Virtue Ethics in the Practice and Review of Social Science Research

Friday 1st May 2015, BSA Meeting Room, London SW6 2PY

Subsequent to the previous events and activities undertaken by the Academy working group on research ethics we canvassed participants as to topics of future interest. This event has been organized in response. As with previous events the presentation of positions papers will be followed by comments and audience discussion. Details of the main presentations can be found below. We hope to include participants from the full range of social science disciplines and the Learned Societies that are members of the Academy.

Morning Session:

Prof. Sarah Banks (Durham): From research integrity to researcher integrity: issues of conduct, competence and commitment.

This presentation will discuss the concept of researcher integrity in the context of the rapidly growing concern with research integrity. I will explore researcher integrity as a complex quality of character or ‘virtue’, which has a focus on the motivations and commitments of the researcher as a practitioner in the research community. This contrasts with the common focus on research integrity, which usually considers the integrity of the research practice – although clearly the integrity of the researcher and of the research organisation influence the conduct of research. I will discuss what is meant by researcher integrity, including weak and strong versions of the concept (conduct according to extant standards, versus reflexive commitment to ideals of what research should be at its best), and how character-based approaches to ethics complement and extend conduct-focussed, regulatory approaches. Whilst the concept of ‘character’ is disputed, and there are critiques of ‘character-building’ education programmes, there are also equally valid challenges to regulatory, conduct-focussed approaches to ethics.

Afternoon Session:

David Carpenter (Portsmouth): The Virtuous Ethics Committee.

In a previous paper given to this forum I argued that research might be better guided by virtue ethics rather than principlism and other well established theories of practical ethics, such as deontology and consequentialism (Carpenter 2014). Here, I drew on the work of Bruce Macfarlane (2009, 2010) in making a case for the virtuous researcher and virtuous research. The ensuing discussion indicated reasonably substantial support for this approach but, perhaps more interestingly, attention was also drawn to the role and conduct of ethics committees in reviewing research. The discussion indicated that, whilst there is an abundance of codes and similar documents aimed at guiding research conduct, there was little to guide ethics committees and their members. A virtue ethics approach to research might help committees identify virtuous research and researchers but it could be equally useful in guiding the reviewing work of committees. In this paper I attempt to relocate and develop Macfarlane’s work such that it is suitable to an analysis of ethical review. In particular I will consider the virtues that reviewers should exhibit or demonstrate when reviewing research and what we might take as the telos of ethics committees.


Registration

Costs: BSA Members £20, Non-Members £30

Please register online before 12 noon, Friday 17 April 2015

http://portal.britsoc.co.uk/public/event/eventBooking.aspx?id=EVT10429