

**CASE STUDY/ SCENARIO (this is based on a real situation so all details such as dates and names have been excluded to preserve confidentiality)**

## **INTERVIEWING VULNERABLE PEOPLE IN A FUNDED EVALUATION**

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**This scenario is designed to present two ethical dilemmas which can occur during fieldwork: can researchers always produce the ‘hard data’ required by funding bodies? And can interviewers draw a line between a research interview and a counselling session?**

I was asked to be part of a research team to evaluate a National project aimed at ‘re-engaging’ students aged 14 to 16 who had become ‘dis-illusioned’ with school attendance and the National school curriculum of that time. The initiative received national coverage with news headlines such as ‘Boost to motivate disaffected teenagers’. The evaluation, funded by the relevant government department, was asked to provide ‘hard data’ to show that the heavily funded initiative was ‘making a difference’. This political drive for so-called hard data strongly prescribed and influenced the research design which can best be described as quasi-experimental i.e. having an experimental group receiving a ‘treatment’, alongside a control group which did not. This pressure on the research team in itself led to certain ethical dilemmas, noted shortly.

We worked closely with a group of 20 teenagers in one region of the UK. The students were drawn from two schools which had been ‘chosen’ for the high truancy rates and low academic achievement. A similar group of students from those schools, again 20 in number, was chosen as a comparator group i.e. they did not receive the intervention programme. One teacher told us that as many as five times that number would have benefitted from the intervention. This was the first ethical tension we faced - why were some selected and not others? We were assured that the comparator group and the other students would eventually benefit from the programme, if it were successful! We are still not sure if this really happened.

Probably the major ethical issue we faced during the project emerged as we really got to know the 20 pupils benefitting from the initiative. As part of the evaluation each pupil was interviewed, usually one-to-one, by a member of the team. During these interviews we were often drawn into conversations and revelations which can best be described as ‘inappropriate’ and certainly did not contribute to the hard data required by the funding body to show that the intervention was ‘working’. For instance, one student feared that she was pregnant. Another told of abuse she was subjected to at home by a ‘step-parent’. A third told us that he was planning to runaway from home. Others told of similar complications and tensions which had seriously affected their education and therefore their alleged ‘dis-affection’ with school.

How were we to deal with these situations? They posed two ethical dilemmas:

- First, if the interviews became counselling sessions would we be able to ‘produce’ data of the kind being paid for by the funding body? Yet, if we turned our backs on the issues that they were raising, would the pupils have continued to engage with us?( we had already found that most of them were subject to large mood swings so that at some interviews they barely uttered a word; in others they would not stop talking).
- Second, what were we to do with the revelations made to us? Were they true in every case?

### **How did we deal with the issues raised?**

We did face these two ethical dilemmas and we felt that we had to do something (doing nothing was not an option). In a general sense, and this is the advice we would give to any new researchers, all we could do was to ‘do our best’ in the situation we faced. I would not like to comment on how effective these proved to be as it was impossible to tell in the short term and the project was not a longitudinal study.

The first thing we did was to discuss the interviews with the teachers of our young interviewees. We spoke directly to the pastoral tutor of each student and of course these were the teachers they knew best. The teachers were highly professional and they knew a great deal about the life histories of the students. We felt that, since we were the researchers, we then had to leave the decisions as to what action to take, or which interventions to make, to the teachers as the pastoral carers with the insider knowledge. As for the subsequent interviews, we felt that we had to continue in the same way and if some aspects of the discussion/ conversation were about the private lives of the students this would be un-avoidable. It did not mean that the interviews turned into ‘counselling sessions’ (especially as neither researcher is a trained counsellor) but we could not exclude or separate the personal issues from the educational issues that we had been asked to explore.

Perhaps the general question for those engaged in research of this kind is: Is it possible to draw a line between a research interview and a therapeutic interview when dealing with vulnerable people? All human beings lead complex lives but some are more complex than others.

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### **References/ Further Reading**

If you wish to read about these dilemmas in more detail you could try:

Wellington, J (2000) *Educational Research: contemporary issues and practical approaches*, London: continuum

Wellington, J and Cole, P ( 2004) Conducting evaluation and research with and for 'disaffected students', *British Journal of Special Education*, vol. 31, no. 2, pages 100-104