


Brief Communication

Ethical challenge of student-participants using a research survey for giving course feedback

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Abstract

Conducting research with one's students as participants can have various challenges. We describe one particular challenge we have encountered when conducting research surveys with participants who had been students of a doctoral course taught by us. Some participants gave course feedback in the research. This may indicate blurring of the roles of student and research participant. Blurring is problematic from the perspectives of research ethics and research integrity. Problems may arise concerning voluntariness, confidentiality and the quality of data. We suggest possible ways of preventing this blurring. These concern (1) the timing of the research in relation to the course, (2) information for the participants, (3) the recruitment practice and (4) the format of the survey questions.

Keywords Research ethics · Research integrity · Dual role · Researcher-teacher · Student-research participant · Feedback

1 Introduction

In this brief communication, we discuss a challenge of research participants using a research survey as a means of giving course feedback. We identified this while having the dual roles of teacher-researchers. In 2021, we conducted a research survey and data driven qualitative content analysis to enhance understanding on conceptions that doctoral researchers have regarding research ethics [1]. We repeated the research with different participants in 2022. In both cases, the participants had just completed a multidisciplinary doctoral research ethics course taught by us. All students of each course were invited to participate in the research survey. An email was sent from the course's e-mail and they were informed about the research, e.g., voluntariness. Answering the survey questions was taken to indicate an informed consent. This practice follows the Finnish guidelines [2].

The research survey consisted of six open questions (Table 1).

To our surprise, the answers included course feedback even though we followed recommendations for ensuring that the participants could distinguish the research from the course [3]: The invitation to the research was sent after the course had ended and the course feedback collected. The students had been informed that participation or refusal to participate in the research would not influence their studies. We had hoped that these procedures would suffice, as the participants were doctoral researchers who had just completed our course which included learning informing participants and voluntariness in research.

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Table 1 Survey questions

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1. Why did you take the research ethics course at this stage of your studies (there may be many reasons, and could you please tell us as many as you can)?
 2. Did the course change your conception of research ethics? If so, how?
 3. Could you please self-evaluate what was the impact of this course to your research ethics skills?
 4. What is the relevance of research ethics for your dissertation?
 5. What is the relevance of research ethics to your career?
 6. If there is anything else you wish to say about research ethics, please do so here
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2 Why is course feedback in a research survey a problem for research ethics and research integrity?

There may be several reasons why research participants give course feedback in the research: Some may confuse the research survey with the possibility to give course feedback. Some of our survey questions referred to the course. Others may miss the possibility to give course feedback and see the survey as an opportunity. Others may want to give feedback in the research survey even though they have already given it. In all three cases, giving course feedback as part of the research survey creates ethical and research integrity problems that relate to the dual roles of student-research participants. The separate roles come with different goals, rights and responsibilities. Ethical and research integrity problems arise when people confuse their roles [4–7]. The problems concern voluntariness and informing, confidentiality and the quality of the data.

2.1 Voluntariness and informing

The participants were not pressured to answer the survey. Yet, had they failed to understand that they were participating in the research, they were neither sufficiently informed nor participating voluntarily [8, 9]. Even though under certain circumstances there are justifiable reasons to conduct research without free informed consent, no such reasons apply here [2, 9].

Much of the feedback in our research survey was either extremely positive or negative, while the feedback received through the course feedback procedures was more neutral. This suggests that most people knew they were participating in research but did so only to give feedback. Voluntariness of these participants can be questioned if they thought that the research participation was necessary for giving feedback [8, 9].¹ Other participants may have either skipped or misunderstood the informing and, thus, participated without being fully informed.

2.2 Confidentiality

Even though the classes had almost 200 students per year, we could identify some participants from their writing styles. Furthermore, even though background information was not collected, the student-research participants will be identifiable to a degree from the publications because we as the authors have our names and institution in them. We informed the participants about these limits to anonymity. Yet, participants' urge to give feedback may compromise their assessment of the benefit-risk ratio.

2.3 Quality of data

Course feedback in the research survey may weaken the quality of the research, as it may diminish the amount and depth of the answers in the survey. Some participants may not want to write lengthy comments. As a result, space given to course feedback may be away from topics pertinent to research. In our case, most of the feedback was given to the last question so the influence on the quality seems minor.

¹ For these participants the situation might have been analogous to therapeutic misconception in medical research; The primary purpose of data collection is lost. [10]

3 Possible solutions

The dual role situations arise when the same people are present in two circumstances which ethically require different behavior. The dual roles of teacher-researcher and student-research participant raise ethical issues regarding power relationships which may compromise voluntariness [3, 5, 7, 11]. Problems may also result when the two roles get mixed [12, 13]. Blurring of the roles is likely to happen when activities in the two roles are similar—such as asking course feedback by online survey and collecting research data with the same method [12].

In our case, blurring of the student-research participant roles occurred even though the participants were recruited after the courses had finished, and they were doctoral researchers who have a high-level understanding of requirements. Thus, extra procedures are needed.

First, in our research the course coordinator contacted the research participants via the course e-mail. This may have led the students to consider the research as a part of the course. The invitation could thus come from a source unrelated to the course. It is recommended having different people to teach and administer the research-related procedures [5, 12, 13; cf. 3, 11]. In our case, it would have required either hiring someone to recruit or conducting the research in another university.

Second, the students had a chance to give course feedback before they were invited to the research. The feedback request came from the university's administration. It is possible that some missed the opportunity. More actively informing about course feedback might decrease the students' inclination to give course feedback in the research. Furthermore, it might be useful to explicitly inform the participants that the research survey is not for giving course feedback. Related to this, it might be a good idea to pre-test the informing to make certain that the information is understood the way researchers mean it to be understood. After all, assessment of understanding is "implicit in providing informed consent" [14].

Third, the first three research survey questions mentioned the course. The final question gave the research participants' possibility to express issues concerning research ethics freely. It might be possible to reduce the amount of feedback with re-wording the questions. The value of open questions should also be considered.

Fourth, timing is important. It might be sensible to postpone the research survey from the course. Yet, it seems important that the possibility for course feedback is available during data collection.

Our experience shows that even educated student-research participants have challenges in adopting the dual role of student-research participant and this may lead to giving course feedback on a research survey—a topic which has not been much discussed. We call for further research on the topic.

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Author contributions Helena Siipi and Susanne Uusitalo wrote the main manuscript text together. Helena Siipi and Susanne Uusitalo collected the data together.

Data availability Data sharing is not applicable. We do not analyse or generate any datasets, because our work proceeds within a theoretical approach. Our manuscript is not an empirical research and has not collected data. The data it refers to was collected to research that was published: Uusitalo, S. & Siipi, H. 2023. "Ethics is quite simple in exact science": A survey of doctoral researcher's conceptions of research ethics. *Teaching Ethics* online first July 27, 2023. <https://doi.org/10.5840/tej2023622127>.

Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate The research design does not require an ethical approval according to the guidelines of the Finnish National Board of Research Integrity. The research was conducted in accordance to the ethical principles of research with human participants and ethical review in the human sciences in Finland. The guidelines can be found here: [Finnish National Board on Research Integrity TENK guidelines 2019](#).

Competing interests The authors declare no competing interests.

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