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Reflections on teaching research ethics in education for international postgraduate students in the UK

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Reflections on teaching research ethics in education for international postgraduate students in the UK

Research ethics in education is a challenging topic to teach and to learn. As the staff and student body in UK higher education and elsewhere diversifies, the challenges increase as shared reference points diminish. My teaching reflections focus on a key tension explored in this article: how the imperative of internationalising the curriculum conflicts with hegemonic codes of conduct regarding research ethics that seem resistant to change. The framework of threshold concepts is applied to the teaching and learning of research ethics in education not, as is usual, to identify such concepts, but to draw attention to the critical role of the intersection between learner and curriculum and how institutional expectations need to be re-appraised.

Keywords: Ethics; Postgraduate; Education; Internationalisation; Threshold Concepts.

Introduction

It is not a new observation that research ethics can be challenging to teach and learn, and it is also a truism that ethics can feature on many a research methods curriculum as something of an afterthought, but writing on this topic is limited. The teaching and learning experiences of taught postgraduate students have received less attention than those of undergraduates too, leaving them an underexplored population (Bamber, 2014). In this article, I attempt to bring these two neglected areas together and reflect on the teaching, learning and assessment of research ethics in education for a very specific audience: international one-year full-time taught Masters students in a UK School of Education, but I would argue that others, in different contexts, face similar issues. For reasons of space, the experiences and challenges for part-time, home and doctoral students are not considered here.

The reflections detailed here are grounded in my current practice (Schon, 1995) teaching on one Masters programme in Education that draws students from very many countries around the globe, but I also draw on experiences gained from two UK university settings in the last 10 years, such as ‘academic skills’ (for research students) and ‘academic professional development’ (for faculty) programmes elsewhere, and participation in two departmental-level and one university-wide Ethics Committee. As Stake (1995) argues,

‘intrinsic’ case studies do not seek to generalise, simply to exemplify the ‘what is’ of a local case. However, a positive response to an earlier presentation of this paper at the HECU7 conference (Smith, 2014) also suggests the issues reported here go beyond my individual experiences.

This article has an important caveat: it is an ethical challenge in and of itself to talk about experiences of teaching and assessing – in whatever guise – the topic of research ethics, as datasets necessarily remain confidential. The difficulty of reflecting publicly on such sources of information must contribute at least in part to the paucity of literature in this area, and the consideration of what it is ethical to report is paramount. It is easy, therefore, to dismiss the analysis that follows as ‘simply anecdotal’ but it is hard to see how we learn more about such a sensitive and contentious issue as the teaching, learning and assessment of research ethics for taught postgraduates unless we are willing to seriously interrogate and reflect on these experiences.

By its very nature, the topic of research ethics is difficult to teach as it does not deal with stable knowledge and, indeed, is characterised by dilemmas with no simple answers (Macfarlane 2009). It is also highly contextual, with different academic disciplines and geographic jurisdictions around the world having a variety of legal, regulatory or cultural requirements and expectations (Macfarlane and Saitoh, 2008). One framework useful for interpreting the teaching, learning and assessment of difficult or troublesome knowledge (Perkins, 1999) is Threshold Concepts (TCs) (Meyer and Land, 2003) who claim that thresholds can be found in all disciplinary fields. Whilst the focus here is on research ethics in the field of education, as ethical behaviour is a pan-disciplinary social construct it is useful to explore the extent to which TCs are a helpful device to reflect on practice in the context of teaching research ethics more generally to an international audience.

Threshold concepts, liminality and the substance of research ethics

Five basic properties of a threshold concept were outlined by Meyer and Land (2003): a TC is held to be transformative; integrative; irreversible; bounded; and drawing on Perkins (1999), troublesome. Evidence of a threshold concept having been acquired can be apparent when someone adopts a new ‘discursive repertoire’ (Meyer and Land, 2005), suggesting that if a basic concept in research ethics – such as informed consent – has been understood, a student’s subsequent ethics application will appreciate, and be written from, a participant’s ‘need to know’ perspective. The move from one state – not understanding – to another, full apprehension, can be problematic (Meyer and Land, 2005) as meaningful learning involves a shift in worldview, a period that Meyer and Land (2003) characterise as liminality. The liminal state is not yet well understood, although work investigates how it may be experienced (Land, Rattray and Vivian, 2014) and the idea of concepts ‘grasped/not-yet-grasped’ documented by Orsini-Jones (2008) resonates with the unstable knowledge and dilemmas (Macfarlane, 2009) encountered in research ethics, where simple – or indeed correct - answers are not always possible. Gaining exposure to a greater variety of different cultural backgrounds serves only to make guiding students towards ethical decision-making yet more complex.

When research ethics are taught – and ultimately assessed – in a particular context some attention needs to be paid to the idea that students may be encountering a good deal of troublesome knowledge (Perkins, 1999) which can be compounded for international students coming from different cultural contexts. Troublesomeness can also be situated in the contemporary compliance culture (McWilliam, 2004) of institutional and professional body regulation. In this respect, it can be argued that elements of a research ethics curriculum, including ‘confidentiality, informed consent and the experimental mental manipulation of human subjects’ (Lucas and Lidstone, 2000: 54), or notions of ‘harm, consent and

anonymity' (Haggerty: 2004: 393) could be considered threshold concepts (Meyer and Land, 2003). This suggests that particular concepts in a research ethics curriculum which hold this threshold quality should be prioritised in teaching (Land et al, 2005) to avoid what Cousin (2006b) calls the 'stuffed curriculum' approach where large quantities of material are all perceived to be equally important.

Conceiving of elements of a research ethics curriculum as threshold concepts, however, mistakes the nature of the threshold concept itself: Meyer and Land (2003) state that such thresholds can be found in all disciplinary fields, but the contextually and culturally-dependent nature of ethics suggests that any threshold will reside in the intersection of learner and curriculum (Cousin, 2006b) and not as a teacher-defined entity. For example, we often refer to sensitive topics (Lowe, 2015) in relation to ethics or teaching more generally, but what this comprises is often not elaborated. The very notion of a sensitive topic will be influenced by national or cultural heritage and unique biographies.

If topics can be troublesome, simulating a challenging experience (Lucas and Lidstone, 2000) may also present difficulties. They aimed to recreate Stanley Milgram's 'obedience' studies of the 1970s as a pedagogic approach. Milgram's original work recruited volunteers from the general public to act as 'teachers', instructed to administer punishment to students who did not perform well on tasks. The basis of the study was not clear to the volunteers, but they were asked to follow instructions and press a button that would deliver an electric shock in response to incorrect answers from students. When told their actions were harmful, participants still complied. Lucas and Lidstone (2000) replicated this process of 'obedience training' via simulation, reporting how it may induce stress in students, as a way of exploring research ethics. This shows that either pedagogic approaches or materials may represent difficulties for students, which makes it important, as Cousin (2008) notes, to avoid 'essentialism' in both curriculum and teaching.

The situatedness of research ethics

The irony of avoiding essentialism in a written text situated in a particular context is not lost: the difficulty of addressing issues in the teaching of research ethics can be informed only by resources accessible to me, chiefly those published by writers from a range of English-speaking backgrounds, meaning that only insights from teaching from a Western perspective (Cousin, 2011) are available to inform my thinking. Conceptualising and designing research ethics teaching appropriate for a diverse international audience therefore remains a challenge. If, as McGinn and Bosacki (2004) suggest, teachers of research ethics need to model ethical practices themselves, it needs to be recognised that what is considered ethical is culturally and temporally situated. It is not only teaching staff to whom this applies: ethics committee members, as the ultimate arbiters of what constitutes an ethically-sound research proposal, may also have a need for training (Doyle and Buckley, 2014).

The situatedness, instability and potentially unsettling liminality that can be encountered when teaching and learning research ethics further complicates issues such as appropriate tools to teach with. Burr and King (2012) write persuasively about the utility of using extracts from 'Big Brother', an intrusive 'reality television' programme as a means of stimulating debate, but do not appear to consider the impact of this device on those from other cultural backgrounds. Textbooks have been investigated and found wanting, in that little space is devoted to research ethics (McSkimming et al, 2000), and elsewhere particular approaches such as the case method (Preston, 1992), and groundings in moral philosophy (Preston, 1992) are also advocated. Haggerty (2004) shows in a Canadian context, that Codes of Conduct are so prescriptive that they impose regulations and standards on academic work that are not applied to other fields. He uses journalistic practices as a comparator which is perhaps unfortunate in a contemporary UK context where such practices have recently been

the focus of lengthy legal inquiry (see, for instance, Leveson 2012). He notes, however, that there is a very real tension between ethical compliance and ethical doings. In UK universities, ethical approval is given – almost exclusively in the field of education – on the basis of a written submission, but a fundamental weakness exists in that actual research practices (‘ethical doings’) are rarely probed unless a complaint is made.

Governed by legalistic and prescriptive ‘rules’, the purpose of teaching research ethics runs the risk of doing what Pring (in McGinn and Bosacki, 2004) fears: the very task may be reduced to a ‘read[ing] off from that code... what exactly one should do’ when what is desired is an ethical sensibility that is actively engaged by each individual throughout all stages of the research process (Macfarlane, 2009). Codes of Conduct proliferate in various countries and also depend on disciplinary allegiances. Where an ethical issue may once have been a local matter, we now have to address a global audience who can be reached instantaneously via new media, suggesting that teaching, assessment and codes of conduct may need revisiting. The value and use of personal data is a case in point, exemplified by a recent European Court of Justice decision which overturned a prior ruling on the export of such data between the EU and the US (see Naughton, 2015 for a readable summary). Such national/regional and professional/statutory body imperatives are subject to further refinement and interpretation at the level of disciplines in higher education. As the staff and student bodies at universities in the UK continue to diversify, particularly at postgraduate level (HESA, 2014), teachers and learners of research ethics may share few common reference points, further complicating data use/value debates along with other potentially long-standing ethical research assumptions and practices.

Governance or formation?

Ideas regarding governance are addressed by Lunt and Fouché (2010) in a New Zealand context and by Williams (2009) in South Africa where the ‘policing’ (Williams, 2009) function raises concerns in practice. This can also be exacerbated by the greater use of new media (Tilley and Woodthorpe, 2011) and an internationalised student body. These ideas, along with the problematising TCs framework (Meyer and Land, 2003) can thus remind us that it is the intersection between learner and curriculum that is important, and that there is an inherent tension between codes of conduct and actual research practices, and many pedagogic tools available to us do not explicitly address diversity. Internationalising the curriculum and sensitivity to ‘Othering’ (Cousin, 2011), both desirable pedagogic goals, remain governed by ‘rules’ (Haggerty, 2004) required by locally-established compliance regimes.

Conceptualising the teaching of research ethics as more rightly a process of supporting ‘formation in research ethics’ (Vallance, 2005: online, n.p) resonates with the notion of threshold concepts as intersections, detailed above. But it should not address only student formation: reflections on the teaching and assessment of research ethics need also to be considered. Consonant with this, the character of the teacher of ethics (McGinn and Bosacki, 2004: online, n.p) maintains that ‘instructors need to model integrity by authentically espousing personal moral and ethical commitments’. It is hard to argue with this sentiment: the teacher of ethics should (presumably?) teach ethically, and serious reflection on our own position is encouraged (Williams, 2009). How this may be achieved in a highly-internationalised environment where there may be a cultural mis-match between teachers and learners does not appear to be addressed in extant literature. The values base underpinning the teaching of research ethics is rightly acknowledged (Macfarlane, 2009). Where cultures, experiences and positions are not shared (Macfarlane and Saitoh, 2008), however, a further dilemma arises immediately: whose values dominate? How this mis-match is discussed or

written about especially from a UK perspective, without falling into the kind of colonial imperialism that postcolonial theorists warn against, makes reflection and writing on institutional and individual positionality (Cousin, 2010; Williams, 2009) difficult.

Reflections on sensitivities within research ethics teaching

The ‘data’ that form the basis of the reflections and analysis in this article are drawn from a variety of naturally-occurring sources – the formal teaching, formal assessment and committee work noted above, not all of which can be articulated fully due to confidentiality issues. As such, McGinn and Bosacki’s (2004) observations on the duties of the teacher of research ethics to behave ethically rings true: where methodologically, transparency and rigour are to be applauded, in this instance, the only ethical path is an element of obfuscation, an additional challenge that Haggerty (2004) has addressed in his reflections on ethics committee membership, noting in particular that there is a lack of awareness of how committees reach decisions. This lack of transparency, however, can be a step in the process that leads to mistrust of either intention, with regard to ethics committees, or data, as in the case of Dutch Social Psychologist Diederik Stapel. Stapel rose to a position of academic prominence but has since been discredited through institutional investigations leading to the retraction of more than 50 publications (see Retraction Watch for thorough documentation). His wholesale fabrication of data without traceable consent and data collection procedures were roundly critiqued by the Levelt Report (2012). It seems that acknowledging the weaknesses in a highly-situated analysis of an individual’s reflections may be the only productive, logical and ethical way forward.

My aim in this article is to reflect upon key issues in the teaching, learning and assessment of research ethics with an increasingly diversified postgraduate student and staff body. It is a form of reflection both on and in action as Schon (1995) advocates, and can best be seen as trustworthy in the vein of personal testimony (Gready, 2008). To support this

claim, I focus below on a couple of issues that frequently cause students difficulties, before considering the imputation of institutional and regulatory requirements in such ‘trouble’. Given the situatedness and dilemma status (Macfarlane, 2009) of teaching about research ethics, I try as far as possible to avoid suggesting that a particular position (as can be seen in Preston, 1992) is preferable for reasons of cultural and educational specificity and with regard to the notion of positionality (Cousin, 2010).

Teaching, learning and assessing research ethics in education

The teaching and assessment reflected on here forms part of a core ‘Research Methods in Education’ module on a Masters programme. The typical audience for this form of teaching are young, international and full-time students on a full-time, one year programme with, as yet, limited work experience. An institutional compliance culture and aversion to risk (McWilliam, 2004) ensures research ethics is a mandatory element of the Research Methods curriculum but, in line with many other institutions, there is a sense that this is a topic that simply ‘has to be done’ within the formal curriculum. My aims in teaching research ethics, however, remain three-fold: to raise awareness of ethical issues, to promote ethical sensibilities, and to inform students of procedural requirements.

Key principles that must be addressed include anonymity and confidentiality, informed consent, risk and harm, and power relationships. Data protection, more a concern of institutional regulation than ethics *per se*, is also now important, especially with an increasingly globalised student community who will undertake fieldwork in every corner of the world. The existing lecture format was not conducive to exploration of these issues in depth as Burr and King (2012), in their extensive use of ‘Big Brother’ extracts suggest is necessary; the extended reflection engendered by approaches such as simulation (Lucas and Lidstone, 2000) can facilitate the oscillation entailed in acquiring threshold concepts (Meyer and Land, 2003). TCs within research ethics are multiple and wholly dependent on the

intersection of teaching-learning-curriculum-biography-culture, connoting time and space to engage with potentially challenging material that cannot be dictated in advance.

The constraints of the lecture format are clear: it can encourage a transmission approach, giving students little time to process or discuss issues or hear alternative views. Starting from a theoretical perspective as Preston (1992) advocates seems also to be off-putting to students. Philosophical standpoints do not always use the most accessible terminology. It now proves more engaging to begin with personal reflection and discussion of the values individuals might wish to bring to their research practices (Macfarlane, 2009) but in the lecture theatre, this still lacks the power to promote ethical sensibilities. Where space cannot be found in the formal research methods curriculum to devote more time to research ethics, a new approach of embedding ethics as a central component of induction activities (as we are now doing, supporting Vallance's [2005] notion of formation) appears to be a promising alternative.

It is acknowledged that students wish to please their teachers, even where expectations are not always clear (Perkins, 1999). Confronting and navigating a very different culture, as many international students do in the course of their studies, adds an additional layer of complexity to an already challenging situation. The tension between the teaching aims outlined above – of promoting ethical sensibilities and ensuring compliance and thus approval of research activities – is not necessarily evident to students. As both Macfarlane (2009) and Farrimond (2013) suggest, 'success' as in ethical approval, can depend on meeting externally-imposed requirements; any nuance in a different culture and language is far harder to achieve, and it is 'rules' (Haggerty, 2004) that can come to dominate thinking.

There is a simple and concrete example that illustrates this point, evident in ethics applications and talk among students and this is the right to withdraw from a research study. The 'rules' (Haggerty, 2004) in every code of conduct in use in educational research or

institutional sanction in the UK, stress this individual right of withdrawal (or non-participation in the first place). Countless applications for ethical approval have passed across my desk promising both anonymity of data collection and a subsequent right to withdraw that very same (anonymous) data. I imagine many other teachers and assessors of research ethics, no matter their geographical location, experience the same conundrum. The ‘right to withdraw’ can therefore be seen as challenging to some students’ understandings of research ethicsⁱ. Elements of the curriculum which are culturally or conceptually alien (Perkins, 2006) can, unintentionally, seem to be literal prescriptions suggesting that the right to withdraw from a research study is a troublesome and transformative threshold concept (Meyer and Land, 2003) for some, making it a valuable integrating moment for the understanding of ethics.

Changes in teaching to more discursive activities have foregrounded an important concern that perhaps reaches beyond the compliance implied in the ‘right to withdraw’. The very idea that many perspectives are acceptable, and choice of where one stands, is challenging as ideas around neutrality, objectivity and autonomy are surfaced. In one sense, this is ideal, provoking the liminality suggested as important (Meyer and Land, 2005) but addressing research ethics in induction also has the potential to destabilise learner identities (Cousin, 2006a) at a very early stage in their international sojourn.

As research ethics are increasingly taught as part of the formal curriculum in UK higher education, they become increasingly assessed. This takes two forms: the formal – in the context of module assessment – and the marginally less formal, in terms of the ethical approval process for all postgraduates undertaking research for (mandatory) dissertations. The timescale of one calendar year involved in taught Masters provision in the UK impacts on how ethical sensibilities are assessed for credit-bearing purposes within the curriculum and then on to applications for approval for dissertation work.

Curricula assessment requires students to demonstrate ethical awareness via an unseen examination and by way of a coursework assignment. The examination is primarily concerned with ‘coverage’ of the curriculum – of which ethics is part – and the assignment rubric highlights the need for a discussion of ethics. Feedback is available in keeping with Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick’s (2006) principles for good assessment and feedback practices. To illustrate their seventh principle (p.206) of assessment providing feedback for teaching, I like to tell a story against myself drawn from the unseen written examination component:

Q: Give three reasons why covert observation might be justified for research purposes [3 marks]:

A: *Covert observation is what you do when you can’t get ethical approval.*

Researching covertly is always problematic, but may sometimes be appropriate. It is a form of enquiry that requires a particularly well-developed sense of ethical responsibility and a strong justification that, one could argue, is difficult for taught postgraduates to acquire within the limited time frame of a Master’s degree. This can be compounded where linguistic and cultural differences exist (Cousin, 2008): the level of nuance expected in justifying covert observation is very sophisticated indeed and the liminal space characterised by Meyer and Land (2005) as anxiety-provoking will itself be compounded by formal assessment.

It is clear in the illustration given above (and this was the totality of the answer) that no sound conceptual grasp of the nature of ethical research practice has been displayed. It also illustrates that the short-answer examination format is not necessarily an appropriate forum for such display either. Moving ethics teaching from the formal curriculum to induction enables more discursive activities and removes the high-stakes right/wrong answers perceived as necessary in an examination format. Given that all students write a dissertation, this revision to teaching-learning activities ensures engagement with ethical issues, rather than reinforcing a view that approval is a ‘barrier’ to be crossed once at the start of the research process.

Research ethics are relational: there are studies, viewed from a twenty-first century Western standpoint that, in many people's opinions, would attract ethical approbation such as Tuskegee. This was a 40+ year study where those of a dominant majority (American doctors) studied the progress of untreated syphilis in the segregated deep-south of the US (Brandt, 1978). Whilst far-removed from educational research practices, Tuskegee illustrates why codes of conduct have become widespread in response to the poor practices of others. Many educational research ethics dilemmas, however, are far more subtle, fine-grained and contestable (Macfarlane, 2009). Such contestability suggests that an understanding of ethical principles is far more reliably inferred from the proposals for ethical approval submitted by international postgraduate students who are potentially undertaking 'in the field' research for the first time.

Institutional requirements and approval processes

In the HECU7 presentation acknowledged earlier, I argued that institutional guidelines and processes are actually the very antithesis of the ethical sensibility development advocated by McGinn and Bosacki (2004) and Vallance (2005) and also in this article, and it was a view that garnered a good deal of support. As McWilliam (2004) argues, the risk aversion of the contemporary university – even though she was writing from an Australian perspective – holds true in a UK context too. To mitigate 'brand' or 'reputational' damage, institutions create policies intended to direct and encourage certain behaviours. This is most keenly felt by staff (Davies and Petersen, 2005), but is consequentially imposed on students.

To support the enactment of visibly transparent audit culture procedures (Strathern, 2000), all UK HEIs have policies, paperwork and processes in place to sanction empirical postgraduate dissertation work, although these will vary by discipline. In a UK HE context, for example, anyone involved in health-related research will look enviously at the lighter-touch regime applied to non-health colleagues. Some commentators, such as Hammersley

(2009), however, suggest that whilst education research is less subject to constraint than health disciplines, because processes are modelled on the assumptions of risk and harm of medical environments (see also Macfarlane, 2009; Farrimond, 2013) it is possible to assume constraints and boundaries through policy pronouncements that are not actually in effect in practice.

Very many departments – despite disciplinary norms – adopt a university-generated research ethics policy as their own, local, code of conduct. This can exacerbate the ‘medical model’ mentality (Macfarlane, 2009) and lead students to a disembodied view of their participants in situations where this is not appropriate. Less thought can be given to real risks, in particular in educational research to notions of power (Banks, 2005), and more to the function – rather than the principle – of, for instance, anonymity. The language and competing principles in many codes of conduct can actively promote a rule-following approach (Campbell, 2001) which impacts negatively on taught postgraduates with their more limited time for reflection. It may seem counter-intuitive to suggest, given how complex ethical decision-making is, that less formal guidance may be beneficial: removing the incentive to follow a recipe arguably encourages more thoughtfulness on behalf of individuals in their ethics applications.

There is also an argument to be made that, in an increasingly globalised environment, research ethics committees themselves need to pay attention to their processes and requirements. Two areas in particular stand out as increasingly problematic: first, an over-reliance on signed consent, and second, studies involving new media. In a UK context, fully informed consent evidenced by a signed consent form has long been viewed both as the gold standard of ethical behaviour and as suitable for audit trail purposes. Our students often now work in contexts where a Westernised notion of individual informed consent is a form of alien knowledge (Perkins, 2006) and also sometimes with less literate populations. It may be

timely to suggest that, whilst avoiding some of the pitfalls of possibly less ethical studies of the past, the written informed consent requirement is no longer the only way to ensure an ethical approach.

A second challenge – of understanding new media – also presents difficulties to ethics committees as there are, as yet, no settled understandings of what constitutes public and private in digital environments, whilst increasing numbers of students are keen to research in this field. Even how some new social media works can be a challenge to ethics committees, as ‘old’ standards of behaviour and participation (boyd, 2014) are changing. How these new forms of participation and representation might be addressed in terms of somewhat older and culturally situated ethical norms and conventions remains to be seen, but it is clear that the availability and speed of information means educational researchers require a rethink: the ‘traceability’ of individuals and the varying forms of their work (blogs and tweets, for instance) (Henderson, Johnson and Auld, 2013) potentially have profound consequences for our understandings of anonymity and confidentiality.

Conclusion

Teachers of research ethics have a challenging role. They deal with unsettled knowledge in the form of dilemmas (Macfarlane, 2009) and with both policy and practice so variable and writings about potentially sensitive issues scarce (Lowe, 2015), there is little to guide them. This long-standing situation is compounded by rapid changes in the demographics of higher education which highlight that staff training (Doyle and Buckley, 2014), ‘rule fetishization’ (Haggerty, 2004: 411), potential ‘threshold concepts’ (Meyer and Land, 2003) and the nature of teachers and teaching (McGinn and Bosacki, 2004) are all useful lenses with which to interrogate how research ethics teaching is done, but surface as many questions as they resolve.

This situation renders problematic any attempt to overcome troublesome knowledge by technicist redesign of curricula alone, and challenges easy assumptions that if the learning environment is suitably ordered then intended transformations (Meyer and Land, 2003) will ensue. This article raises a range of challenges that need to be addressed in research ethics teaching: the implications of globalisation; the time available to international taught postgraduates to acquire an ethical sensibility aligned with local cultural norms (and how this might conflict with modes of practice in geographically-dispersed fieldwork sites); and the potential for well-intentioned codes of conduct based on a ‘medical model’ of harm and risk to undermine the teaching enterprise by foregrounding compliance.

The intersection between teacher-learner-curriculum inherent in TCs, together with highly-situated notions of ethical behaviour, present a dilemma beyond those commonly used as cases to support the curriculum. Moving from transmission models to discussion models, as Burr and King (2012) suggest in their use of reality television clips, is a productive way forward, but the culturally and temporally-situated basis of ethics and ethical teaching also needs to be acknowledged. The notion of threshold concepts (Meyer and Land, 2003) as residing neither in the learner nor the curriculum (Cousin, 2006b), but in their intersection, is more easily understood with an appreciation of culturally-situated ‘sensitive’ topics.

The limited duration of the UK Master’s programme reflected on here is easily exhausted: moving elements of the teaching of research ethics to the induction period allows for more discursive activities that can focus on the values base that students bring to their research (Macfarlane, 2009) and notions of positionality and ‘Othering’ (Cousin, 2010, 2011). Concrete examples – such as the use of Stapel’s misbehaviour and its impact on his postgraduate students whose theses employed the fabricated data – highlight the immediacy and importance of research ethics and can trigger the shift from ‘not-yet-grasped’ (Orsini-Jones, 2008) to a more positive position. Enhancing cultural sensitivity and modifying

curricula are easily-achievable individual actions for anyone who teaches research ethics. Addressing the challenges inherent in overly-prescriptive (and thus unhelpful) codes of conduct and institutional processes is a task that will take a little longer.

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i For different reasons not examined here, this issue can prove a challenge to home-based postgraduate students in education too.