The ethics review of visual communication design research proposals: is a 'dual mandate' approach justifiable?

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Abstract

The majority of institutional ethics committees at South African tertiary institutions state in their standard operating procedures that the role of the ethics committee includes screening proposed research with regard to the core principles of ethics (dignity and autonomy, justice, non-maleficence and beneficence), as well as the scientific validity of the envisaged study. The first part of this paper debates to what extent such an approach is justified, as the notion of validity is primarily located in the philosophy of science and not in the field of moral philosophy. The second part of the paper illustrates some of the main points of the discussion with selected examples from the field of visual communication design research. The examples are drawn from (1) practice-based design research, where the products of the design practice are presented as inquiry outcomes, often contextualized in an accompanying written report; (2) practice-led design research, i.e. studies that investigate the nature of practice in an effort to develop insights that will contribute to new knowledge about the design practice, where the processes and products of the design practice may be used as data, but are not considered to be inquiry outputs in themselves; and (3) image-based design research, or research approaches where visual images such as photographs, drawings or video recordings form an integral part of the data collection and analysis methods. As the selected examples show, the notions of validity and ethics are interwoven and inextricably linked, but not inseparable. While recognizing that crude errors of reasoning (i.e. low validity) may in some cases ultimately lead to harm (i.e. unethical conduct), it is argued that the 'dual mandate' approach of screening for issues of ethics and validity concomitantly is not suitable for visual communication design research. Ethics clearance is a relatively recent requirement at Universities of Technology and is becoming increasingly rigorous. In the light thereof, the paper contributes to the current debates about the ethics dimension of design practice and design research, especially in a South African setting.

Keywords: *Visual communication design research, ethics review, validity, dual mandate*

Introduction

This paper discusses issues and concerns relating to the ethics review of visual communication design research proposals. The paper focuses on the relationship between the core principles of research ethics on the one hand, and the notion of validity on the other hand. The background to the discussion is that the terms of reference and standard operating procedures of the majority of institutional ethics review committees at South African universities, and internationally as well, state that research proposals should be assessed both in terms of the universal principles of ethics, as well as with regard to the scientific validity of the envisaged study. , The universal principles of ethics include dignity and autonomy, justice, non-maleficence and beneficence (Gallagher 1999).

This dual mandate stems primarily from clinical research in the health sciences where, as discussed in greater detail later in the paper, discussions surrounding the principle of equipoise (Miller & Brody 2007) show that in a clinical research setting a biased sample can easily lead to a situation where, if the study were to proceed, the researcher would in all likelihood waste the time of the study participants and needlessly inconvenience them. The researcher is also likely to deny the participants

access to standard treatments and therapies, and neglect the 'therapeutic obligation to offer optimal medical care to patients' in other ways as well (Miller & Brody 2007, p. 151). Transferring the concerns raised with regard to equipoise in broad terms to other types of research implies that a proposed study with a flawed research logic and inappropriately selected methods should not be allowed to proceed from a research ethics point of view. This is the case in order to prevent a situation where the researcher wastes the time of the participants with activities that will in any case not lead to valid results and will thus not contribute anything meaningful to scholarship in the design disciplines.

Based on definitions of validity by Kirk and Miller (1986, p. 80), Lather (1993, p. 673), Mouton (1996, p. 111), Reichertz (2000, p. 3) and Mayan (2001, p. 25), for the purpose of this paper the notion of validity refers to as an epistemic criterion which applies to the entire research process and deals primarily with those strategies of legitimizing knowledge which rest on the quality of fit between observations, facts or data and the conclusions based on such observations, facts or data (Gaede 2004). Using the term 'validity', and not 'credibility', in connection with visual communication design research may at first seem problematic and inappropriate. However, there have always been pleas among qualitative researchers for a move away from a 'qualitative only' way of writing and a return to the terminology used by mainstream science (see Morse et. al., 2002). In this regard, it is also important to point out that ever since the paradigm wars of the 1960s, a number of authors working in the qualitative inquiry paradigm have retained the term 'validity' in their writing all along. These include Lather (1993), who argued that '... rather than jettisoning validity as the term of choice, I retain the term in order to both circulate and break with the signs that code it' (Lather 1993, p. 674).

The remainder of this paper develops the argument that during the ethics review of visual communication design research proposals, issues of validity and ethics are invariably interwoven and interlinked, but not inseparable. While recognizing that crude errors of reasoning (i.e. low validity) may in some cases ultimately lead to harm (i.e. unethical conduct), it is argued that in contrast to the dual mandate approach commonly used in the health sciences, the emphasis of an ethics review in the visual communication design disciplines should fall fairly and squarely on issues of ethics.

Ethics review and the 'dual mandate'

Ethics clearance for research proposals is a relatively recent requirement at South Africa's Universities of Technology and is becoming increasingly rigorous. Some institutions have multiple research ethics committees which operate alongside each other, each being separately accredited to issue ethics clearance numbers. For example, one ethics committee focuses on proposals from the humanities, one on research in the health sciences, one on research involving animals and so on. In other cases, the university has a single central ethics committee which reviews proposals from all its faculties. In addition, some universities have set up faculty-based ethics committees which can process proposals for low-risk studies, but are not in a position to issue clearance numbers. These faculty-based ethics review committees are usually monitored and audited by the university's main ethics committee or ethics review board. Smaller public universities and private tertiary institutions tend to submit their research proposals to external ethics committees for review where needed, such as to the ethics committee of the Human Sciences Research Council, or the ethics review board of the Medical Research Council. In some instances, only those projects that will be published in an academic journal where the editorial policy of the journal stipulates that an ethics clearance number by an accredited ethics review board must be submitted together with the journal manuscript are sent for ethics review, especially as ethics clearance numbers cannot be issued retrospectively.

In order to assess the level of risk and the nature of the review required, ethics review committees look at whether the proposed study will involve (1) human participants, (2) organizations, (3) animals, or (4) the environment. Based on the numerous ethics training materials available to ethics reviewers online and elsewhere, studies involving archival research or a philosophical analysis using only written sources generally do not require ethics clearance. Studies involving human participants

typically require a letter of information to the prospective participants and informed consent forms unless there are clear reasons why informed consent can be dispensed with. Studies involving organizations imply that a letter of gatekeeper permission needs to be obtained before the study commences, such as written permission from a school principal, school governing body and/or the Minister of Education to conduct research with the learners on the school premises. Prospective studies that will involve animals and the environment need to adhere to international protocols to minimize cruelty or adverse consequences to the environment. As a general rule, studies involving children, pregnant women and vulnerable participants such as prisoners require a more rigorous and detailed review, usually by co-opting additional experts onto the ethics committee where needed.

Regardless of the level of risk, the standard practice is that research proposals are first scrutinized by scholars and researchers in the relevant academic discipline, such as by a faculty-based research committee, before they are forwarded for ethics review. This arrangement means that ideally issues of validity and scholarly rigor, as well as other research quality criteria rooted in the philosophy of science, are assessed at faculty or school level, and that issues of ethics such as the risk of harm to participants as well as other considerations located in the field of moral philosophy are evaluated by the relevant ethics committee. In practice, however, the terms of reference and standard operating procedures of the majority of institutional ethics review committees at South African universities encourage the above mentioned 'dual mandate' approach whereby the role of the ethics review board is to engage with both issues of scientific validity and ethics.

As mentioned in the introduction, this 'dual mandate' approach emanates from a health research setting where the principle of equipoise (Miller & Brody 2007) plays an important role. Equipoise exists when '... a clinician has no good basis for a choice between two or more care options or when one is truly uncertain about the overall benefit or harm offered by the treatment to his/her patient' (Cook and Sheets 2011, p. 55). Equipoise links closely with issues of research sampling and measurement validity (Miller & Brody 2007). The assumption is that where a preferred care option is available based on clear evidence, further research is generally speaking not justified. In contrast, where there is no sound basis for deciding between two or more care options due to a lack of evidence, and the overall benefit or harm offered by a particular treatment is unknown, further research is warranted. The likelihood that the proposed study will, once successfully completed, directly benefit the study participants is thus very high at the outset. This implies that it may easily happen that an ethics reviewer or research ethics committee member from a health research background may require a research project from another academic field to conform to the principle of equipoise (broadly speaking) on a variety of levels. These may include the expectations that (1) the researcher has to show that the proposed project will have foreseeable benefits to the study participants before the project may proceed. If there are no tangible and foreseeable benefits, then why do the study in the first place? and (2) the researcher must clearly show that the proposed study will lead to scientifically valid results that will reduce the uncertainty surrounding the choice among two or more available options. In the event that it is known right at the beginning that the results of the proposed study will not meet these criteria, then why do the study in the first place?

It is, however, debatable to what extent the 'dual mandate' approach of assessing issues of validity and ethics concomitantly is helpful in the case of research proposals from the visual communication design field. These typically involve (1) practice-based design research, where the products of the design practice are presented as inquiry outcomes, often contextualized in an accompanying written report (see Roome 2013, for example); (2) practice-led design research, i.e. studies that investigate the nature of practice in an effort to develop insights that will contribute to new knowledge about the design practice, where the processes and products of the design practice may be used as data, but are not considered to be inquiry outputs in themselves; and (3) image-based design research, or research approaches where visual images such as photographs, drawings or video recordings form an integral part of the data collection and analysis methods (Prosser 1998). In other words, visual communication design research is primarily idiographic in nature, whereas the 'dual mandate'

approach to ethics review sits more comfortably with a nomothetic research orientation (Jary & Jary 2005, p. 290).

Discussion of examples

In the case of visual communication design research proposals, ethical considerations primarily relate to the dignity of the human person (see Langmann & Pick 2014) as well as methods and techniques of ensuring anonymity, meeting privacy expectations and ensuring informed consent in a manner that is appropriate for data collection and analysis approaches which involve with visual images (Pauwels 2008). As far as the ethics review process is concerned, Prosser and Loxley (2008:49) point out that:

> 'Due the relative newness of visually orientated research, there is limited agreement among ethics committees and visual researchers on ethical guidelines and subsequent practices. It is clear that around the world funding bodies, universities, academic departments, regional and local authorities and researchers are only now beginning to consider establishing comprehensive and viable visual ethics policies (Prosser and Loxley 2008, p. 49)'

Bearing in mind that visual communication design ethics policies are still in the process of being developed, the following three examples briefly highlight how issues of validity and ethics are linked, but not inseparable:

Example 1

As part of a practice-based research project, an artist/researcher intends to produce an exhibition of documentary photographs of the interiors of public trains as well as commuters travelling on them with a view to obtain an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon of commuting and to convey this understanding visually. A validity issue is that verbal explanations of the commuters about their views, opinions and experiences would meaningfully augment and contextualize the visual information and such a triangulation of methods would improve the study design as a whole. The implications for research ethics are that simply taking documentary photographs in a public train, possibly by means of a concealed camera, is a relatively straightforward matter seen from a research ethics point of view, provided that the artist/researcher does not harass or needlessly annoy the commuters, and that they remain anonymous throughout the process. Interviewing the commuters, on the other hand, would require additional measures to ensure that the universal principles of research ethics, i.e. dignity and autonomy, justice, non-maleficence and beneficence, are complied with. Such additional measures would include an information letter about the project, informed consent forms, obtaining permission to photograph and to voice record the conversation, and so. In such a case, raising the scientific validity of the study has significant implications for research ethics.

Example 2

As part of a practice-led research project, a researcher intends to interview 15-20 of the most well-known and influential graphic designers working in South Africa at the moment about their practice, their design philosophy, working habits, etc. The intention is to offer the designers the option of participating anonymously and to voice record the interviews. A validity issue is that it is important for the readers of the completed study to know who was interviewed, in order to allow them to form an own opinion whether they agree that the selected designers are in fact among the most well-known and influential designers. The related research ethics issue is that conducting interviews and anonymizing the data is relatively straightforward from a research ethics point of view. Declaring the identity of the participant in the research report, on the other hand, would require a more rigorous approach to research ethics prior to, during and after the data collection. Such a more rigorous approach would include agreements about how the data are stored and who will have access to the

data under what conditions, etc. In this particular case, the participating graphic designers may also become annoyed when offered the option of remaining anonymous in the research report and other subsequent publications, as the fact that they are considered to be well-known and influential was the reason for their selection in the first place. While ethics review committees tend to encourage anonymization wherever possible, in this this particular case anonymization would probably be counterproductive to the aims of the study as a whole.

Example 3

A researcher intends to employ the visual research method of photo-elicitation in a project about perceptions and attitudes surrounding nudity in art to be conducted on a university campus among university students. The researcher intends to show three to four photographs relating to the theme of nudity in art to each participant at the beginning of an individual interview. A validity issue for a project of this nature is that the photographs are intended as a prompting device in order to reduce awkwardness in the early stages of the interview, i.e. to 'break the ice', which will ultimately contribute to a situation where the participants are inclined to talk more freely. This will in turn increase the likelihood of a positive communicative atmosphere and the chances of obtaining richer and deeper data during the interviews. From a research ethics point of view, a study of this nature would require, among others, an information letter informing the participants of the aims of the study, how the data will be handled, and information about the participant's right to withdraw from the study at any stage without adverse consequences. However, in order to place the prospective participants in a position where they can give informed consent in a meaningful way, they will need to see one to two representative examples of the type of images that will be used during the photo-elicitation procedure beforehand. If this were not the case, a situation could arise where the photo-elicitation interview proceeds normally up to a point where the researcher shows an image to the participant which the participants experiences as obscene or offensive. At this point the participant may choose to exercise his/her right to withdraw from the study. However, at that point 'the damage will have been done' and it would have been better if the participant had a clearer idea beforehand what he/she was agreeing to. In such a study, the process of showing the prospective participants one to two representative examples of the images to be used beforehand as part of the procedure of obtaining informed consent, and then showing a few more images in the photo-elicitation interview itself once the interviewee has agreed to participate in the study, does not significantly change the study design and does not have a strong impact on validity considerations. In other words, no noteworthy tradeoff between issues of validity and issues of ethics needs to occur.

Conclusion

This paper discussed how issues of validity and ethics are invariably closely connected during the ethics review of visual communication design research proposals, as illustrated by means of three examples. The view adopted in the paper is that the 'dual mandate' approach of screening for issues of ethics and validity concomitantly, which is popular in the health sciences, is as a general rule not suitable for visual communication design research. The emphasis of an ethics review in the visual communication design disciplines should fall fairly and squarely on issues of ethics, and on ways of avoiding foreseeable harm.

Ethics clearance is a relatively recent requirement at Universities of Technology and is becoming increasingly rigorous. Most institutions currently ensure that postgraduate and free-standing research projects, especially if they are externally funded, undergo a process of ethics screening, but do not yet require fourth year and undergraduate projects to be submitted for ethics clearance of any kind. This state of affairs is, however, gradually changing and it is likely that in three to five years from now it will be standard practice for small-scale undergraduate projects to undergo a thorough and detailed process of ethics review.

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