Original paper

How should we teach research ethics?

HUGH DAVIES

Research Ethics Advisor, National Research Ethics Service, 1-4 Maple St, London, W1T 4HD, UK.

Email: hugh.davies@nres.npsa.nhs.uk

Socrates (SO) is strolling along in the Agora to buy some fruit for his wife Xanthippe. He meets Corecticus (CR), a teacher of research ethics.

CR: Socrates, I was looking for you! As you'll probably remember my cousin recently discussed teaching ethics with you. He learnt so much that when I mentioned my problems with research ethics, he suggested I talk to you. As you well know, I teach research ethics but I ask myself 'Am I a good teacher?' Indeed, what is a good teacher?

SO: Corecticus, as you know I always declare I am the most ignorant of men. Perhaps together we might see how best to teach research ethics! But first: what do you want to achieve in your teaching?

CR: Well, above all, that committee members can make both 'correct' and 'good' decisions to protect the research subjects. But they must also be careful not to hinder ethical research.

SO: A most important and onerous task and a fine balance. To whom will you address your teaching?

CR: Particularly to my committee members but all those who take part in any aspect of research must understand the ethical dimension of this work. As soon as a research proposal comes to mind, the researcher must think 'What are the ethical dimensions?', 'Is it fair to ask a person to take part in this research project?' Some argue that in this the researcher's considerations are the most important ethical check, the actual procedures of REC review come too late and add little. They propose that the existence of the REC changes the researchers' behaviour, their review adds little more.

SO: A good point Corecticus. If all learn together we might iron out misunderstandings and perhaps establish trust. Well let us proceed. You talk of 'correct' and 'good' decisions. Let me ask you if these are the same?

CR: No. By correct I mean that the process of decision-making follows the rules of research review. Decisions must be made in a committee that follows the standard operating procedures. Procedures are important, they give the public reassurance and the members their indemnity.

SO: May I ask you who has the duty to ensure that the committees follow such rules?

CR: Put like that, it is clearly the role of the committee administrator and chair.

SO: So here there are separate aims for administrator and researcher, so these we might need to help separately. It seems to me from what you say that your members are decision-makers.

CR: Unlike other ethicists, yes.

SO: So let us first ask ourselves 'What is a good decision?'

CR: I would say it is a decision whether it's fair to ask people to participate or how it might be amended to be fair or ethical, having given it detailed, rigorous and unbiased consideration.

SO: What might you mean by 'fair' or 'ethical'?

CR: By fair I mean the study is reasonable in the circumstances – it has a worthwhile purpose, it is equitable, treating people equally and it doesn't exploit the subject to the researcher's benefit. It strikes a balance between competing interests. By ethical I mean it meets ethical standards. It has an acceptable balance between risk and benefit, considering the interests of subject and society. It abides by, or doesn't infringe, the duties of the

researcher to try to do good and to avoid harming the subject, it respects the autonomy of the subject and all interests are respected and handled equitably.

SO: So then what capabilities are needed to be a good decision-maker rather than a bad one?

CR: My experience suggests there are several tasks for committee members and researchers. They need to understand the context in which research is proposed, recognize all parties relevant to the review, consider empathetically all involved. They should identify their own convictions and values concerned, be able to communicate and explain these adequately, while identifying, appreciating and respecting other opinions and value systems. They have then to weigh up competing arguments to make a good decision.

SO: So, there is a lot your pupils need to be capable of. Are you sure you have included all? Have others looked at this problem and if so what conclusions did they draw?

CR: I don't know of similar work in our field but I recently read an essay that looked at what members of clinical ethics committees need [1].

SO: Is this relevant to your work?

CR: I think it is. These committees help health professionals look at moral dilemmas in their everyday clinical work. We do the same but in research. I'd argue that the moral principles overlap.

SO: So do your ideas agree with these authors?

CR: I'm pleased to say that by and large we seem to agree.

SO: That is reassuring indeed but are there differences?

CR: Yes, after reading, it seemed to me that I have placed greater emphasis on what might be termed 'critical appraisal'.

SO: What do you mean by this mysterious modern term?

CR: I know, but I can't think of a better phrase. By this I mean reading the proposal and analyzing it so we understand the context of the research proposal, customary practice as I would call it. We must know something of the relationships between those involved and how research might alter practice, what the consequences of this are and whether this is acceptable.

SO: I see, and another justification for learning together it seems to me, but go on.

CR: Moral issues enter my list later than these authors. I think much happens before we apply any moral analysis. We need, as I've said, to know the background and customary practice – the custom as I call it. And importantly this must be accurate and correct. Ethical analysis on erroneous 'data' is almost a misdemeanour in itself. Then we need to know the parties involved (we all agree on this), their expectations, values, fears and hopes. It's with all these that we can create a 'story' or paint a picture we can break down and analyse in any moral sense.

SO: A clear picture! Thank you Corecticus. Now what do these authors include that is NOT on your list?

CR: Two things strike me. They are more concerned about possible power imbalances and secondly the need for facilitation.

SO: So, having read this excellent article, how might you modify your list of capabilities?

CR: Obliquely I cover what they call power imbalances but I think I need to be clearer where this fits in. The facilitation they mention is probably peculiar to the clinical ethics committees. They don't deliver decisions as we do on RECs, rather they try to help the parties settle differences.

SO: So, if you agree albeit with some minor modifications, let us proceed. What do these tasks require?

CR: That's where I'm stuck, Socrates! Please, help me think out my teaching objectives.

SO: The impression comes to my mind that many capacities or virtues are needed if your members are to be able to do these tasks.

CR: Virtues and capacities, what do you mean? Socrates, I am not as wise or steeped in philosophy as you are.

SO: Well then, let us write down your list so we can study it in more detail and see what your members need.

CR: Thank you, with your help I see that you take me far beyond the simple teaching of research ethics.

Task	Capacities and virtues
To understand the context in which research is proposed.	Analysis and imagination, humility to recognize what we don't know.
To recognize all parties relevant to the moral conflict.	Analysis and imagination.
To consider all involved.	Empathy and respect.
To identify and question their own convictions and values.	Insight.
To be able to communicate and explain these convictions adequately.	Clarity of thought and expression.
To identify, understand, and accommodate others' opinions and values.	Listening, respect and humility.
To work out the moral problem as simply and clear-cut as possible.	Clarity of thought.
To accept and weigh arguments, in order to make a wise decision.	Respect and humility.
Accommodate disagreement but stand firm on issues.	Humility and courage.

To reach a good decision committee members need to show so many human virtues – humility, empathy, respect and not least courage. Our committee members also need analytical skill, insight, clarity of thought and expression.

SO: A committee member like that will surely be successful. How then are we to teach these?

CR: Oh Socrates your argument helps but it deepens my despair. Indeed how am I to teach these? That is why I seek your advice.

SO: Let me help then. You have drawn up this list and we agree, and others in your community agree. So how will you develop your teaching?

CR: Firstly together teacher and pupil must agree the tasks before researchers and reviewers, much as we have done today. There is no hope if we disagree. Using fashionable terms we find in education, we must agree our 'educational objectives', which is to help members perform the tasks of ethical review. But Socrates, that's probably the easy part. How do I teach these capacities or virtues that we see underpin the tasks of review? Can I or is it a hopeless task?

SO: Yes, this has exercised me in the past and I have had many interesting discussions on this and I'm not sure I'm any the wiser. Can we teach virtue or is it God given? Are we born with it or do we acquire it? Then if we are to learn it, what is the most effective lesson?

CR: But this just reframes my original question! And is it actually too late by the time the members join a committee? So far I can see from our discussion, I must first recognize the need for these capabilities and virtues. You have helped me start. Then I'm stuck but as we talk I feel you lead me to think that before I can expect others to develop these capabilities, I, as the teacher, must ideally have them myself or at least have some understanding of them.

SO: Surely so, a wise insight Corecticus. a teacher can't hope to teach what he does not himself perceive or know, and surely the best way to understand these virtues is to recognize them in yourself and others. When you do, will you not be in a better position to explain them? Let me go back and ask how can we teach something.

CR: If it's factual knowledge, I can present it as such and persuade my pupils there is value in memorizing these facts. A skill I suppose has to be demonstrated and then the teacher must provide opportunity for practice. But we are talking of capabilities and virtues, these are more difficult.

SO: Indeed so, but can you apply the teaching methods you've suggested?

CR: We can discuss the definition of these 'virtues' but that seems to me to be rather abstract and limited. We could consider their application in narrative form or in simulated review, in some sense we do that already when we review dummy applications. This brings me to the idea that my teaching might be conducted as if we were in a committee to help us all see these 'capabilities and virtues in action'.

SO: And you yourself will need to be particularly careful to demonstrate them while also looking for them in your pupils so you may help them recognize these capacities and virtues in themselves. You will need to be the uncritical commentator.

CR: But alas, this will take so much time and hard work and my masters demand immediate solutions.

SO: Ah, the evils of the modern world! I have few answers but is good teaching easy? Let me ask you 'However speedily your masters want you to work, do you have any chance of success if, at the very beginning you are unclear what you wish to teach and how you will go about your task?'

CR: Obviously not oh Socrates!

SO: Then do you have any alternative?

CR: No I see not. The path you describe for me is not easy but I must travel it.

SO: But before we say farewell, I see we haven't touched on ethical knowledge.

CR: I recognise this and wanted to talk about these but this discussion helps me see that there is much of importance before such teaching. I might propose that if we have the virtues we've described we might have no need for ethical theories or 'schools' or even ethicists peddling their ideas. Ethical theory is no substitute for analysis and debate built on the virtues we have outlined. It will be like the house built on shifting sands.

SO: Were I to live in such a world, I would be content although perhaps unemployed! But is your world so perfect that it contains nobody other than such laudable colleagues?

CR: Obviously not, Socrates I have seen this in my committee. Perhaps I can tell you a story to illustrate this. For the most part our committee discussed the projects before us and reached what I might describe as 'consensus', but sometimes we didn't. At times quite naturally we would disagree. In a group of 18 this would seem to me to be inevitable. Some members held strong views and at times I could feel tempers rising and members becoming hostile. It seemed to me that neither side was able to listen. I am ashamed to say that at times the arguments became personal. The virtues you listed had long since flown out the window! It was then that our chair would turn to one in our committee steeped in ethical thought and wisdom and ask his advice. He would use ethical analysis to explore our disagreement and look for the underlying issues we were debating. He would try to express these as objectively as possible. It was clear to me that his ethical analysis helped him do this. By placing the argument in what I might describe as the 'ethical context' the chair was then able to 'depersonalize the argument'. Once others no longer felt under attack and were able to listen to each other. Do you see what I am saying, Socrates?

SO: Yes indeed it is an excellent example of the power and good purpose of ethical analysis.

CR: You have helped me see that I must work with all so we share our educational objectives. We must agree the tasks of research ethics and the capacities and virtues we need. Otherwise there is no chance of success. No, ethics cannot be knowledge alone. It surely has its place but there are many other virtues as you describe them that are required to be a 'good committee member'. It is impossible to solve moral problems by theoretical reasoning alone. But if ethics is more than such problem solving, is about capabilities and virtues, the research ethics teacher must help his (or her) pupils, the committee members, understand themselves and the way they will later deal with ethics and handle moral conflicts in any study. How we conduct the teaching might be a model for the committee's conduct.

SO: Let us look then at this aspect of your teaching, ethical expertise. What might the teacher bring to the discourse? Are there ethical tools that the teacher can demonstrate?

CR: Yes, I see we need to pass on our experience on how we approach these research ethics problems. But we must ensure our students see these are tools and not solutions. Underpinning research review we find judgment. Our ethical analysis is just a means to this end. The researcher in her design must make choices and hence judgment. The reviewer likewise must judge if the design is fair or ethical.

SO: Yes, judgment is central to your work is it not, and what do you see this judgment based upon?

CR: I have thought about this recently in my teaching of new REC members, and suggest to the new members that our judgment is based upon what I call one of the 'Four Es'. We might judge by simply saying 'If I were you', Ego based review or we might use Empathy and imagination, 'Thinking and feeling like you'. Thirdly we might apply Expert opinion using standards and judgments from published work. Finally and fourthly we might use published Evidence from research.

SO: An interesting idea but what underpins these?

CR: Our personal values underpin the first. I think they come from family, friends, our peer group,

professionals and, with time, our committee colleagues. They are, in my experience, commonly applied and easy to use but are difficult to explore and tenaciously held. Analysis presents difficulty. An individual moral stance may be derived from detailed reasoning, yet personal values can also be a private framework of unexamined and unexaminable views.

SO: And your second, empathy and imagination wasn't it?

CR: This I'm not so sure about. I'm attracted to it, it seems the ideal but some argue it's impossible, elusive if not illusory, to truly empathise with another, let alone with 3000 potential participants for a trial, and I fear they may be right. However, if achieved it gets nearer a true understanding of the potential participants and feelings.

SO: Yes, I see the difficulty. What was your third?

CR: Ethical review using the judgments and standards from the study of the 'august bodies', the law, and ethics literature.

SO: And your fourth?

CR: Evidence-based ethics – using surveys, questionnaires, focus groups and interviews to gauge public view. After all if we argue ethical research is research the public would accept, evidence (in the absence of empathy) may be the closest we will get to a representative picture.

SO: An ideal solution.

CR: However, it's not that easy. There are problems appraising and assimilating the evidence. Articles or documents have varying authority, uncertain ranking and occasionally are inconsistent. They may not match the specific purpose of a REC as they are often written for several audiences. There is often finally 'devil in the detail'. Publications can't accommodate all the details of a specific research project and their conclusions or recommendations may not therefore be appropriate. It can however capture broad views across society and 'paint the background'. What is needed is a workable assessment of the hierarchy of the source of evidence that might allow us to weigh competing papers and methods that can assess their quality and validity [2]. But that is perhaps beyond our talk today, Socrates.

SO: An interesting analysis of judgment and ethics, Corecticus. I must leave soon so tell me, how might our discussion shape your teaching? What have we learnt?

CR: We agreed that researchers and reviewers must both undertake ethical analysis of a research proposal and hence would benefit from learning together. We recognized that the committee members are decision-makers, and we are trying to help them make good decisions, so we looked at the skills they need, critical appraisal, clarity of thought and expression and insight as well as the virtues that are required, humility, empathy, respect and courage. We proposed that these come before ethical reasoning and expertise. But we agreed that ethical expertise is one of several tools that might help them reach a decision, to make the judgment central to their work. We discussed other tools or ways of deciding and I put forward the '4 Es' – ego, empathy, expert opinion and evidence. When teaching the teacher must clearly explain that while they can provide guidance and expertise their pupils must find and develop these skills, capacities and virtues.

We concluded by talking about the form the teaching might take. We recognized that success required all to agree the educational objectives and as research review requires good relations between all involved we saw the importance of the relationship between teacher and students as a role model, shaping the relationships between committee members. These conclusions I owe to you, Socrates!

SO: Clearly not, Corecticus, didn't we arrive at them together?

CR: Well no matter however we arrived at them, I shall take that list to my director, Sapientia. Farewell then and thank you!

Acknowledgements

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