Ethics in Social Science: regulation, review or scrutiny?

Summary of the plenary sessions

The plenary sessions of the conference looked at how the system of reviewing or regulating social science research projects is working. None of the speakers were against ethics scrutiny as such but they did raise some questions about the current interpretation of policy and therefore the system as presently constructed. The four speakers' PowerPoint presentations are available on the web either www.the-sra.org.uk or www.acss.org.uk. Below is a short summary of their talks.

Prof. Robert Dingwall argued very strongly that it was inappropriate to establish review systems for the social sciences on the model used by the medical and natural sciences. Social scientists as "guests in people's lives" were not powerful and rarely, if ever, at risk of killing people. Clearly a system based on professional autonomy was not suitable for biomedical researchers but, he argued, "a system based on an elaborate pre-emptive regulative bureaucracy was equally inappropriate for the social sciences".

He suggested that the goals of current regulatory systems are confused. They seem to be about protecting the participants and the institution and in some cases their introduction has given universities the opportunity to register research and, he felt, extend managerial control over not just that research was done - a legitimate activity for universities - but over what was done which challenged freedom of enquiry. There were some serious costs to this; chiefly the compromising of professional judgement and responsibility and along with that "ethical de-skilling".

Dingwall concluded by arguing for a much clearer separation of functions. Ethics was essentially a peer issue and not for high level institutional committees. Other issues, such as registering what research was being done, or the health and safety of researchers, were for line managers. Additionally, he argued we should move to a presumption of competence in subjects. It was one thing to empower children or those with learning difficulties, another to assume they needed protection. Ethical review should be confined to situations comparable to biomedical research where the researcher is in a position of power.

Prof. Dingwall's discussant, **Sharon Witherspoon**, agreed there were costs and benefits to regulation and that generally the risks of social research are lower than in much medical research.   But she pointed out that social scientist researchers have interests too – including the need to publish or meeting funders' priorities. Neither polar position of "we are professionals-trust us" to "this needs to be regulated like bio- medical research" were really appropriate for social science. There was a role for independent ethics scrutiny, but this should be based on considerations of proportionality: between risk and harm, and between the knowledge that the research would bring and the burden on respondents.   None of these were simple issues nor could reference to a written ethical code always substitute for a review procedure based on discussion of these issues.

In her position as a funder, Sharon said that she had seen some research proposals that were ethically very naïve or self-interested, so there clearly is a need for a greater understanding of ethical issues among the research community. What is important is getting the right level of ethics review. She argued for an appropriate form of triage with a clear focus on what level of harm should we worry about and what level of delegation is appropriate. She also felt it was important that while ethics committees should not be captured by ethics "professionals" they should be led by a majority of researchers with lay representation.

She noted that institutions like universities have legitimate interests in the longer-term health of social research, so are able to carry out review in a way that is permeable to discussion and that may promote learning and shared norms. So she disagreed with Robert that universities were mainly interested in exercising managerial control. She was far more worried about the move towards setting up national committees with burdensome and unclear regulatory powers, and in which researchers had a minor role in reviewing research. Her concern was that this would lead to less good research being done, to presumptions that social research had to prove it was not harmful (rather than a presumption that it was unlikely to be) and would not foster the kind of dialogue and discussion that would lead to improved ethical practice.

Dr Ron Iphofen echoed some of the same themes. He felt there was always a risk of harm and stress and ethical decisions often have to be taken by researchers in the field. Therefore it was important to enhance researchers' abilities to make these judgements and the role of professional associations in developing ethical practice is very important. His major focus was on clarifying the difference between ethical review and research governance which he felt far too often were confused both analytically and in practice.

Research Ethics is about "treating people with respect, dignity and concern for their values and lives when conducting research" which Ron described as "professional integrity". Research Governance is "concerned with quality, standards and accountability" i.e. "institutional integrity". Only if you have both do you get "good" science and "proper" behaviour. Good ethics review is risk alert, aware of the issues but not risk averse. In this way committees can be supportive of innovative but risky research, balancing possible harm against public benefit. Governance on the other hand is risk averse with a damage limitation approach to research, aware of corporate law and vicarious liability. Ron argued that too often the distinction is lost when the overlap occurs and ethics scrutiny committees are used to consider both dimensions. He also stressed the need for ethical awareness training for researchers and also that ethics review committees should develop a repertoire of experience to draw on in making their decisions.

John Oates developed some of these points in his presentation which focused on the principles underlying ethical research. He was keen to stress the importance of ensuring that researchers have a sense of their responsibility. He reminded his audience that ethical codes have a long history going back to at least 500 BC with Hippocrates. However, as the experience of the Nazi regime in Germany showed, formal rules and regulations in and of themselves are, not necessarily, a guide to good ethical practice if the concept of valid consent and ethical behaviour are not internalised by the researcher. And, of course, the 1947

Nuremburg Code made the importance of obtaining valid consent from research subjects very clear indeed, while the 1964 Declaration of Helsinki said that "the interests of science and society should never take precedence over considerations relating to the well- being of the subject".

John endorsed the need for more ethics awareness training and warned against an over reliance on detailed guidelines which he felt could take away the need for researchers to think through their research proposal and consider the ethical implications assessing harm against benefit. He suggested RECs should be guided by four principles - independence, competence, facilitation and accountability. A general principle underlying all systems of scrutiny or review should be "proportionality" and committees, at all levels, should ensure that the level of scrutiny was proportional to the risk of harm. More needed to be done to develop triage mechanisms and get the level of assessment right. There was a danger that over bureaucratisation would encourage researchers to circumvent procedures or not undertake innovative research.

The final speaker of the morning was **Sam Clemens**. She presented a case study of how the need to introduce a system of ethics review in a large independent research organisation, working in a competitive market, led to a rethinking of the organisation's ethics training and a change in culture. NatCen's work had always been guided by professional ethics guidelines, chiefly those of the SRA. But the need to introduce a formal committee was viewed with concern by many staff. It was important, therefore, to ensure that the committee was seen as a facilitator not a barrier and, in particular, to ensure that research proposals were not held up by long drawn out proceedings and people's ethical awareness was enhanced so that they were not deskilled by the process.

Training was put at the centre of the initiative and also the process was designed to be as facilitative as possible. People could bring their proposal at an early stage while design issues were being considered and, though there was a checklist to respond to, researchers presented their proposal to the committee and discussed the implications. Many had found this very helpful and the spirit was one of peers helping peers. As she said, the REC "has helped people to think up front, receive advice and guidance and think broadly about their project". Only one project in 18 months needed a serious re-design but many have benefited in smaller ways as have researchers' confidence in ethical issues.

Summary of the Workshop discussions

There were four parallel workshops in the afternoon and the notes and feedback from each is given here.

Social Science Research and the NHS Research Ethics Committees (RECs) – current issues

Martin Stevens, Kings College London (Chair and joint rapporteur)
John Oates Open University (Introduction)
Julia Heynat (Joint rapporteur)

John Oates introduced the session, identifying eight broad points

1. Noting some of the consequences for university-based research of National Research Ethics Service (NRES) RECs, which are the only bodies currently recognised by Secretary of State to approve research with NHS staff and patients, and some types of research where participants lack full capacity to consent.
2. Issues about research with different paradigms and overall approaches in terms of the need for ethics review and approval.
3. The set of exclusions from the need for a NRES review of specific kinds of research activity within the NHS (in particular, service evaluation and audit).
4. Issues relating to the Mental Capacity Act and opportunities for ethics review as required by the Act.
5. The significance of the Social Care Research Ethics Committee being recognised as an approved review body in relation to Mental Capacity Act research.
6. The importance of training and support for ethics committee members.
7. Concerns regarding 'additional uses of patient data' drawing on NHS patient records where consent was not previously given.
8. The potential benefits of a wider adoption of the Integrated Research Application System (IRAS) or IRAS-compatible systems

Some of these issues were reflected in the discussion, although the following themes emerged as dominant in the discussion:

1. Competency of practitioners, structures and process
2. Relationship between social science and NRES RECs
3. Support for social scientists
4. What research should come to NRES RECs
5. Consistency
6. Remit of NRES RECs

Competency

Competency issues relating to individuals and ethics review structures arose when describing the variable handling of different research models. As well as giving examples from their own experience, participants made reflective observations highlighting that the relevance of different research approaches is not, or appears not to be, always competently understood, valued or dealt with appropriately. The perceived and/or real shortfall in expertise aired in the discussion raised issues of competency relating to ethics committee members and research practitioners as well as extending to the ethics review process itself.

Participants referred to situations where NRES REC members displayed insufficient understanding of non RCT models particularly in regard to their value and use. However, there was considerable disagreement within the group about the quality of NRES REC review of social science and particularly qualitative research. One participant suggested that the Academy should request a re-analysis of the outcomes data for NRES RECs in order to

provide evidence about the review of different kinds of research. How NRES REC members were trained was raised as an important factor in improving the quality of review of these kinds of study. The importance of ensuring adequate representation of people with expertise in qualitative research methods on NRES RECs was also mentioned as being required to help ensure good quality review of different kinds of research.

Conversely, whilst referring to quality standards, a view was expressed that social science needed to make sure its own house was in order. The fundamental dichotomy between RCTs being regarded as the main model for medical research versus other models of social research was a dominant theme in the discussion, but other aspects also appeared relevant in considering issues of competency.

Pertinent to this part of the discussion, John Oates referred to the high degree of variability in terms of models, structure, operation, knowledge and expertise when reflecting on university RECs, and this is discussed further under the section on "Consistency". Others also pointed to a degree of confusion or frustration in trying to understand procedural aspects of the ethics review process, in specific cases and more generally. In commenting on the experience of trying to find their way through the ethics review system, one participant, for example, described it as a "nightmare".

From the discussion it was not clear to what extent such experiences and concerns were considered as being representative of both NRES RECs and University RECS. However, an emerging picture for both settings, was of cases or circumstances appearing to frustrate or undermine the value and contribution of examples of research and, furthermore, appearing to limit or diminish rather than uphold or raise quality standards.

Relationship between social science and NRES RECS

A better relationship between researchers and NRES RECs was felt to be essential in order to break down what were considered by some as myths, in relation to the approach of these RECs to social science and particularly qualitative research. For example, researchers could be encouraged to attend NRES REC meetings as observers, as anyone is entitled to do, in order to get a good sense of the kinds of approaches to review and the overall process. More work on a local scale to increase interchange between NRES RECs and the social science community was also felt to have value in enhancing the review process.

Support for social scientists

The importance of training for social science students in terms of ethics issues and the different systems of review and approval was stressed, as this was seen as an increasingly specialised area of knowledge. John Oates described the approach in his university in which researchers have to submit proposals for research ethics check, before submitting funding applications. Funded research is commonly submitted for UREC review before submission to NRES RECs, which was seen both as a prior check and as a means to support researchers submitting bids.

What research should come to NRES RECs

While it was clear that research with a strong emphasis on biomedical issues needs to be approved by a NRES REC, URECs were felt to be at least as capable for much social science research.

Conversely, NRES's policy of excluding service evaluation and audit, which may be defined as 'research' in some contexts (typically in universities and local authorities) was also seen as potentially problematic. Some researchers may wish to have such studies reviewed in terms of ethics and whilst university ethics committees would also review these studies, this might exclude non university researchers. Further, not having NRES REC approval may make it difficult to secure support from NHS R and D. Clarifying the role of NHS R and D in this respect, would be helpful.

A suggestion that student research be added to the list of exclusions, because of the low levels of risk usually involved and the difficulties of fitting with student timescales, provoked some debate. Several noted that such research often raised very difficult ethical issues. The overall quality of applications was felt by several participants with experience of sitting on NRES RECs to be highly variable and generally poor. They felt that students were not prepared well in terms of ethics, and also that many supervisors lacked the skill and knowledge to do this. One person queried whether students should be undertaking research requiring NRES REC approval, although generally, this was felt to be a necessary part of research training, which was important in maintaining good standards of social science research.

Consistency

A suggestion was made that there may be hidden variability in the NRES REC practice, in addition to the contested perception about the review of qualitative research. One participant reported on a quality assurance project being undertaken at the moment, involving 25 RECs reviewing the same proposal. Differences and similarities in the verdicts will inform this debate.

The consistency of URECs was also questioned, partly because of the acknowledged 'extreme' variation in practice and systems, based on a survey undertaken in 2004 (Tinker, A and Coomber, V. (2004) *University Research Ethics Committees: their role, remit and conduct,* London, King's College) as well as a perception of variable practice more generally. It is hoped there will be a repeat survey but funding has not yet been obtained.

Remit of NRES RECs

Whether NRES RECs should consider methodological issues, how their evaluation of methods should impact on decisions, and their role in demanding changes to methods raised a number of issues. Some support was expressed for a separation of these roles, which were felt to be adequately addressed by peer review of science or methods, although there was a debate about the rigour and independence of peer review. At a minimum, there was agreement that methodology carried ethical value, even if only in terms of the waste of time and resources resulting from research of extremely poor quality. A different but related issue was that there were reports of committees approving what they felt was 'rubbish research', which was not actually harmful in terms of the treatment of participants.

It was noted that NRES RECs were required by the Clinical Trials Directive to consider design for RCTS, potentially producing a different kind of ethics review for these studies.

Finally, for research falling outside existing ethics review procedures, the need for "a point of reference" to discuss ethical issues was also raised.

Implications

The various issues discussed raise training and professional development implications for all those involved in systems of ethical review as well as for the wider research community. Furthermore, the concerns raised would need to be taken into account and be well understood when discussing improvements to systems for ethics review.

Summary of the main points of feedback

A number of recommendations were made of actions to be pursued by the Academy of Social Sciences and the SRA. These were:

1. Promote interchange between social scientists and NRES RECs, for example through events with NRES REC representatives.

2. Clarifying the role of NHS R and D, would be helpful, as there were reports of differing practice in terms of the extent of extra review.

3. Request a re-analysis of the outcomes data for NRES RECs breaking it down more sensitively than just 'RCTs and others', as currently, in order to answer questions about the consistency of committees responses to the different kinds of research.

4. Develop training for new and existing researchers in terms of ethics and particularly in negotiating the NRES and other systems.

5. Publicise report of the NRES Quality Assurance project.

<u>Social Care – current plans and their implications</u>

Michael Preston-Shoot, University of Bedfordshire (Chair and rapporteur)
Jan Pahl (Introduction - A PowerPoint of this is available on the SRA and Academy websites).

The workshop began with discussion of the issues and concerns in the group following the morning presentations. These were:

- What are the costs of research governance and where do they fall?
- How do we ensure ethical environments in which research can take place? Are we in danger of assuming that ethical approval and governance systems, and research itself, take place in benign environments?
- What is ethical review and what is research governance?

- There needs to be more discussion and analysis of insider-research – risks and responsibilities of practitioners and managers researching systems of which they are a part. When researchers work for and/or are researching in local authorities, how do we conceptualise and understand accountability?
- What are the risks we are seeking to prevent? What boxes need to be opened and what might they contain?
- The notion of accountability needs to be unpacked. What are its dimensions?
- How do we ensure that all those involved in research itself, and in its governance, are competent?
- The legal rules, especially in the Mental Capacity Act 2005, are unclear.
- What is our position on children's research?
- Criminal Record Bureau (CRB) checks do not ensure ethical competence.

Professor Jan Pahl then gave a presentation (see separate Powerpoint presentation) and facilitated discussion. Some clarifications were offered of the balance between the Social Care REC and University (HEI) RECs. Among the points and issues to emerge, some of which focus on social care and some of which have broader salience, include:

- What should be the balance between lay and profesional membership of ethics committees? Is the distinction between lay and professional tenable?
- How might private, voluntary and independent (PVI) sector organisations be included without undue burden?
- How do we define research, for which ethical approval and monitoring is required?
- How do we define social care?
- How do we manage the fragmentation of adult and children's social care when issues to be researched may straddle both – disabled parents, young people in transition from children's to adult services are cases in point? What is happening nationally, which points towards fragmentation, may not be what is being established locally by HEIs and local authorities.
- How do avoid unnecessary risk aversion because of concerns about corporate liability?

Participants asked questions relating to accountability, especially of the Social Care REC and questioned what would be the avenue for appeal. There was discussion of the ethics of research utilisation, for example by central government departments when they have funded research. There was agreement that the culture of ethics committees should be considered and that SRA and the Academy might lead on raising ethical awareness and literacy. There was general agreement on the importance of training and other supports, especially once projects had gained ethical approval. Concerns were voiced that ethical approval systems might lead to individuals feeling less responsible for ethics. Concerns were voiced too about how committees viewed their roles. Governance means appraising ethical submissions for their reasonableness rather than imposing one set of views on another.

Summary of the main points of feedback

The group agreed the following points to be fed back in the plenary session:

1. There is a marked lack of clarity in the Mental Capacity Act 2005. It is unclear who falls within and outwith its remit. The SRA and Academy should engage with the Department of Health to address this concern.
2. Ongoing funding is necessary for training and support, and for then sustaining ethical awareness in organisations. The SRA and Academy have a leadership role here.
3. The costs faced by the private, voluntary and independent (PVI) sector need to be considered.
4. Ethics committees should have researchers as members.

University Research Ethics Committees how are they working?

Anthea Tinker, King's College London (Chair)
Richard Jenkins, University of Sheffield (Introduction)
Suzanne Higgs, University of Birmingham (Second introducer)
Janet Lewis, (Rapporteur)

Richard Jenkins opened the discussion with a brief presentation about the background and current operation of his University's Research Ethics Committee, which he chairs. He recognised that there is considerable diversity between different Universities in the way in which ethics is handled and in Committee structures. The key points about the Sheffield Committee are:

- The University of Sheffield's Research Ethics Policy was approved in 2003, largely in response to the external stimuli provided by organisations such as the Wellcome Trust. In 2004 the Research Ethics Committee was set up, as a committee of Senate.
- Unusually, the Committee has been chaired by arts or social science people.
- The Committee does not look at individual project approvals, unless there is a dispute or lack of agreement to be resolved, in which case it is the 'court of appeal'.
- Responsibility for, and ownership of, the ethics approval process is devolved to departments. Trust is a keyword here.
- In terms of governance, Heads of Department are responsible for ensuring that there is an adequate and functioning ethics approval procedure, in line with University policy, operating at departmental level.
- The main work of the Committee is in keeping the policy under review, operating a rolling programme of Departmental reviews and visits, and organising workshops and training.
- The Committee has a budget and dedicated admin support.
- It does not deal with research within the NHS at all, although there is a grey area to do with evaluation and audit.
- Proposals considered low risk are, relatively speaking, fast tracked; the decision as to whether a project is low risk or not is a consistent theme in staff research ethics workshops.
- The University's Vice Chancellor is very publicly supportive of the work of the UREC.

- The need for more training for researchers on ethical issues has been recognised, and resourced.
- The Committee's agenda has broadened recently to included integrity as well as ethics.

Suzanne Higgs then outlined some of the arrangements at Birmingham University where there are three central committees which are for Arts and Social Sciences, Life and Health Sciences and Physical Sciences and Engineering and each committee has 10-12 members including 2 lay members. Oversight is of staff led projects and postgraduate research students (this does not include postgraduate on taught courses). There is a self-assessment form for each project and the level of review depends on the risk identified. Most of the reviews are web-based and this is felt to work well.

A range of issues were then discussed in the group. Underlying much of it was an acceptance that practice between different Universities was extremely variable so people's experience of the way the system operated was very diverse.

Ownership A number of people stressed the importance of individual researchers taking responsibility for ethical concerns. The review process was considered worthless if this did not happen.

Legitimacy It was suggested that there might be an absence of legitimacy where reviews of ethics were being forced on Universities by external bodies like Wellcome or the ESRC. This might be particularly relevant for those constitutencies within the University who don't understand ethical issues (the engineers were again identified). It was thought there was legitimacy at two levels: whether people accepted that research raised ethical issues; and whether the local process of review was seen as legitimate. Some natural scientists fell into the first group while social scientists tended to accept that ethics was a legitimate concern but be reluctant to comply with the process of review.

The distinction between ethics review and research governance Picking up on the points made in the morning, the practice of Universities like King's College, London and Sheffield was to separate ethics review from governance, with governance coming within academic services or the research office and there being separate Research Ethics Committees. In other places overall responsibility for Ethics and Governance might reside in the same administrative team but be dealt with by different Committees. There could also be Ethics Committees with a focus on activities other than research – a Fundraising Ethics Committee at King's for example.

Involvement of students Some Universities have active involvement of student reps but this does not happen everwhere.

Many URECs are underfunded and overworked Some Universities have committed considerable resources to their Research Ethics Committees – Sheffield has a budget of £10,000 a year and King's has 4 full time administrative staff – while others are struggling to find funds to pay the expenses of lay members. A number of people in the group talked of their Ethics Committee being overworked despite tasks being delegated and divided up. Members were overwhelmed by new applications and policy documents. There was a general consensus within the University Research Ethics Forum (organised through AREC) that the availability of resources depended on there being support from senior staff for the endeavour.

The burdensome nature of reviews There was a danger that ethics review will become too burdensome. The University of Michigan and one or two others in the US are apparently stopping doing ethics reviews except in those cases where it is required by the funder because it was seen as too much of a burden.

Web-based review There was uncertainty about using a web-based system – whether lay members could manage it and whether it was possible to have a proper debate. Suzanne said that in Birmingham it was possible to have face to face discussion but they had not experienced problems with a virtual system. There is apparently some evidence that decisions taken electronically are more considered.

Criticism of the current system There was a strong dissenting voice from a number of people in the workshop who felt that the sense within the group was that people were committed to the current system. But a lot of academics are opposed to what is happening and ask `why are we doing this'. Review systems have appeared in the last 6 years and have assumed a life of their own, leading to over-regulation. The whole notion of trust has disappeared. The previous system, where Universities had codes of practice and within these individuals took responsibility, had worked well. It was very demotivating to have to go through the review process which often required the completion of inappropriate forms. It was thought much of it was to do with insurance premiums and was being driven by legal requirements and risk aversion, for example health and safety. There was a continual push to institutionalise ethics and shift it from individual responsibility to being a procedural matter. It would be much better to put resources into training, rather than review systems, and managers should be taking decisions rather than pushing them upwards.

Response to the criticism There was sympathy with this view that as research has expanded so regulation has grown and that management responsibility is being eroded by aspects of the current system. But it was thought that the problem was the way in which the review system was run in some places (in an overly bureaucratic way) rather than the system itself being the problem. The point was made that we have all become more aware of ethical issues and conscious that much research was carried out with vulnerable people who need to be protected. In the past we may not have thought enough about ethics. While Ethics Committee are not necessarily the best way of ensuring good practice we need to find a way of ensuring that individuals are protected from bad practice.

Training Given the importance that was emerging of individual researchers taking responsibility for ethical practice the need for resources for more training was emphasised.

Summary of the main points of feedback

The key points identified by the group which were fed back to the plenary session were:
1. There is huge diversity between different University Research Ethics Committees. Some were working well, others less so. We needed to find out more about this diversity and its impact.
2. There appears to be some ambiguity about the ambit of research committees.
3. If URECs are to work well they need to be properly resourced.
4. It was important that any system found ways of making individual researchers responsible for ethical practice and university managers responsible for research governance.

5. A key purpose of ethics review should be seen to be the protection of vulnerable people.

Teaching Ethical Awareness and Developing Engagement in Ethical Issues

Helen Simons, University of Southampton (Chair and joint rapporteur)
Janet Boddy, Thomas Coram Research Unit (Introduction – a PowerPoint of this is available on the SRA and Academy websites)
Nathan Emmerich, Queens University, Belfast (Joint rapporteur)

Introduction

Helen Simons outlined the main focus of the session – how can we teach ethical awareness and develop engagement in ethical issues in social science research - with a reminder of the nature of ethics and ethical decision making in context in the field. Janet Boddy (IoE) gave a brief talk (see separate powerpoint presentation) on the ESRC-funded 'ethics guidebook' project, a web-based guide to help social science researchers negotiate ethics and regulatory requirements while encouraging reflection on the ethical issues raised by the research they are undertaking. Styled as a 'rough guide to social science research ethics', the website will soon be reaching the testing stage and its launch is currently scheduled for late 2009. Janet also talked about the varying aspects of ethics review from governance procedures to the actual consideration of ethics in depth above and beyond the remit of governance. She also highlighted the commitment of the ethics guidebook project to stimulate this higher form of reflection and to motivate good ethical practices throughout various social scientific disciplines.

We then moved to an open discussion forum.

Moral Philosophy in ethics review

One of the first points raised in the discussion concerned the place of moral philosophy in ethics review and ethics education and engagement. Whilst it is acknowledged that moral philosophy cannot provide complete *a priori* solutions for the ethical issues raised by social science it provides an important foundation and is a useful starting point for ethics education. It was noted that the underpinning philosophies of ethics – e.g. utilitarian and deontological approaches – had not been highlighted in the presentations and discussions in the morning.

The social contract and informed consent forms

The importance of attending to the social contract between the researcher and participant was noted; ethical practice is based foremost in that relationship, and not in the bureaucracy of regulatory procedures. In this context informed consent forms received a lot of comment. It was argued that:
- the proliferation of consent forms diminishes the social contract between researcher and participant and was likely to be counter productive; and that
- consent forms can encourage a tick box approach to ethics in the field, increasing the likelihood that trust between the researcher and the researched will be compromised; they can arrogate the nuances of the social contract away from the embodied relationship between researcher and researched and towards a technocratic,

bureaucratic and legalistic government/institutional procedure.

That said, it was also noted that consent forms may be appropriate for some projects – just not inevitably necessary. Later in the workshop, there was a related discussion on whether a bureaucratic approach to getting people to 'do' ethics could be counter-productive to the actual aim of embedding ethics in practice. The specific example of unread but signed informed consent forms was raised.

It was noted that a proportional response to different types of research and methodologies was required from ethics committees. However, it was also noted that many ethics committees work well and aim for constructive dialogue with applicants, and that there can be a certain amount of mythologizing about the difficulties created by ethics review.

Raising and Teaching Ethical Awareness in Research

The question of how staff and students are made aware of ethical issues and how to handle the ethics of research was raised. Distinguishing between the substantive and procedural issues raised by research was a theme which recurred throughout the session. It was noted that, as well as training for early career researchers and students, it is important – and can be challenging – to engage experienced and senior colleagues in ethics training. Staff were thought by several present to be the more difficult group to engage in training activities and strategies for doing this were discussed: one participant reported ongoing discussions about whether ethics training could be made mandatory for staff, another said that an annual 'three line whip' meeting had been helpful. Later in the discussion, a related question was raised about target groups for ethics education. In addition to embedding ethics in research methods training for undergraduate and postgraduate students, it is useful to address awareness raising and training for experienced researchers and staff in positions of authority and maybe also for lay people and others who sit on ethics committees.

(In relation to this discussion it was noted that the ESRC online ethics guidebook was originally conceived as being for early career researchers but feedback during development revealed that it was likely to be equally useful for experienced researchers at both the procedural and substantive levels).

Content of ethics research teaching

There was a discussion on training content and requirements and several participants outlined what was in their ethics training for student researchers at Masters and Doctoral level. Some departments included discussion of philosophical assumptions as well as facilitating procedural institutional ethical requirements and some involved the use of case examples and ethical dilemmas. More information was provided about the ethics review training and ethical discussions during the process of research by the National Centre for Social Research.

It was suggested that anxiety about ethics review could pose a barrier to engagement in substantive ethical issues during ethics training. For example, one participant in the discussion noted that students taking part in ethics training often just wanted to know how to fill in the ethics form. One participant queried whether this might be mitigated by removing ethics education from the immediate vicinity of ethics review! Another thought that it may

not be possible to remove it far enough within students' time scales and that embedding it in research training programmes more generally might be more helpful.

The ability to identify risk and ethical issues and the need to educate researchers on the implications of the REC for their own research practice were noted. The ideas of principles and of procedures and their contrasting implications were raised. Finally it was suggested that whatever ethical requirements had to be followed, it was also good practice to advise students to include a discussion of ethics in their completed dissertation.

Ethical issues in relation to outputs

A question was raised about ethical issues in considering what happens to research outputs. What are the ethics of using or not using research data and evidence, or of how they are used? And whose responsibility is it to ensure that research reports are acted upon. A number of distinctions were raised here regarding differing research users (government, third sector, other academics, the research participants, the media) and research dissemination as a more general pedagogic activity in the public interest. Access to research publications is often limited, but the parameters of this issue are in flux at this time, especially with the growth of technology and data archives. This might allow for greater dissemination of research but institutional repositories of "raw data" raise further issues of ownership, attribution and interpretation. There is a need to consider issues of intellectual property, and for clear agreements between funders and researchers about use and subsequent potential use.

The new requirement for the assessment and maximisation of 'economic impact' in grant applications to the major funding bodies has produced a dissemination requirement and allowed researchers to build in the costs of dissemination, or some aspects of it into the initial grant application. This creates an expectation – and an opportunity – to plan for and enact dissemination activities, but there remains a wider question about researchers' responsibilities for development activities and in considering the potential uses of their research.

In relation to use of data, it was further noted that the specification of phrasing of requests for informed consent on consent forms (as being informed consent to do x,y or z with the data) inhibits the possibility of further research on the data, e.g. secondary analysis.

It was also noted that research ethics committees encourage the feeding back of research outputs, results, findings or conclusions in a form appropriate to research participants.

Questions were raised regarding the use and presentation of social science in the media and the veracity or accuracy of reporting. A further dimension related to participants recognising themselves in research reported in the media for which they may not have been prepared. This could possibly be mitigated if researchers could be advised to consider how a participant would feel if they were to read outputs from or media coverage of a project.

Timing of Ethics Review

There was a discussion about the timing of an ethics review, and the need to consider ways of encouraging reflecting on ethics throughout the 'life course' of a project. It was argued that placement of ethical review at the beginning of enquiry or in the early stages of research

design and planning could potentially inform consideration of ethical issues raised at the later stages of the research process, but that further reflection on the issues in situ would almost always be necessary.

Ethical Issues raised by new technology

The issue of 'covert' research methods on websites which are publicly or semi-publicly available was raised by a researcher who had conducted research on a web forum and then posted her research findings to the forum. This had provoked discussion on the forum regarding the ethics of such research with opinion being divided amongst the unwitting research participants on the appropriateness of the study's covert methods. To avoid such a situation arising it was thought that it would be helpful to find ways to engage or seek participants' consent or review of findings earlier in the process, so there are no surprises when the results are made more widely accessible.

It was observed that RECs must be careful not to become prescriptive about the ethical acceptability of specific methodologies, particularly because social science methodology is constantly under development. The use of new technologies and the internet, and the development of visual methodologies provide good examples of developing areas that raise new ethical considerations.

Ethics in international contexts

The ethics of research in international contexts was raised as an issue that poses particular challenges:

(i)   First, the differing cultural location of research could have implications for ethics review requirements, and researchers need to find out the ethics review requirements of the countries in which they conduct research.

(ii)   Second, ethical consideration needs to take account of different cultural norms and expectations. For example, signing informed consent forms might be seen as risky or insulting by participants in some cultures. Relatedly, differing requirements might be made by RECs in differing cultural and research contexts.

Ethics in quasi- research contexts?

There was a discussion about 'what counts as research', and the need to raise awareness of ethical issues in research-like activities that may not be required to go through ethics review – for example, the distinctions that can be made between research, evaluation, audit, and consultancy. It was noted that government departments may use activities such as 'customer insight' to gather views of service users, and that this may also raise ethical issues. There may be particular challenges for research-like activity – for example, relating to the timescales and specifications of the work, and there is a need for ethics training to help researchers negotiate with funders and project commissioners around ethical issues within project specifications. One might also note the difference between research and journalism; or auto-ethnography and some blogs (esp. NeeNaw and NightJack)

Summary of three main points of feedback

1. Much concern was expressed about the creeping bureaucratisation of ethical review and how informed consent procedures borrowed or adapted from medical ethics is damaging to the social contract we develop and adhere to in social science research. Ethics - how one behaves in relation to others - is relational and contextual. It involves considering how one behaves throughout the whole process of research and in relation to the ethical dilemmas encountered in the field.

2. Hence in our teaching and awareness raising of ethics, we need not only to focus on the start up phase of getting ethical approval but engage in a dialogue throughout, based upon principles and procedures for guiding how one acts in the field and with an awareness of what ethical perspective we are coming from whether, for example, a utilitarian or a relational ethics perspective. Training needs to encompass both the principles of research and the principles of philosophy for it is these that will guide the ethical decisions we actually make in the field. Training in ethical awareness should make explicit the assumptions underlying the ethics review as a regulatory process and where the drivers for this are coming from and the assumptions underlying ethical practice with the awareness that the latter is not always served by the former. It is merely, even at its best, still only a first step towards ethical action in research.

3. Ethics of utilization. Concern was expressed that much research does not get used and maybe some gets misused. What are the ethics surrounding the end stage of the process of research and whose responsibility is it to see that research findings are disseminated, incorporated where relevant, into policy and practice and not misused. Who benefits? This raises a number of political issues and is a reminder that ethics is often intertwined with politics in the actual context of ethical decision- making.