Ethical Review of Research Involving Human Subjects: The School of Physical Education Experience

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Background

Research undertaken at the School of Physical Education encompasses both qualitative and quantitative methodologies. Data are collected often through planned experimentation involving human subjects. This experimentation may range from the collection of physiological variables in a laboratory setting to the systematic observation of teachers in a school setting.

The School of Physical Education ethical review process has been in place for research performed by faculty and graduate students since 1993. The process was initiated in response to a concern among academics in physical education worldwide regarding ethics in research involving human subjects. Many journals within the discipline, also require acknowledgment of adherence to ethical procedures before consideration of publication in their journal is given.

Through the efforts of the faculty members and with the encouragement of the Dean, the School's Research and Graduate Studies Committee drafted a set of guidelines for both the conduct and the review of research. These guidelines are now in place and are accepted practices when conducting research.

The Process

When faculty or graduate students plan to undertake research involving human subjects, they must submit a proposal for research (including subject information and consent forms) to the Ethics Sub-Committee of the Research and Graduate Studies Committee. Included with the proposal is the School's ethical review form. In this form, the researcher provides additional information regarding: a) the subjects of the study, b) the level and extent of subject involvement, c) study risks and benefits, d) any deception to be used, and e) procedures for confidentiality. Copies of the proposal for research, the ethical review form, and a reviewer's checklist are then given to two anonymous reviewers who must verify that the research is concerned with the best interests of the participants. Faculty members take turns to share this responsibility. The primary purposes of this review are to establish whether the researcher has documented the influence of the study on subjects and that proper procedures have been outlined. Two secondary purposes of this process are reviews of informed consent and methodology. When expertise beyond the professional competencies of faculty is required, outside assistance may be solicited.

As defined by the review process, informed consent involves: a) writing a clear description of the purpose, programme and procedures, b) outlining a description of potential benefits and risks in the programme, c) including a statement that participation is voluntary and the individual has the right to withdraw, or documenting how safeguards have been built into the programme when deception is necessary, and d) providing a statement that the individual's data are confidential. The reviewer indicates on the checklist if the proposed research has considered all aspects of informed consent.

Again, the reviewers' main purpose is to identify potential concerns regarding human subjects. However, if a problem in methodology may impact the research project, the reviewer can make comments or suggestions regarding the methodology. It is the position of the School of Physical Education that it is not appropriate to "judge" the quality of the research unless it adversely impacts the subjects. If there is insufficient information and reviewers need additional resources to support their decision, they are to contact the committee as soon as possible.

Once the reviewer has read the proposal and the submitted form, he/she can indicate on the reviewer's checklist whether the proposal is accepted, accepted with revisions, or needs to be returned for a rewrite. All materials are returned to the Research and Graduate Studies Committee and the researcher is informed of the result of the review process. Once a proposal is accepted, the researcher can begin the research. Acceptance of a proposal with revisions requires the researcher to make slight adjustments in his/her proposal, information or consent form. Typically this process is painless and results in the eventual approval of the research. In instances where a rewrite is requested, the researcher resubmits an amended proposal (when needed) and a new ethical review form to the committee. The documents then go through the review process again.

The Result

The main reasons for the success of the ethical review process have been the support of faculty and the professional and open manner in which the review process is undertaken. The School has been able to create a system of review that is complete, yet, not a burden nor a threat to faculty.