Building Ethical Reflexivity: Case Studies

Introduction

As SoTL scholars, it is important to recognize that a range of ethical issues can arise during each step of a project. This type of work requires ethical reflexivity.

> **Ethical reflexivity** is the ability to think about your own and participants' attitudes, views, and beliefs to consider the implications of scholarship, avoid harm, and ensure participants' rights through a project.

Case Studies

The following case studies are provided to allow you to think about and consider SoTL work from multiple perspectives. As you read each:

- Consider the benefits and risks through the eyes of participants, and from the perspective of your participants' everyday experiences.
- Think about the multiple identities and roles being brought into the work (e.g., instructor, scholar, student, administrator, consultant, teaching assistant, coordinator, librarian).
- Identify how the principles of the TCPS2 can be incorporated into the project (respect for persons, justice, and concern for welfare). *For scholars located outside of Canada, please research and review equivalent statements on ethical research involving humans in your area.*

We encourage you to read and reflect on your own, and then join a discussion with others to learn more about different perspectives. If you are at UCalgary, you can discuss via our MS Teams Channel.

Case Study 1: 100% Student Participation

Professor Cohen is a well-known researcher. They are interested in conducting a study to better understand how the sleep patterns of college students impacts their learning. Their goal in conducting this study is to help students learn more and do better in their courses. At the start of a lecture before the midterm exam, they approach students in an undergraduate course they are teaching to participate in the study. They share their

overarching research question (how does sleep impact learning) and then ask students to raise their hand if they don't want to participate. Professor Cohen excitedly reports to their lab group that they have 100% participation of students in the research study.

Discussion Questions:

1. If you were a student in this course, what thoughts and feelings might you have regarding this study and the recruitment strategy used?

2. How well does this approach follow the principles of the TCPS2 (respect for persons; justice; concern for welfare)?

3. What would you recommend changing about this approach to ground this work better ethically?

Case Study 2: Colleague Conundrum

Professor Toure has been leading workshops on effective student-centred assessment strategies for the past 15 years and is well known in their department as a mentor to junior colleagues. They are interested in understanding the impact of their workshops to improve their approach, present at conferences, prepare a few journal publications, and possibly write a book on assessment.

Professor Toure uses the course enrolment records to identify the participants who have joined their workshops in the past year. Four of these individuals are currently teaching in their department, so they find them in the hallway and ask them to join a focus group on teaching. All four attend, and once they arrive, Professor Toure turns on a video camera and asks everyone if it is okay that they video record the conversation. It is the first time that the participants have heard about recording, but no one asks any questions or says no.

Professor Toure works independently on their project, and two years after the focus group the first journal article is published. The article includes direct quotes from all the participants. Two of the participants are co-authors and the other two are acknowledged using their first and last name at the end. After the article comes out, attendance at their workshops drops. Professor Toure initiates another focus group, but no one attends, and Professor Toure does not understand why.

Discussion Questions:

1. If you were a participant in this study, what thoughts, feelings, and questions might you have regarding this study?

2. How well does this approach follow the principles of the TCPS2 (respect for persons; justice; concern for welfare)?

3. What would you recommend changing about this approach to ground this work better ethically?

Case Study 3: For-Profit Connections

A university collaborates with a technology firm to research the implementation of a novel software tool to provide formative feedback to students. Scholars engaged in the study express concern over potential biases in their results, suspecting that the findings may be influenced to align with the commercial interests of the technology firm that designed the software.

Professor Davis embarks on a scholarly investigation using the software, enlisting the support of her colleague, Emily, who plays a significant role in the research process. Nevertheless, Emily holds a financial stake in technology firm that stands to gain from the research outcomes. Upon publication of the research findings, Professor Davis assumes the position of primary authorship, while Emily's contribution is acknowledged further down the authorship list.

Discussion Questions:

1. How can researchers balance the need for collaboration with external partners while maintaining research integrity?

2. What mechanisms can be put in place to ensure transparency and prevent conflicts of interest in research partnerships?

3. How should researchers communicate concerns about ethical issues to their institution and partners?

Case Study 4: Co-Author Quandry

Dr. Santos is interested in exploring the impact of flipped classrooms on student engagement. She decides to involve two undergraduate students, Sarah and Michael, in the research project as co-researchers.

Dr. Santos guides Sarah and Michael through the research process, and they actively participate in designing the survey instrument, collecting data from classmates, and analyzing the results. Sarah takes the lead on writing the literature review, while Michael focuses on data visualization. When it comes to publishing the SoTL findings, Dr. Santos struggles with the authorship, and assumes sole authorship. Sarah and Michael are acknowledged at the end of the article.

Discussion Questions:

1. How can authorship be determined fairly while ensuring all researchers receive proper recognition for their work?

2. How can the authorship process be used as a learning opportunity for students to understand the value of scholarly contribution?

3. What criteria should be used to determine the allocation of authorship credit when faculty members and undergraduate students collaborate on SoTL research, particularly regarding their respective roles, responsibilities, and contributions throughout the research process?

Reflect Further

1. How often do you think about "power imbalances" in your professional relationships (among faculty, staff, and students)? Do you think power imbalances might occur during SoTL research? Have you experienced it? If so, in what ways?

2. What ethical concerns arise when participants, particularly students or colleagues, feel pressured or obligated to participate in SoTL projects? How might you ensure that the principles of voluntary participation and informed consent are present in all SoTL work? In which ways have you dealt with these ethical concerns, if ever?

3. How did you learn of authorship practices within your research group or discipline? What are some authorship practices that help support SoTL guiding principles?

4. Have you ever witnessed or experienced a conflict of interest in your personal or professional roles? How did the conflict(s) impact your and others' behaviours? What strategies/mechanisms might you use to limit the influences of secondary interests or biases in the conduct of your research?

5. How can scholars communicate concerns about ethical issues to their study team, institution, and partners?

Discussion Notes for the Case Studies

The previous case studies were provided to facilitate discussions about ethics from diverse perspectives, and they can inspire a wide range of ideas. While scholars navigate ethical constructs in various ways, here are some themes that might arise and that we encourage you to consider:

Case Study 1: 100% Student Participation

Themes include power relations and imbalances, consent processes, and privacy and confidentiality. An important idea to discuss is that professors hold a position of authority over their students, which can create a power imbalance that might lead to students feeling pressured to participate in research projects. This coercion can compromise the voluntary nature of participation, fully informed consent, and lead to students feeling obligated to participate in research they might not be comfortable with.

Possible Considerations

- **Third-Party Involvement**: Bring in a neutral third party, such as another professor or research ethics board (REB) representative to explain the research to the students and answer their questions.
- **Inform Students about the Research**: The purpose of the research, expected duration and procedures. Participants' rights to decline to participate and withdraw from the research once it has started, as well as the anticipated consequences. Also discuss any prospective research benefits. Allow students adequate time to review the information and make a decision. Avoid pressuring students to provide immediate consent. Clearly communicate to students that there are no repercussions for their refusal to consent.
- **Inform Students about REB**: Provide students with information on how to contact the university's REB for ethical concerns, emphasizing that they can report any issues without fear of repercussions.

Case Study 2: Colleague Conundrum

Several key themes regarding Professor Toure's research practices emerge from the case study. First, beyond ensuring informed consent, it's important to examine potential power dynamics influencing participants' decisions. Second, a more balanced approach between research objectives and ethical considerations when working with colleagues could have been beneficial. Lastly, both the research team and institution can help establish clear guidelines and oversight mechanisms when researching colleagues and employees experiences.

Possible Considerations

- **Informed consent**: Professor Toure should have obtained informed consent from participants before recording the focus group, ensuring they understood the purpose, usage, and their right to refuse. They should have had the chance to ask questions and express concerns.
- **Transparency, anonymity, and data ownership**: If informed consent was obtained, it's vital to honor promises of anonymity and clarify data ownership and access. Anonymizing data is generally best practice to protect identities and privacy unless individuals provide explicit consent and preference for their name or a pseudonym to be used.
- **Authorship ethics**: Authorship in research should reflect significant intellectual contributions. It is a good practice to discuss from the beginning of the study possible future publications/conferences to agree on authorship protocols.
- **Respect for participants**: Researchers must treat participants with dignity, honesty, and privacy protection, avoiding harmful or exploitative practices. Professor Toure's

approach, including recording without prior consent, does not uphold these relational criteria.

- **Consult REB**: When unsure about ethical procedures, Professor Toure should consult the Research Ethics Board (REB), an expert committee ensuring research proposals protect participant rights and adhere to ethical standards.

Case Study 3: For-Profit Connections

The main themes in this ethical conundrum revolve around conflicts of interest, integrity in research, and fair authorship attribution. First, there's the concern over potential biases in research results due to the collaboration between the university and the technology firm, raising questions about the integrity of the study's findings. Second, the involvement of Professor Davis and her colleague Emily introduces a conflict of interest, as Emily holds a financial stake in the technology firm. This raises ethical considerations regarding the objectivity and impartiality of the research process. Lastly, the disparity in authorship attribution between Professor Davis and Emily highlights issues of fairness and transparency in academic credit allocation, prompting discussions on equitable recognition of contributions in collaborative research.

Possible Considerations

- **Disclosure**: Professor Davis and Emily should clearly disclose their financial interest in the research to both research team members and the university's ethics board. Fully disclosing all potential or existing conflicts of interest helps foster integrity in research, which in turn, can protect from allegations of misconduct.
- **Authorship Guidelines:** Establish transparent authorship criteria at the outset of the research project to ensure that collaborators contributions are recognized appropriately. When researchers and collaborators put such understandings in writing, they have a helpful tool to continually discuss and evaluate contributions as the research progresses. Tools, such as the Contributor Role Taxonomy (CRediT), may help capture individuals' contributions more transparently.
- **Third-Party Involvement:** Use a neutral third party for data analysis to minimize any bias in interpreting the results.

Case Study 4: Co-Author Quandry

Key themes revolve around collaboration, recognition of contributions, and equitable authorship. First, Dr. Santos' decision to involve undergraduate students Sarah and Michael as co-researchers highlights the importance of collaboration and inclusivity in academic projects. Second, the significant contributions made by Sarah and Michael throughout the research process, from survey design to data analysis, underscore the value of their involvement and the need for recognition of their efforts. Lastly, the dilemma surrounding

authorship attribution prompts discussions on fairness and transparency in acknowledging contributions, emphasizing the importance of appropriately crediting all individuals involved in scholarly efforts.

Possible Considerations

- **Equitable Authorship Attribution and Transparency**: Implement clear guidelines for fair recognition of contributions, considering involvement rather than hierarchy. Ensure transparency by explaining roles and responsibilities to undergraduate students and fostering open communication.
- **Avoiding Exploitation and Conflict of Interest Management**: Safeguard students from exploitation by ensuring their involvement is voluntary and providing appropriate support and mentorship. Address conflicts of interest openly, engaging in dialogue and implementing mechanisms for fair decision-making.
- **Ethical Leadership and Continuous Communication**: Model ethical behaviour as a mentor, providing guidance on research ethics and authorship attribution. Encourage ongoing communication and feedback among all stakeholders, promoting accountability and integrity in research practices.