**

Education is a field of study that draws upon a diverse range of disciplines (e.g., psychology, sociology, literary theory, legal studies, etc.) and therefore provides opportunities for researchers to select among a number of disciplines in designing, conducting, and presenting their work (SHULMAN, 1988). Educational researchers draw upon the perspectives of many disciplines, each with its own set of concepts, methods, and procedures. At the same time, Education, like other fields of study and disciplines, has been characterized as existing within an era of paradigm proliferation (BRUNER, 1996; DONMOYER, 1996; MILLER, NELSON, & MOORE, 1998; SMITH, 1997). Traditional positivist research exists alongside interpretivist, participatory, and autobiographical research. There is no single genre for the conduct or presentation of educational research. This plethora of research approaches has contributed to a complex and evolving ethical landscape for educational research. [2]

Researchers and theorists have begun to articulate the particular ethical concerns for quantitative research (HERRERA, 1996; JONES, 2000; SAMMONS, 1988), qualitative research (de LAINE, 2000; HADJISTAVROPOULOS & SMYTHE, 2001; van den HOONAARD, 2002), autobiographical research (LEATHERBY, 2000), narrative research (GOTTLIEB & LASSER, 2001; SMYTHE & MURRAY, 2000), practitioner or action research (GLEN, 2000; KELLY, 1988; McNAMEE, 2002a; PRITCHARD, 2002; STUART, 1998; TICKLE, 2002), feminist research (GLEN, 2000; KIRSCH, 1999; PATAI, 1991; RIDDELL, 1988; USHER, 2000; WALKER, 1998; WEINBERG, 2002), among other characterizations. Many researchers now realize that ethical research must consider the whole person and the "moral career" of the inquirer (de LAINE, 2000; SCHWANDT, 1995). Education graduate students must be supported to work through the complexities of disciplines, paradigms, methods, ethical standards, and ethical commitments. Furthermore, the vast majority of Education graduate students are full-time working professionals who therefore must balance academic, professional, and personal commitments. Ethical concerns cut across disciplinary, personal, professional, and legal spheres (cf. JOHNSON & ALTHEIDE, 2002). Given these complexities, McNAMEE (2002a) argues that "one can properly challenge the

level of preparation given to researchers in the field of ethics and educational research, and question whether it can sensitize and guide them toward more acceptably professional conduct" (p.130). This paper represents one attempt to unpack the ethical complexities of educational research by documenting (a) the concerns and issues faced by one group of Education graduate students and (b) the kinds of preparation provided through the research methods course in which they were enrolled. [3]

### **3. Context**

#### **3.1 The course**

*Introduction to Educational Research* is a required 36-hour course for all students enrolled in a Master of Education program. This course provides an introduction to the assumptions, concepts, and procedures associated with a diverse range of qualitative and quantitative approaches to educational research. The course is targeted toward building a repertoire of conceptual and practical research skills that will enable students to successfully prepare for and subsequently complete independent research in the form of a thesis or project (an exit requirement for the degree). Both authors have been involved in teaching this course for a number of years. [4]

Thirteen students (10 women and 3 men) were enrolled in one section of the course taught by McGINN. All 13 students volunteered to participate in a case study of their learning in the course (see also McGINN, DUNSTAN, & FAULKNER, 2002). Given our focus on research ethics, it is important to note that this research project received ethics clearance from our institutional research ethics board. At the beginning of term, all students were apprised of our intent to conduct research in the course. All students received instruction about research ethics and a complete copy of the research ethics application that was submitted by the course instructor. Students were informed that their participation in class activities was required for educational and assessment purposes, but that the decision to participate in the research was completely separate from course assessment. Students were assured that their participation was voluntary and that their confidentiality would be maintained through the use of pseudonyms. Students were asked not to inform the instructor directly about their intentions to participate in the research. At the end of the course, students were asked to sign consent forms if they chose to participate in the research. The instructor was out of the room while students signed the forms and did not receive the signed forms until all course grades had been submitted. [5]

Students in the course participated in a series of research activities that involved investigating other graduate students' understandings and implementation of research methods in thesis or project research. The major course assignments were as follows:

1. A content analysis of two theses or projects completed in the department. These assignments were submitted to a web-based conferencing space (WebCT) and provided important data for assignment 4.
2. A 25-minute paired seminar about a research approach.
3. A semi-structured interview of a student working on a thesis or project in the department, including transcribing and analyzing the interview, and soliciting feedback from the interviewed student. Transcripts and analyses were submitted to WebCT.
4. A statistics project that involved entering and analyzing numeric data from the content analyses of the theses and projects submitted by all class participants (assignment 1) and another unrelated research project.
5. Weekly reflections on the course readings and assignments through WebCT. [6]

In the fourth week of the course, one class session (three hours) was devoted to discussion of issues of research ethics. Students read a chapter from the course textbook (PALYS, 1997), the university policy and application forms, and an article about one researcher's struggle to conduct "respectful research" in an educational setting (TILLEY, 1998). As with other course topics, students were expected to submit a 250-word reflection to the WebCT electronic conferencing forum plus shorter reactions to two or three classmates' responses. However, unlike most other course topics, students did not confine their discussion of this course topic to the set discussion week. Instead, discussion of research ethics issues continued throughout the course in the online forum and in face-to-face class meetings. Online conversations about research ethics began two weeks prior to the class session and continued until the last class. Overall, "research ethics" was one of the most common topics addressed in the online forum. Of the 437 messages for the term, 68 (over 15%) directly referenced issues of research ethics. This finding clearly indicates the importance and relevance of research ethics for this group of students. The prevalence of research ethics in students' online conversations prompted us to examine the content of these messages and how they might inform our work as educational researchers, research methods course instructors, and graduate supervisors. [7]

### **3.2 The analysis**

We searched the WebCT database to identify all student messages that discussed research ethics. These messages include (a) students' reflections and written responses during the week that research ethics was the class focus, (b) other reflections and written responses throughout the term that referenced research ethics, and (c) students' formal written assignments (thesis or project analyses, interview analyses) that referenced research ethics directly. [8]

An initial review of these messages highlighted students' comments and queries related to (a) the university policy and application forms (i.e., "paper ethics," see TILLEY, 1998), (b) ethical standards for members of their professions (teaching, physiotherapy, counseling, etc.), and (c) personal moral commitments about "respectful" and "just" practices. The messages provide evidence of the students'

struggles to resolve tensions between the ethical standards of their professions, the requirements of institutional research ethics boards, and their own personal moral positions. The students were uncertain how to proceed when work that was a natural part of their daily practice (e.g., documenting students' learning, evaluating a new therapeutic treatment program, soliciting feedback from colleagues) now came under the scrutiny of the university and its research ethics board (cf. JANESICK, 2002; LINCOLN & TIERNEY, 2004). These uncertainties reflected the moral tensions that GLEN (2000) characterized in her distinction between internal and external integrity, that is, between competing values, principles, and desires within an individual (internal integrity) and compromises between social groups or organizations (external integrity). Based upon these preliminary considerations, the two authors independently coded all of the WebCT messages to identify descriptions of paper ethics, professional ethics, personal ethics, daily practice issues, and other relevant notions. We reviewed our coding during joint analysis sessions. Through this process, we identified a series of competing agendas that influenced students' understandings about research and research ethics. In this paper, we review the various competing agendas that students experienced and provide excerpts from student postings to substantiate our analyses. [9]

#### **4. Complexities and Competing Agendas in Educational Research**

Throughout the online class conversations, the students' comments revealed the complexities of research ethics in practice. The students raised concerns about historical cases such as the Tuskegee syphilis experiments (UNITED STATES PUBLIC HEALTH SERVICE, 1973), MILGRAM's (1963) obedience studies, and HUMPHREY's (1970) investigation of the "tearoom trade" (i.e., impersonal sexual encounters in public settings). The students also critiqued more recent research that was addressed in the media and in their other courses, including the Russel Ogden case where a Canadian graduate student successfully argued for researcher-participant privilege when his research records on assisted suicide involving persons with AIDS were subpoenaed by a coroner (see PALYS, n.d., 1997). For example, Rachel wrote:

"Reading first the Palys chapter, and then the Tilley article, I was forced to really think about what 'research' has taken place in the name of science. Some of the research which has taken place is appalling, and it really makes me cringe at the thought of being associated in the same class of 'scientists' as they are." [10]

The students' conversations support critiques and questions that appear in the research literature (e.g., BURGESS, 1988; de LAINE, 2000; LEE-TRAWEEK & LINKOGLE, 2000; McNAMEE & BRIDGES, 2002; SIMONS & USHER, 2000; STANLEY, SIEBER, & MELTON, 1996; van den HOONAARD, 2002). In particular, the conversations revolved around three key topics: (a) the multiple roles and conflicting obligations of practitioners, researchers, and students; (b) ethical issues that can be addressed through forms and guidelines; and (c) personal and moral commitments toward what counts as ethical behavior. [11]

#### **4.1 Practitioners, researchers, and students: Multiple roles and conflicting obligations**

As students in an introductory research course, participants were simultaneously students and beginning researchers. As well, many students had professional obligations and roles including K-12 teaching, adult education, college instruction, physiotherapy, personal training, counseling, health education, and international exchange coordination. Many of the students planned to conduct research in their professional settings. As McNAMEE (2002a) has argued,

"[i]t is not uncommon for research by in-service professionals to investigate their own professional context. The option of ignoring the nexus of other roles is not possible; one cannot decide to disregard one's identity as a professional engaged in that context" (pp.136-137). [12]

Not surprisingly, the WebCT postings include references to the similarities and differences among the various roles that students held as researchers, learners, and professionals; and the ways that those roles influenced their evolving identities, research plans, and questions about research and research ethics (cf. de LAINE, 2000, pp.94-119). For example, Joanne wrote:

"Through the course of my week, I don't really consider myself a Student, let alone a Researcher. However, as I was reading last night, it struck me that we all do some form of research everyday. In my Physiotherapy Clinic, I am conducting ongoing research into the efficacy of my treatments, all be it on an informal basis, using mainly observationally techniques." [13]

Joanne's posting highlights the similarities between her professional practice and research. GLEN (2000) has argued that healthcare practitioners are familiar with action research because it mirrors their daily work practices, which involve assessing patient needs, providing an intervention, and reviewing progress. Similar claims can be made about the match between teaching and research, a connection that the students highlighted through an extended conversation that emphasized the critical role of observation in both teaching and research as exemplified in Dianne's posting:

"Tilley talked about the teacher-researcher difficulties and asked whether it was possible to teach and systematically observe at the same time. My reaction to that was that teachers can't teach any other way. We are called upon to systematically observe at all times, even on the playground or in the lunchroom. In order to teach well we must observe and record behaviours, ideas, comments and attitudes ... I think all teachers are researchers but rarely are aware of this important aspect until they have a form to fill out." [14]

The responses to Dianne's posting indicated strong agreement with her statement that teachers are by definition researchers. However, the responses also emphasized some of the subtle distinctions among teaching, learning, and research. For example, Rachel wrote:

"What you say is true- teachers who do not 'observe' their students miss a lot and, as a result, the teacher suffers, as well as the student! I think though that Tilley was referring to making observations in the capacity of a researcher, which I think is slightly different. In the role of a researcher, the teacher is not observing the students for the purposes of evaluation, but rather to serve the purpose of furthering their research. The two overlap perhaps, but are not one in the same." [15]

The ensuing discussion revealed the students' recognition that, while there may be considerable overlap between the roles of a teacher and a researcher, these are distinct roles. As Rachel explained, the "duality" of being simultaneously a teacher and a researcher influences how one teaches and how one researches:

"I enjoyed reading Tilley's article, and her discussion of the duality of the situation she was in. As both teacher and researcher, her roles became inextricably linked and as a result, both were effected. The section on 'Documentation: RePresenting the Women' was particularly effective. Whenever someone is in a research position their observations are subject to their individual biases. Tilley did well to recognize this and in the process has some valid contributions and suggestions to make to those undertaking any research projects." [16]

Erin introduced the notion of the "double role of a double identity" as a way to discuss the complexities of combining the roles of teacher and researcher:

"Tilley also leads ones reading of this article towards the difficulties that a researcher, who has been involved previously with her research population, might encounter. The double role of a double identity make the process a little bit challenging. It has to do with what she called the outsider/insider. When she started and stopped to be an outsider? And when she started and stopped to be an insider? How does the fact that the researcher was 'someone familiar' affected the results? I consider that this article promotes the idea that in order to be a respectful researcher, one might be sensitive and do not lose from perspective that one is with 'life'. Sensitivity can help to represent research findings in a respectful way." [17]

As GLEN (2000) has argued in the context of healthcare professionals, double roles entail a form of "double-mindedness." GLEN provided a case example of a nurse practitioner engaged in action research who encountered a 14-year-old patient who confided that she might be pregnant, did not know what to do, and did not want anyone (especially her mother) to know. Before the nurse practitioner had an opportunity to solicit more information from her young patient, the mother entered the examining room demanding to know why the girl had been feeling nauseous and tired. The dilemma for the nurse practitioner was to balance her personal and professional obligations to the 14-year-old patient, the patient's mother, the potential child that the 14-year-old could be carrying, and to the healthcare profession toward whom her research was targeted. [18]

As de LAINE (2000) has argued, "A multiplicity of roles goes to make up the social self; the researcher may be mother, student, nurse or therapist. The individual performs multiple roles in the field, to be held in abeyance in some

situations, or combined with others in differing circumstances" (p.97). Multiple roles may lead to conflicts of interest, and ethical and moral dilemmas. For example, Stephanie noted the need to balance the roles of researcher and practitioner that was evident in a research report that she had read for another course:

"I suppose the not[e] taking gets distracting through and one [teaching or research] must have priority over the other. I just finished reading a narrative/case study about the cycle of low literacy in my families and education course. The teacher was also the researcher and she made it clear at the end that she put teaching as a priority over research. I think that is an ethical decision for her, but it may make for less validity." [19]

Like the author of the research report that Stephanie described, many students gave priority to their obligations as professionals rather than their obligations as either students or researchers. However, Sophia, who had taken a leave from the college where she taught, commented about her desire to live the role of a student (at least temporarily) rather than the role of a practitioner or researcher.

"To me, being a researcher means working. It means going back to the College and taking on the persona of a professional. It means responsibilities and politics and frustrations. In my position at the College, I have participated in various stages of research. Even when I was doing pilot testing for a new reading instrument out of [a university], after the initial learning curve, it became tedious. It's work." [20]

Sophia's response might be considered a reaction to McNAMEE's (2002a) suggestion that for "those who are by temperament of motivation guided to the educational life ... their many professional roles are often shot through with incompatible demands" (p.129). This situation is particularly evident in the essay by TICKLE (2002), where he explored the tensions that gaining consent, establishing trust, being open, listening in confidence, and anonymizing participants created for him as a teacher educator engaged in action research. He described two different cases where beginning teachers working under his supervision faced difficulties in their school placements and were reluctant to report this information for fear of recrimination. As a teacher-educator, TICKLE was obliged to help these beginning teachers prepare for educational careers. He also needed to circumvent any potential problems for other new teachers who might be placed in the same school settings. At the same time, TICKLE's commitment to action research meant that he needed to document his teacher education practices. In both cases, TICKLE faced a dilemma because he had guaranteed confidentiality under the auspices of the research project, and now as an instructor he needed to intervene for educational purposes. The two cases demonstrate the ways that openness, honesty, anonymity, and confidentiality complicate the maintenance of dual roles as both practitioner and researcher.

"For the action researcher, each may in its own way both open windows and close doors, precisely because the research is directly associated with professional action

within a given—and continuing—social situation. The practitioner researcher has an integrated role, as actor and as information gatherer" (TICKLE, 2002, p.46). [21]

McNAMEE (2002a) warns that these dual roles may lead to "guilty knowledge," which he defined as "the feeling of guilt that arises when one both comes to know of certain harms or wrong doings and is torn between courses of action to remove the sense of guilt that attaches to the knowledge" (p.131). Such guilty knowledge can lead practitioner researchers into ethical dilemmas about which professional commitments to satisfy and which to thwart (GLEN, 2000). John raised this issue in a question that he posed to Ellen:

"Can the distinction between protecting privacy and the idea of secrecy (a researcher not presenting information because of her or his proximal relationship with the subjects) be made and who judges it? i remember you talking about a student in a class you taught. without your definitive knowledge about his case you could not have helped. How did you protect his privacy? was anything hidden from other teachers or his parents?" [22]

The students' conversations suggest the need for research methods instructors to provide guidance through example. That is, research methods instructors can help students to make ethical decisions and to question ongoing ethical issues and guidelines by sharing both published and personal research stories. For example, research methods course instructors can provide research stories from the published literature (e.g., McNAMEE & BRIDGES, 2002; SIMONS & USHER, 2000; TILLEY, 1998; van den HOONAARD, 2002) that describe researchers' attempts to resolve ethical tensions in practice. More importantly, research methods course instructors can model their own thought processes and emotional reasoning strategies as they work through research decisions and related ethical dilemmas in their own research. As GLEN (2000) suggests, research methods course instructors need to model integrity by authentically espousing personal moral and ethical commitments. She cites McFALL (1987) in arguing that, "one must speak 'in the first person' and make one's principles one's own" (GLEN, 2000, p.13). [23]

In addition to drawing support from research methods course instructors, students hoped that their graduate advisors would help them to deal with the potential ethical quandaries that they might face in their research. As Lynn stated, "the individuals we eventually acquire as our advisors will need to be selected with great care." The students' comments reinforce our commitments as graduate supervisors to model ethical research practices. Beyond graduate advisors, the students also looked to the ethical guidelines available through their professional associations and university regulations. [24]

#### **4.2 Forms and guidelines for research ethics: What's addressed and what's overlooked?**

In general, the students were very much in agreement with the need for ethical standards and principles. Rachel commented:

"I was intrigued by the issues which precipitated the development of the ethical principles by the APA [American Psychological Association]. So much of what they suggest as guidelines seems so obvious to me, and yet there is apparently a very real need to outline these ethical standards for some members of the population." [25]

Many students found that the examples in the textbook (PALYS, 1997) helped to explain ethical principles and justify their rationale as Ellen explained, "These examples do an excellent job of explaining the reasons why it is important and necessary for researchers to be required to follow standard ethical principles." Dianne argued that, "researchers must look closely at all aspects of their research which means that they must think it through in light of the guidelines given ... I was glad to read that there were guidelines for researchers to follow." [26]

Dianne was not the only student to express gratitude for the availability of national guidelines and a university handbook to help sort through the potential ethical issues involved in a proposed research project. For example, Sharon wrote, "The supplied handbook on our university's research ethics help prepare our research." The existence of these resources prompted the students to think carefully about their research and what might be involved. As Erin explained, "The University Faculty Handbook make me think about the serious process that involves the decision to make the commitment of conduct a research on campus and the amount of people that should be involved." However, some students found that additional explanation was required to make sense of these complex documents:

"In terms of [the institution's] ethical handbook, I hope we go over this in class because some clarification would be helpful. There's a lot of jargon and some explicit understanding about what I will have to encounter for my exit project would be helpful" (Stephanie). [27]

Comments like Stephanie's suggest that students were aware that although the ethical guidelines and handbook provided a basic recipe or prescription for conducting ethical research, more information was required to fully explore their roles as morally responsible researchers. Some of their comments suggest the need for further guidance and advice regarding their "moral careers" as educational researchers (de LAINE, 2000; SCHWANDT, 1995). [28]

Students were conscious that they would need to document their attention to research ethics issues in their theses or projects. University Senate regulations require that all theses or projects involving research with human participants must include a letter from the institutional research ethics board confirming ethics clearance for the research. Based upon the prevalence of human participants in educational research, this regulation means that almost all students would need

to submit an application to the research ethics board at some point during their graduate program. Comparable requirements are now in place at most institutions (PRING, 2002). In addition to providing safeguards for potential research participants, this requirement also had an impact upon the students' perceptions of themselves as researchers. Dianne explained:

"For me the big step was doing the ethics application. Thinking through the rationale, risks, benefits etc. was huge in helping me feel like a researcher. In my interview [analysis assignment] J did not go through that process and I found it interesting that while he looks at research much differently after doing the course, he does not feel like a researcher." [29]

Despite their positive reactions to the ethics guidelines and the ethics application process, students recognized that there was more to ethics than filling in forms. For example, John drew upon an analogy to officiating a sports match to explain that, "As with any game or assignment, management on many levels is imperative. Regardless of the black and white rules or procedures, there are the gray areas of ethics and human actions that come into play." Rachel also commented on the advice about navigating among potentially competing principles:

"I really like the way that the CPA [Canadian Psychological Association] recognizes that some of the ethical decisions made by researchers are not cut and dry, and that as an organization, they actually outline which principles are more important to maintain than others." [30]

Martin was most vocal in raising concerns about the shortcomings of policies and procedures:

"My ideal was not to question the individual policies, but to establish the importance ethics plays into our daily lives. I don't think that any policy can teach ethics or should function in a manner to be used as a shield [for] politicians or school officials. If the playing field is level for all research then don't hide behind some sort of invisible boundary which only intention is to protect someone's A\*\*." [31]

He further argued,

"[e]thics or morals cannot be taught in one class or term. You eventually will have the odd scientist pushing the limits. Making a bunch of rules and regulations which will only seek to limit honest scientist completing ethical research will only hinder research in all fields." [32]

On the other hand, Sophia expressed discomfort with the thought that completing institutional requirements might not be sufficient:

"I think what I'm most uncomfortable with is the sense that in order to be accepted as authentic, appropriate and valid, the researcher must pass through hoops beyond the

standard ones. I accept ethics review; I accept academic credentialing and standards. I feel like these should be enough." [33]

She was further convinced that researchers who followed the institutional regulations should receive full institutional support. In commenting upon the Russell Ogden case (see PALYS, n.d.), she asked, "If universities require us to fill in ethics forms and meet certain standards, and we do so to their satisfaction, don't they have a responsibility to protect us if it all blows up in our/their faces?" [34]

Given that these students are beginning researchers, we cannot expect them to have all the answers. Forms and guidelines can only address so much. As PRING (2002) states,

"[i]t is impossible to conceive of moral life without implicit reference to a set of principles that are embodied within moral practice. But that does not mean that one can, as it were read off from that code or those principles what exactly one should do on any one occasion" (pp.113-114). [35]

De LAINE (2000) concluded her book with the following point:

"Fieldworkers continue conducting studies informed by criteria of formal codes and guidelines, believing that while they are within such parameters they are engaged in ethical fieldwork, but their behaviour could be perceived as morally objectionable. Ethical codes cannot adequately deal with the 'grey areas' of qualitative field research, and these 'grey areas' seem to be increasing" (p.215). [36]

Furthermore, SMALL (2002) argued that establishing codes of ethics may even hinder ethical behavior for those codes focus only on particular ethical issues.

"Codes of ethics present a temptation to institutionalize one philosophical approach to ethics, namely, a 'top-down' strategy. By this I mean one which follows the successful models of logic and geometry by starting with abstract and universal principles, and proceeding to derive particular judgements from them through a kind of logical reasoning" (pp.90-91). [37]

John expressed a similar concern in his question, "Is this what ethics has come down to—structure and not value?" Other researchers and theorists have pointed to the shortcomings of ethics forms and guidelines in terms of feminist or other moral commitments (GLEN, 2000; TILLEY, 1998; USHER, 2000). Many researchers note that ethics forms and guidelines fail to address the ambiguities of educational research and the complex strains of responsibility for practitioners who conduct educational research (KELLY, 1988; McNAMEE, 2002a; PRITCHARD, 2002; SIMONS & USHER, 2000; TICKLE, 2002). Discussions in the research literature and in the WebCT conference space for this class address personal and moral commitments toward what counts as ethical behavior. [38]

### 4.3 Personal and moral commitments: Ethical fitness and virtuous researchers

John provided the following summary of the three required course readings about research ethics (PALYS, 1997; TILLEY, 1998; and the university handbook):

"Palys tells us of the academic organisational or institutional codes created—Tilley speaks of the personal subjective research dilemmas—our own university's guide tells us the way we are going to be good and do proper research. but when it comes down to it, can you make the right, just, fair, respectful, and honest decision? it seems to be that simple." [39]

John's "simple" question about whether individuals can make a "right, just, fair, respectful, and honest decision" is akin to PRING's (2002) assertion that it is more important to consider the virtues of the researcher than to think in terms of principles, codes, and rules. As PRING argued, "The ways in which researchers engage in moral deliberation depend on the sort of persons they are—the dispositions they have to act or respond in one way rather than another" (p.123). [40]

While the guidelines may be helpful, they are clearly insufficient. As Lynn stated,

"I am happy that ethical behavior is given so much attention as it is in Palys' chapter. There doesn't seem to be much left out. In fact, it teaches one a very valuable lesson in many ways and I draw upon the statement that 'The researcher is the one to judge' as we make sense out of the dilemmas our own research will no doubt present." [41]

Similarly, Ellen commented, "I agree with [TILLEY, 1998] that although the good intentions and integrity of the researcher do not guarantee that harm will not be done to subjects in the research process, these are paramount in strengthening any official protection given." [42]

However, PRING (2002) warns that simply being a virtuous person may also be insufficient: "The unreflecting but virtuous life is not sufficiently helpful when conflicts emerge—when underlying norms and values (previously only implicit) are challenged or eroded in the very social foundations of one's practice" (p.117). John referenced KIDDER's (1996) notion of "ethical fitness" as one way to be both virtuous and reflective. As John explained, "i think it is really inherent upon the person. it takes being honest and ethically fit to be open-mindedly innocent about the results. you need your intelligence and intuition to get going in a good way." Based upon John's definition, ethical fitness requires researchers to strike a balance between intrapersonal, interpersonal, and extrapersonal (or institutional) interests. STERNBERG (2003) defines this balance as wisdom. [43]

Concerns about the personal and moral commitments of individual researchers also prompted Sophia to ask some important questions about academic freedom and the value of knowledge gathered under suspect conditions:

"It's too facile to rest on Palys' words, 'Knowledge that rests on a foundation of manipulation, hierarchy, deception, distance, and control probably isn't worth having' (p.114). First of all, he says 'probably' which doesn't convince me that he completely buys into this, but more importantly my question is 'Why?' Does the method by which knowledge was obtained determine the relative value of the knowledge itself? If knowledge is obtained by means other than those sanctioned by pc [political correctness], does that negate the knowledge itself even if it leads to further information which could help the preferred cause? Isn't the pursuit of knowledge, the quest for answers a value worth protecting and fighting for? Isn't the freedom of curiosity and honest exploration more valuable than toeing a line set by others?" [44]

Clearly the students in the course were wrestling with challenging ethical questions as they strived to become wise researchers (see STERNBERG, 2003). Their struggles and questions indicate that they were beginning to develop virtuous research habits on an individual and a collective basis. Their comments suggest that they were beginning to explore their responsibilities as researchers and critically reflect upon matters of intellectual freedom and moral judgment. Many students were aware that they were caught between the, often contradictory, expectations of themselves as morally responsible researchers and the demands of institutional and professional guidelines. As a group, the students were also developing shared community practices that could sustain their individual commitments to moral responsibility.

"Virtues are fostered—and indeed related to—particular social contexts and without that social support personal virtues so often weaken ... Therefore, if we are wanting virtuous researchers, then we must have 'virtuous research communities,' communities which embody the very virtues which one requires of the members of those communities" (PRING, 2002, p.125). [45]

For John, the desire for a virtuous research community prompted him to request a greater emphasis on teaching ethical fitness and the philosophy of thought:

"Individually researchers must make the effort to find the distinctions with a difference, within themselves, and their research. that is why innocence is so terribly important. not only to be open-minded, but to try to rid oneself of stereotypes is imperative and difficult in life. maybe that is why the philosophy of thought or decision-making ought to be taught" (John). [46]

On the other hand, some students remained cautious in their plans. For example, Stephanie claimed, "I think for now I will just stray far away from research that could border on unethical." Of course, staying within the bounds of ethical practice requires clear understanding of ethical, moral, and professional commitments. These commitments may compete and lead to the kinds of tensions that were at the heart of conversations throughout the course. [47]

## 5. Recommendations and Concluding Thoughts

Students in the research course spent considerable time discussing the complexities of practitioner research and potential difficulties that they might face as they embarked upon the research projects that they would need to complete in order to satisfy their degree requirements. Their online discussions highlighted similarities and differences among their roles as practitioners, researchers, and students. Working professionals in the course were well aware of their obligations and responsibilities as practitioners, and were beginning to discover their new (sometimes, competing) obligations as researchers and students. Through the research course, they drew connections to the elements of research that were present in their day-to-day work practices (e.g., observation, note-taking, assessment) and began to see themselves as researchers (cf. MCGINN, 2002). Despite their emerging identities as researchers, they also recognized that sometimes their professional roles as teachers, therapists, health-care providers, and other practitioners would need to outweigh their obligations as researchers. At the same time, their emerging understandings about research led them to deeper understandings about reciprocal relationships among the various social roles that they held. They understood that their evolution as researchers could have lasting effects on their roles as practitioners, certainly a desired outcome for a graduate degree in Education. They looked to models provided through course readings and class discussions to think about how they could resolve any tensions that they might face during their master's research and beyond. [48]

Given their emerging understandings about the ethical complexities of practitioner research, the students also came to understand the content of research ethics forms and guidelines. Perhaps, more importantly, they came to understand the reason why such forms could only ever partially address ethical decision making. Only certain contingencies can be identified in advance and documented on paper. True tests of "ethical fitness" (KIDDER, 1996) or "wisdom" (STERNBERG, 2003) arise during practice, when researchers are on their own in the field faced with some quandary. In those situations, researchers are guided by their own personal and moral commitments. The students' critiques of other researchers and their statements about their own commitments suggest that the students were beginning to develop virtuous research habits that would support them in the face of challenges and difficulties. [49]

As the students indicated in their online conversations, they were seeking guidance from their graduate advisors and their course instructors about how to address ethical principles and ethical dilemmas in their research. In addition to being accountable for the graduate curricula, research methods course instructors have responsibilities to serve as models of morally responsible research, teaching, and learning. As LINCOLN (1998) suggests, this need for authenticity is crucial when students are learning about ethical and moral issues regarding research methods. That is, although many instructors who teach research methods include ethics on their course syllabi, they need to "practice what they preach" by connecting their teaching and their own research ethics. According to LINCOLN (1998), such a connection between research and the

teaching-learning nexus could be promoted through explicit instruction by sharing research stories with students, and encouraging students to question and engage in dialogue about ethical and moral issues involved in research decisions. We also recommend that research methods course instructors design course assignments that encourage critical and collaborative reflection by providing students with opportunities to share their ethical concerns and research stories with each other and the course instructor through class discussions and written assignments. To promote this reflection and dialogue, we recognize the need to create inviting and "connected classrooms," in which students feel psychologically safe and willing to let their voices be heard (BELENKY et al., 1986; LINCOLN, 1988). Consequently, we recommend that research instructors aim to provide a forum in their classrooms that will invite students to discuss their various needs and concerns surrounding the "hidden curriculum" or subtext of the research journey and their own personal moral careers as researchers. [50]

In line with educators who advocate the importance of promoting metacognitive skills (thinking about thinking) by integrating philosophical and epistemological inquiry into educational contexts (e.g., ASTINGTON, 1993; HAYNES, 2002), we suggest that research courses need to provide course space to encourage students to question ethical guidelines, and to explore and discuss the complex moral and ethical issues that underlie research methods. We aim to encourage students to become wise researchers who use both their minds and their hearts when making research decisions. Research courses need to encourage students to develop competencies as researchers who will reflect upon their research decisions with respect to pragmatic, philosophical, ethical, and moral issues related to research design, methods, data analysis, and presentation. Through critical discussion and inquiry, we hope that graduate students will learn to explore the ethical and moral implications of their methodological decisions, and that they will adopt a commitment to becoming morally responsible researchers. [51]

Given the complexity of moral and ethical issues concerning educational research and the evolving definitions of competing ethical models (GLEN, 2000; JOHNSON & ALTHEIDE, 2002; LINCOLN, 1988), we suggest that the teaching of ethics needs to receive priority in research methods courses, along with methodological issues such as research design, sampling, data collection, and the like. We are committed to gaining a deeper understanding of the complexities of research ethics and to developing an encompassing curriculum for educational research ethics. Although most graduate programs now include a session or two on research ethics (McNAMEE, 2002b), few programs have full courses on ethical dilemmas in research and their solution (SAKS & MELTON, 1996). Now is the time to consider offering a more intensive treatment of ethics within Education graduate programs and other social science disciplines. We are confident that such a course would garner considerable student interest and would clearly have substantive intellectual and practical content. [52]

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## Citation

McGinn, Michelle K. & Bosacki, Sandra L. (2004). Research Ethics and Practitioners: Concerns and Strategies for Novice Researchers Engaged in Graduate Education [52 paragraphs]. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 5(2), Art. 6, <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs040263>.

Revised 6/2008