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December 27, 2016

Ethical Tensions in Research: The Influence of Metatheoretical Orientation on Research Ethics

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ABSTRACT

When developing one's own research agenda, early and mid-career researchers continually negotiate how best to meet ethical standards and resolve ethical constraints using methodologically sound approaches. Often such struggles occur behind closed doors, their outcomes reflected in the institutional language of an ethical review board. This panel seeks to bring these struggles to the forefront by having panelists who study various populations discuss how they approach ethical challenges in their research. Due to the nature of the groups these panelists study, the panel provides a context where the site of ethical struggles, challenges, and tensions are exacerbated. Key issues to be discussed are: informed consent, risks to participants, and research design and dissemination. Discussion of these issues will be oriented around each participant's metatheoretical orientation to research in library and information science (LIS). Adopting such an approach will highlight some of the main challenges when engaging in ethical practices that may not align with institutional standards, as well as denote possible strategies for addressing them.

ASIST 2016, October 14-18, 2016, Copenhagen, Denmark.
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Keywords

Research ethics, metatheory, methodology.

INTRODUCTION

Westernized approaches to research ethics follow a series of codified rules. To complete a research study, a researcher or research team must seek formalized approval from an ethics board and signify their intent to follow the rules mandated by it. Ostensibly, cooperation with formalized ethical mandates produces a research study that takes care to protect the wellbeing of participants. However, the interests of stakeholders as conveyed by these mandates may not align with the metatheoretical orientations espoused by the researcher or research team. In these instances, such mandates may serve to promote research perceived as risky or harmful to participants, or conversely, stifle new and important research approaches.

This panel will address inconsistencies between methodology, or “a theory for research step-taking” (Dervin, 2003, p. 126), mandated by institutions, such as institutional review boards (alternatively named ethics review committees, research ethics boards, or independent ethics committees), and the metatheoretical orientations of researchers. Panelists will address how the minimum standards of ethics mandated by these institutions may or may not be suitable ways of engaging with members of the communities they study.

Unsurprisingly, much of the current discourse on ethics in research focuses on the practical constraints imposed by institutions. This panel seeks to refocus this discourse on

how these constraints and, more broadly, the constraints researchers may unknowingly place on themselves based on their choice of methods, could be better assessed in light of their guiding methodologies.

Based on these observations, this panel addresses the following line of inquiry: How does metatheory help guide ethical decision-making when performing research in library and information science (LIS), specifically for research that directly engages with participants?

PANEL FORMAT

In this panel, attendees will hear how researchers who are in the early to middle stages of their careers, and work in a variety of contexts, approach ethical challenges in their research. Panelists will discuss how they think about informed consent, risks to participants, and research design and dissemination based on their different metatheoretical orientations to LIS research. The panel will proceed in four parts: session introduction, panel discussion, small group discussion, and session wrap-up. Each part will now be overviewed.

Session Introduction

The panel will begin with a brief introduction to the key issues that will be discussed during this session.

Panel Discussion

Each panelist will briefly introduce themselves and the ways in which their research is informed by their stated metatheoretical approaches, including populations under study and research methods employed. Each panelist will address one of the discussion questions outlined below related to tensions that might arise from the ethical norms and standards employed in their field of study, and their own epistemological and ontological principles.

The discussion questions are as follows:

1. How do you as a researcher weigh the perceived significance of the research problem with potential risks incurred by your research participants?
2. How can researchers conduct research with specific populations in a way that is not exploitative?
3. How do social, cultural and political contexts inform how researchers define consent?
4. How does the choice of data collection methods ensure integrity of the data as well as integrity of participant experiences?
5. How can researchers disseminate research in an ethical manner? What responsibility do researchers have for monitoring how their data and methods may be used by others?

Small Group Discussion

Following the panel discussion, attendees will break out into small groups, in which the panelists will act as facilitators. Attendees will be directed to discuss the topics presented during the panel. Panelists will rotate through the groups to facilitate discussions based on the questions they each addressed during the panel.

Additional questions to consider during the group sessions may include:

1. What are the criteria for determining proper and improper ethical approaches and who should enforce these standards?
 - a. Should the individual or the institution have more of a responsibility to enforce these standards?
 - b. Should these standards vary by metatheoretical orientation?
2. How can communication between researchers be enhanced to bring ethical discussions and goals to the forefront?
3. What are some strategies beyond obtaining institutional review board (or ethics review committee, research ethics board, or independent ethics committee) approval researchers can employ to be transparent about the ethical frameworks guiding their research and how their metatheories inform these frameworks?

Session Wrap-up

The panel will conclude by inviting attendees to share findings from their small group discussions and individual thoughts with the entire group. In addition, attendees will also be given the opportunity to engage in a question and answer period with the full panel.

PANEL MEMBERS

Panelists are comprised of early to mid-career researchers within the LIS field. Brief biographies of each panel member, as well as the panel moderator, are provided below.

Ross Todd, PhD (moderator), Associate Professor, School of Communication & Information, Rutgers University, & Director, Center for International Scholarship in School Libraries.

Ross's research primarily focuses on the engagement of people and their information worlds, and how this interaction can be understood to facilitate professional action and change, and make a difference to individuals, organizations, societies, and nations. Drawing on an intellectually diverse and rich multidisciplinary base, it focuses on the interconnectedness of people, information, and knowledge, the development of creative and responsive information and knowledge infrastructures that can make a

difference to individuals, social groups, institutions, and organizations, and facilitate professional action and change.

Sarah Barriage, PhD Candidate (panelist), School of Communication & Information, Rutgers University.

Sarah's research focuses on the information experience of young children related to their free-time activities and is influenced by the field of childhood studies. Her approach is grounded in the belief that children are marginalized within contemporary Western society, and that the power imbalances inherent in the research process must be addressed in order to conduct ethical research with this population. This child-centered approach to research includes carefully considering all aspects of the research process, from recruiting and selecting participants, establishing informed consent, collecting and analyzing data, and disseminating research findings, as well as the relationship between the researcher and the researched.

Wayne Buente, PhD (panelist), Assistant Professor, School of Communications, University of Hawai'i at Mānoa.

Wayne's research interests include digital inequality, digital citizenship, social media, and social and community informatics. Using a sociotechnical perspective, his work investigates how information and communication technologies (ICTs) help to address issues of social and political inequality. Underlying all his research goals is the belief that ICTs are merely one component among a variety of social, political, and contextual factors that can empower individuals and organizations to achieve social change. Recent work explored how homeless shelter guests in Honolulu, HI utilize ICTs in ways that develop and sustain social support networks.

Elke Greifeneder, PhD (panelist), Professor, Institut für Bibliotheks- und Informationswissenschaft, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin

Elke is a Juniorprofessor at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin where she leads the information behavior research group. Her interests are human information behavior in users' natural environments, including effects of ubiquitous computing, effects of distractions, and remote user testing. Previously she held a position as assistant professor at the Royal School of Library and Information Science at the University of Copenhagen. Among other community services, she was the Program Chair of iConference 2014, is the co-chair of the International Relations Committee in

ASIS&T, and is the editor of Library Hi Tech, Emerald Publishing Group.

Devon Greyson, PhD (panelist), Postdoctoral Fellow, Child & Family Research Institute, University of British Columbia.

Devon studies what people do with health information and when this matters to health and social equity. Applying an intersectional social justice lens to youth and family health information practices and to public health information interventions, Devon has worked with populations such as young parents and topics such as vaccine hesitancy. Accountability to research participants and their communities is a core value of Devon's research process, which often requires integrated knowledge exchange processes, creative research methods, and collaborative interdisciplinary project teams.

Miraida Morales, PhD Candidate (panelist), School of Communication & Information, Rutgers University.

Miraida's research focuses on the relationship between health information practices and reading. Her work questions prescriptive notions of literacy as a set of skills that people either have or lack, and problematizes the concept of health literacy as defined by the public health literature. Rather than asking whether members of communities have sufficient health literacy skills and how this health literacy level correlates with health factors, her work strives to empower adult early readers to evaluate the quality and usefulness of consumer health information documents.

CONCLUSION

This panel will engage with key struggles, challenges, and tensions within different areas of LIS research. The unique characteristics of participants as early to mid-career researchers, whose research involves direct engagement with participants, bring these issues into sharp focus and represent emerging perspectives of how these issues should be addressed in future research.

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