Why should social care research be subject to ethical review?

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Ethics of social care practice and research

Ethics of Social Care Practice

- Ethical issues centre largely on balancing competing accounts of the individual’s good
  - Autonomy: enabling the service user to make decisions that fit their personal life plan within the context of needing support
  - Paternalism: Act for the service user’s good, irrespective of his wishes, preferences, or personal account of the good life
Ethics of social care practice and research

Social Care Research Ethics

- Ethical issues centre on balancing the individual’s good and future individuals’ good

- Wearing the “practitioner’s hat”: Seeking to minimise risks and respecting the autonomy of people recruited as participants

- Wearing the “researcher’s hat”: Maximising the overall benefits within a piece of research
Navigating research ethics: 3 arguments

1. The libertarian “rights-based” argument

- Emphasises the value of research participants’ autonomy and freedoms
- Places focus on the validity of consent
- If consent has been obtained, the research is ethically justified to proceed
- Other considerations relating to harm or overall benefit are not seen as morally relevant
- If permission has been obtained, the research is justified to proceed
Navigating research ethics: 3 arguments

2. The paternalist “duty-based” argument

- The emphasis is placed on the researcher’s duties to participants
- These duties give rise to rules that determine which actions are ethically justified, independent of consequences
- One rule might require that the participant is not exposed to a more than minimal risk of harm
- Valid consent cannot override the fulfilment of these duties
- Research that exposes participants to harm can never be justified
Navigating research ethics: 3 arguments

3. The utilitarian “consequence-based” argument

- The research is justified if the overall total good that can be done is maximised
- Emphasises that the value and quality of the research is a core ethical consideration
- Balances the benefits and harms to individual participants and people in the future
- Non-consensual research that harms participants is justified if it will lead to considerable future benefits
Which of these three arguments do you find most convincing?
From ethics to governance

- Research ethics review amalgamates aspects of all three arguments. The focus is on:
  1. obtaining valid consent
  2. ascertaining the harms and benefits facing participants
  3. ascertaining the beneficial outcomes for individuals external to the research

- There are no *a priori* right answers to how these considerations should be balanced when they pull in opposing directions

- The emphasis is on researchers to argue for why their protocol is justified, and to defend their arguments under challenge
Gaining approval in a nutshell

1. Valid consent
   - Mediates #2?

2. Harms/benefits to participants
   - May overrule #1?

3. Benefits to society
   - The value/usefulness of the research
   - Scientific validity

The key question for the researcher: How are these concerns to be balanced or judged?
2 practical examples

1. Paying participants (beyond reimbursing expenses)
   - Does payment invalidate consent?
     - Coercive?
     - Should we inform participants beforehand about the payment they will receive?
   - Will payments benefit participants, or cause them harm?
   - Are payments crucial to obtaining the benefits that the research has the potential to bring about?
   - Resolution: Present an argument to the REC, and expect that argument to be challenged in light of opposing considerations
2 practical examples

2. **Involving adults lacking the capacity to consent (LCC)**

- How is the participation of adults LCC to be reconciled within an autonomy-based consent process?
- What additional duties to protect adults LCC are required?
- Does involving adults LCC lead to research that is less (or more) likely to produce useful and beneficial knowledge?

**Resolution:** Researchers need to work harder to justify including adults LCC, and to incorporate additional protections and procedures.
And finally... why a REC?

- **Contestability**: The relevant ethical considerations are reasonably contested, and need to be worked through.

- Researchers have a clear conflict of interest in this process of balancing the relevant considerations.

- **Independent accountability**: relevant stakeholders who stand in relation to the ethical considerations are best placed to reason through the process of making appropriate judgements.
Any questions?

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