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The role of research ethics committees: Friend or foe in educational research? An exploratory study

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Ethics committees have an important role to play in ensuring ethical standards (e.g. BERA, ESRC, RCUK recommendations) are met by educational researchers. Balancing obligations to participants, society, institutions and the researchers themselves is not, however, easy. Researchers often experience the ethics committee as unsympathetic to their research endeavour, whilst ethics committees find some research approaches do not make ethical implications sufficiently explicit. This potential for misunderstanding is evident in the literature, but studies investigating how participants perceive this relationship are missing. This research comprises a novel empirical study which explores researcher perceptions of research ethics committees. Fifty-five participants in higher education departments of education responded to an online survey. Open and closed-ended questions were used to collect data on roles, methodological stance, experiences of the research ethics committee, perceived tensions and examples of good practice. The results indicated that contemporary educational researchers regard research ethics committees as friends when researcher and reviewer are transparently engaged in a shared endeavour. When this shared endeavour breaks down, for a variety of reasons—including apparently unreasonable demands or mutual misunderstanding—the research ethics committees can become foes. The difference between foe and friend lies in the quality of communication, clear systems and a culture of respectful mutual learning. The contributions of this study have practical implications for the ways that education researchers and research ethics committees relate to one another within university settings, both to alleviate areas of tension and to arrive at a shared understanding which will enable best ethical research practice.

Keywords: ethical complexity; research ethics committees; the educational researcher; the ethics of practice

Introduction: setting the context of ethics guidelines and ethics committees

In recent years there has been a significant emphasis on ethical regulation in educational research. Derived initially from medical spheres, research ethics codes have been established by professional associations, research organisations and all universities concerned with educational and other subject research (BERA, 2018; Hammersley and Traianou, 2012). Research ethics regulation is not only a requirement in British universities (Hammersley, 2009) but is also required by many journals when

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publishing research. Research ethics codes were established to mitigate against potential harm to research participants following instances in the physical or psychological sciences [e.g. Milgram's (1963) shock experiment to measure obedience and more recently the Alder Hey hospital organ scandal].

Commonly recognised research ethics principles which underpin the codes encompass not only minimising harm, but also respecting autonomy and dignity, protecting privacy, ensuring informed consent, ensuring equality, inclusivity and diversity, and demonstrating social responsibility (Hammersley and Traianou, 2012; BERA, 2018: 4; ESRC, 2019). Researchers have generally accepted the idea that principles focused on justice, beneficence, respect, research merit and integrity are an important guide for ethical decision-making in research, even if the role of ethics committees is more contentious (Halse, 2011). Furthermore, and specific to the educational research context, the British Education Research Association guidelines are 'designed to support educational researchers in conducting research to the highest ethical standards in any and all contexts' (BERA, 2018: iii).

Beyond Britain there is some diversity in the practice of research ethics reviews and their governing principles across different countries. For example, in America, compliance with US federal regulations regarding the protection of human subjects in research is mandatory. Public universities must have an internal review board (IRB), which reviews research involving human subjects. All research ethics policies originate from Federal Regulation 45 CFR 46 but are predicated upon earlier reports, including the Nuremburg and Helsinki declarations and the Belmont Report of 1979 (US Department for Health and Human Sciences, n.d.). Canada implements a similar national regulatory system as the USA. Ethics board membership is often viewed as a part of scholarly community contribution (Page and Nyeboer, 2017).

American, Canadian, British, Australian, Norwegian and Swedish universities operate mandatory centralised research ethics review systems for non-medical human research. Processes are based on compliance, documentation, formalised templates and online tools, with independent internal reviewers, revised documentation if required and final official approval prior to the start of any research project involving human participants.

However, in Europe and Asia there is less uniformity of practice. Whilst the European Commission and all European Union-funded research projects require research ethics reviews to occur at institutional level, other funded or non-funded research outside of the medical sciences may be treated differently according to country. Responsibility for the design of ethical research in the social sciences and humanities is commonly either devolved down to less formal peer review of projects within subject groups at a specific institution, or lies with the senior researcher or professor to self-regulate their own research design for ethical good practice. Thus, the spectrum of research ethics review is diverse in practice.

Within education research, BERA's (2018) updated guidelines, along with the RCUK and ESRC research ethics policies, are referred to by research ethics committees when reviewing applications to ensure ethical issues are mitigated by educational researchers who may be working in a range of contexts with several research audiences. These research ethics committees have several obligations: ensuring the rights of participants are protected, fostering academic integrity within and beyond their

institutions, and a responsibility to the wider society which may be affected by the research results as well as to the researcher themselves. Research ethics committees may be perceived as a friend; they have a legitimate and useful role to play by offering advice, providing a forum in which ethical principles and their application can be discussed and initiating discussion concerning problematic cases (Hammersley, 2009). In addition, ethics committees may assist in strengthening the calibre of research undertaken in their institutions and encouraging good research practice at multiple levels. Pursuant to this, according to Alderson and Morrow (2006), ethics committees also act as protective barriers between researchers and potential participants; they raise awareness about the importance and usefulness of ethics among research communities, evaluate the costs and benefits of the research—including risks to participants, advise on the prevention or avoidance of ethical problems, veto unethical research, ensure participants receive clearly communicated information to allow informed consent or withdrawal, and ensure participants' needs are met and that certain groups are not over-researched.

Balancing all these responsibilities is not, however, always easy, and not all researchers welcome the contribution made by ethics committees in the research process. This is particularly important to consider in education research, where a number of specific ethical dilemmas are known to occur, contextually and methodologically (e.g. those relating to research context, gatekeeper permissions, dependant relationships, participants' rights—especially those of children, and the role of insider researchers) (Zeni, 2001). Ethical complexity emerges from differing methods of investigation, ranging from experimental design to action research.

Developing an awareness of the practical and philosophical issues surrounding the implementation of ethical guidelines in research practices is important. It can help ethics committees empathise with, and better support, the needs of those conducting educational research, whilst also ensuring that the integrity and implementation of core ethical principles and guidelines are understood and practised within subject specialisms. Greater insight may also allow organisations that issue ethical guidelines on research practice to understand how their principles are implemented by committees in academic settings and the debates that are raised in doing so. Whilst there is some discussion of the ethical issues underpinning research practices in educational research, there exists a gap in empirical research into the perceived role of ethics committees and whether or not these committees are considered a help or a hindrance by researchers. Perceptions held by educational researchers about their research committees matter, since it is known that attitudes are important drivers of behaviour. Researchers often experience the ethics committee as unsympathetic to their research endeavour, whilst ethics committees find some research approaches are unclear about ethical implications. This potential for misunderstanding between ethics reviewer and educational researcher is evident in the literature, but empirical studies addressing perceptions of participants in this relationship remain a missing link.

Understanding the balance of responsibilities is important for both educational researchers and ethics committees. Thus, this study aims to explore researcher perceptions of research ethics committees as friend or foe in educational research, addressing a gap in current research. The study does not seek to investigate the conduct or administration of research ethics, nor the effectiveness of current guidelines, for which there is already an extensive literature. Rather, this article adds value by

extending rather than repeating scholarship. A discussion of the underpinning concepts now follows, including processes, power and academic freedom, the challenges of differing perspectives, insider research and research involving children.

Underpinning literature of the issues and tensions between researchers and ethics committees

Ethics processes and administrative burden

Much of the literature bringing together research ethics and researcher interactions emphasises the tensions and challenges between them (e.g. Kellner, 2002). The dynamics of the relationship between research committees and researcher is less frequently investigated, and there are fewer reports of the mutual benefits of this relationship, or of a 'liberation' approach to ethical guidance as in Vadeboncoeur *et al.* (2016). This approach advocates a balance between the rights and freedoms of researchers as well as student choice for participation.

One of the reservations researchers have about ethics committees is the bureaucracy and formality involved (e.g. Smyth and Williamson, 2005; Wiles *et al.*, 2005). Hammersley (2009) indicates that legally required ethical regulations substantially increase the time and effort needed to meet administrative demands, thus reducing the time and energy available for reflective practice. He goes on to suggest that it is disingenuous for supporters of ethical regulation to downplay this administrative burden on the grounds that such ethical and methodological reflection is an inherent part of the research process. His alternative proposition is that committees demand something quite different to the reflexive explorations that naturally occur as part of the research process. A disconnection between university ethics review and real-world research has been described as an 'ethical schism' (Halse and Honey, 2005, 2007). As a result, researchers focus on simply complying with an ethics committee, not with what is and is not ethically justifiable (Hammersley, 2009). Researchers may perceive ethical applications as little more than a performance, filling out forms in an approved way and using 'ethics-speak'.

Furthermore, this administrative burden may be viewed as unwarranted, as ethics committees are sometimes seen as lacking in legitimacy. It is claimed that ethical regulation has been implemented to protect universities and other organisations from litigation (Gunsalus *et al.*, 2007; Sikes and Piper, 2010), and may perhaps be necessary within medical fields where there is a greater potential for harm (Hammersley and Traianou, 2012). Whilst, according to Hammersley and Traianou (2012), there have been attempts to make the approach of ethics committees in educational research more appropriate, one of the tensions raised in the literature is that there are no reported incidents of harm or potential harm caused by social science or educational researchers (Hammersley, 2009; Parsell *et al.*, 2014). Instead, there is a view that ethics committees tend to over-dramatise the seriousness of ethical problems in educational research, even though such research is not in reality very different from many ordinary everyday activities. As a result, unnecessary prescription, excessive regimentation and exaggerated precautions are imposed (see Halse, 2011). Some go on to argue that ethical regulation is therefore in itself not ethically justifiable (Hammersley, 2009; Hammersley and Traianou, 2012).

Power, academic freedom and questions of expertise

Debates about power are prevalent in the literature. 'Ethics review has been viewed as a disciplinary system: a regime of power designed to control researchers by compelling them to conduct their research according to the norms, practices and protocols of principlism approved by institutional, state and/or national guidelines' (Halse, 2011: 244). Halse goes on to say that there is a difference between an ethical framework and the purposes of an ethics committee review, with the latter simply interpreting and enforcing normative behaviours in a disciplined and approved way. Halse (2011: 243) thus claims that 'the purpose of ethics review as a disciplinary system is to impose specific performative demands that discipline researchers and correct deviant behaviour so that the researchers conduct themselves according to sanctioned standards'. A concern is that university research committees may wield too much power over social research (Parsons *et al.*, 2015), and that a need to protect the rights of participants has simultaneously resulted in a weakening of the researcher's control over their own research (Juritzen *et al.*, 2011). One danger is that, as a result, researchers might surrender their sense of moral and ethical responsibility to the professional consensus of the ethics committee (Fine *et al.*, 2000; Alderson and Morrow, 2006; Hammersley, 2009). Indeed, Hammersley (2009: 218) believes that 'the ethical regulation of social research represents an illegitimate attempt to legislate morality, one that cannot be justified by appeal to the "ethical risk" involved'.

As a counterpoint to Hammersly (2009), McAreavy and Muir (2011) propose that the ethical review process 'must have significance. It requires movement away from a "them and us" culture and from a "ticky box" management style' (McAreavey and Muir, 2011: 402). Furthermore, although they acknowledge the tensions between researchers and ethics reviews, they argue that researchers should engage with and contribute to the development of research ethics guidelines to enhance the research landscape. Connolly and Reid (2007) consider that researchers should participate in creating improved ethical frameworks to counteract any overly restrictive policies, rather than perceiving ethics committees to be restricting academic freedom (Tierney *et al.*, 2007; Sikes and Piper, 2010).

Ethics committees acquire their authority from real or assumed expertise. However, given that there is a lack of consensus even within the research community about best practice of ethics committees, such expertise may be questionable. For example, committee members may be required to make judgements in areas they are not experienced in (Sikes and Piper, 2010). Making an acceptable decision about any proposed educational research depends at least in part on a situational awareness of the project and the methods employed; yet no member can have expertise in all methods, even collectively (Hammersley, 2009). In itself this may not be a limitation; ethical issues in principle need to be explained clearly enough for a lay person to understand, and thus the naïve reviewer on ethical committees has an important role to play (Alderson and Morrow, 2006). The value in non-experts reviewing research applications is that they can approach a research project with fresh eyes as outsiders, mitigating against the researcher who has stayed within their discipline for many years using the same or outdated ethical positions and practice. In fact, ethics committees can provide a comprehensive, independent and expert review system (Webster *et al.*,

2004), which could therefore be highly beneficial to educational researchers. However, for some educational researchers, research ethics committees may have questionable expertise upon which to base decisions if there is a lack of familiarity with educational research approaches which are core to their methodology.

The challenges of differing methodological perspectives

Ethical regulations based on a medical model of objective, scientific, experimental inquiry assume research follows a predictable, sequential process (Halse and Honey, 2007; Sikes and Piper, 2010). In educational research such an assumption is unrealistic—research design is more likely to be iterative and open to multiple interpretations (Richardson and McMullan, 2007). Thus, a medical ethical model is likely to impose constraints which make little sense to educational researchers (Israel and Hay, 2006; Parsell *et al.*, 2014). This type of ethics process may induce researchers to exclude groups judged too time-consuming to include (Hammersley, 2009), or lead them to favour methodological approaches such as hypothesis testing as more likely to meet ethics approval (Holmwood, 2010; Stanley and Wise, 2010). The medical ethical model may also have little sensitivity to the different cultural contexts of educational research (Allen *et al.*, 2009; Sikes and Piper, 2010).

Some qualitative research approaches challenge ethical principles which derive from a medical science research design. For example, distancing between the researcher and the researched is counter-effective in action research, which aims to evidence an impact on others. Likewise, the goal of objectivity may be unachievable in reflexive approaches where the self is the subject of study. Characteristics of a scientific research design, such as a protocol of questions to be piloted in advance (Tierney and Conwin, 2007), inhibit the organic nature of narrative research. Revisions to criteria about researcher impartiality are necessary when researcher and researched are one and the same. Furthermore, notions of research rigour may need to be expressed differently if the data is not claiming objectivity but its reverse, a deepening knowledge of subjectivity. These varied approaches challenge both the researcher to make alternative values explicit, as do Gladwell (2001) and Costley and Gibb (2006), and also challenge ethics panels to appreciate these differences. Parsell *et al.* (2014) point out that ethics panels do not always have expertise in practice-based research, and as a result proposals familiar to them tend to receive more informed ethical support (Parsell *et al.*, 2014).

The new BERA guidelines (BERA, 2018) make it clear that dilemmas may arise in conducting educational research, often without an obvious or singular solution, and will instead require different and creative approaches taking account of cultural contexts and situated judgements. The BERA guidelines suggest that research ethics decision-making becomes an actively deliberative, ongoing and iterative process of assessing and reassessing issues as they arise. This is something ethics committees may therefore need to begin to take into account. It seems there are moves away from the 'one size fits all' ethos that may have prevailed previously. Indeed, Parsell *et al.* (2014: 171) has suggested that 'the conventional oversight model with one-off approval of a predefined research environment will often be insufficient', and that it would be beneficial for ethics committees to have more input to a study on an

ongoing basis, given the reflexive nature of these alternative methodologies and the maintenance of interdependent, dynamic relationships.

Insider research

Many principles of ethical research derive from the assumption that the 'other' is the focus of research attention. Issues of confidentiality, impartiality and distancing from the research setting are premised on the assumption that the researcher is an outsider to the researched setting. However, these ethical principles are challenged by the researcher whose focus is their own development as a practitioner, or their own organisation as an insider. Williamson and Prosser (2002: 587), for example, acknowledge the challenge for the action researcher 'concerning the close relationship between researcher and participants, and the explicit aim of changing practice'. To achieve change from within, the researcher needs to be an insider to the change process, deploying insider deep knowledge to interpret and evidence the situation (Jaswinder *et al.*, 2019). In quantitative and some qualitative research, the researcher is distanced and independent of the research context: for the action researcher or practitioner-researcher, being an insider is a prerequisite, and insider knowledge forms a crucial part of the research landscape. This is often a troubling divide in perception between researcher and research committees. Gibbs *et al.* (2007) and Mercer (2007) describe ethics committees characterising insider research as intrusive, and even a potential 'violation' of others.

Given these genuine differences between research orientation and ethical positions, it is inevitable that research committees and researchers find themselves in conflict. Kellner (2002: 26) notes: 'when we consider ethical issues, we are often less than comfortable, for we must grapple with a lack of correspondence between codes of ethics and the conduct of ethnographic methods'. Specifically, codes of ethics 'pose distinctive demands on principles of informed consent, confidentiality and privacy, social justice' for the insider researcher (Fleming and Zegwaard, 2018: 205).

Gladwell (2001), as an experienced teacher/student researcher, describes his collision with a Canadian ethics panel in submitting an action research thesis. He describes their unfamiliarity with the unquantifiable aspects of learning and teaching known only to those present within that interaction, and argues that ethics panels should be open to learning from teachers about their stories. He proposes a revised and expanded view of ethics to legitimise these alternative forms of learning. Costley and Gibbs (2006) suggest an 'ethics of care' for those researchers working within their own organisations. These researchers recognise the richness and quality of knowledge possible when an insider researches their own context, and explicitly address the ethical complexity this involves.

Practitioner-researchers, however, are finding ways to make their position clear, and bring ethics and the endeavour of pedagogic research into a state of harmony. Gladwell, for example, proposes to his Canadian university ethics panel 'an ethical understanding based on the realities of my understanding of research and teaching' (Gladwell, 2001: ii). Mercer (2007) similarly proposes ways of resolving 'delicate dilemmas' as an insider researcher, focusing on informant bias and reciprocity in interviews as a way of addressing ethical questions in a way that does not stifle the research initiative. Studies such as these are beginning to impact on the relationship between ethics panels and pedagogic researchers, as insider researchers become explicit about their ethical values, offering clearly articulated principles which are acceptable and transparent to researchers from other research positions.

Special considerations when researching children

It is beyond the scope of this review to discuss in depth the ethical issues involved in researching children, accounts of which can be found extensively elsewhere in the literature (e.g. Morrow and Richards, 1996; Pring, 2004; Aubrey *et al.*, 2005; Farrell, 2005; Alderson and Morrow, 2011; Brooks *et al.*, 2014). Instead, what needs to be acknowledged are the challenges ethics committees may face when dealing with research proposals that include children or vulnerable families as participants. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989)—Articles 3 & 12—legislates that children and young people are entitled to express their views and that their best interests must be prioritised in any research undertaken, including being given an opportunity to provide fully informed consent. Children's competence and agency are emphasised in the literature, indicating that children and young people should have the same rights to choose whether or not to participate in research as adults do (Hammersley and Traianou, 2012). The differential power relationship between adult and child should also be acknowledged (Morrow, 2008, 2009), along with their additional specific vulnerabilities, including their level of understanding (ESRC). This has had an inevitable impact on the way research with children is conducted, assessed and viewed, as there are ethical implications of children's increased involvement in research (Morrow and Richards, 1996). Ethics review committees are especially sensitive about granting permission for projects involving vulnerable participants (Sikes and Piper, 2010), given their legal responsibility for projects taking place in their name. There is therefore a tension that exists for committees between balancing the need to safeguard children as required by law, allowing them to participate and express their views in an informed way in a research environment, whilst also ensuring that they are not excluded from being researched or their inclusion only accepted if specific methodologies are used.

Methodology

Sampling

Convenience sampling was used to recruit participants who were researchers in higher education institutions (HEI); a sampling method chosen because it was 'available to the researcher by virtue of its accessibility' (Bryman, 2012: 201). Gatekeeper organisations associated with educational research, such as the Psychology of Education section of the British Psychological Society, the British Educational Research Association, the Practitioner-Researcher network and the National Teaching Fellow network were contacted and invited to distribute a link to the survey to their members. Although these networks yielded a narrow range of participants, these informants offered valuable experience of engagement with the research process, and specifically as faced by educational researchers. An invitation to the survey was also posted on social media (Twitter) and sent to personal contacts. This resulted in 55 responses, with one excluded as the answers were not intelligible.

Instrument

A survey containing 17 questions derived from key themes in the literature was used to gather the data. There are a number of strengths associated with survey use:

surveys ensure a standardised procedure, are quick to administer to gather large amounts of data, replicable and easy to score (Coolican, 2009; Bryman, 2012). Using surveys also reduces potential bias errors caused by researcher characteristics (Phellas *et al.*, 2011), although a disadvantage is that they may produce a low return rate (Coolican, 2009; Bryman, 2012). The survey included both open and closed questions. The use of closed questions easily facilitated statistical analysis and comparability of answers, as coding naturally followed a fixed answer format (e.g. no = 0, yes = 1). Difficulties are known, however, to arise in using closed questions which only allow for simple responses: participants are unable to expand upon their answers and the researcher is unable to prompt or probe to gain further information (Coolican, 2009; Bryman, 2012). Therefore, a number of open-ended questions were also included in the survey, so that respondents could answer in their own terms, producing rich, qualitative data for analysis (Silverman, 2015). The use of both open and closed questions was therefore considered critical in this study, so that both an empirical understanding of the issues and tensions around ethics committees identified in the literature could be examined, but also so that survey data might provide insight into perceived issues of research ethics committees as friend or foe. As illustrated in Table 1, there were six closed-ended questions and nine open-ended questions which aimed to collate more in-depth information about perceptions of committees as friend or foe.

A five-point Likert scale was employed in two questions on the survey, an established psychometric scale among psychological measurements that require self-reporting (Wakita *et al.*, 2012) and a five-point scale is known to be reliable (Lissitz and Green, 1975; Boote, 1981). Responses were rated on a scale of definitely yes, probably yes, might or might not, probably not or definitely not.

Procedure and data analysis

The online survey was designed using the Qualtrics platform, a well-established tool commonly used in educational and social science research (see e.g. Ardoin *et al.*, 2013; Paquette and Rieg, 2016). Links to the survey were distributed via gatekeeper organisations, social media and personal contacts following receipt of university ethics committee approval. Participants ticked a box consenting to participate in the anonymous survey in accordance with GDPR regulations (2018). A contact email was also provided if they wished to receive a summary report of the main findings. Participants spent, on average, 12 minutes completing the survey. Statistical data was analysed using SPSS (version 22) for descriptive analyses.

Rich qualitative data is extensive in scope, so there will be inevitable processes of selection, which may skew the way findings are perceived and explained, influenced by location, power and position of the researcher (Thapar-Bjorket, 2004). The analysis of data in this study aimed to mitigate against these tendencies, by drawing on three different analytical processes. The first process was a linguistic analysis of vocabulary that carried judgement or value, classified into positive and negative connotation. For example, vocabulary used in the data taken as negative in connotation includes: difficult, frustrating, overly cautious, arbitrary, bureaucratic. Vocabulary used in the data taken as positive in connotation includes: supportive, helpful, proactive, incredibly hard-working. The second process was a thematic analysis, based on the key content words within the questionnaire. Those key content words formed a coding tool which was used to classify and annotate the data: roles, tensions, ethical

Table 1. Survey overview

Illustrative closed questions	Response
Are you a UK-based researcher?	yes
	no
What methodological approach would you usually take in your research?	qualitative
	quantitative
	mixed methods
	other
How much contact have you had with research ethics committees in the last 5 years?	more than 6 projects
	4–6 projects
	1–3 projects
	none at all
In your opinion are there specific tensions between research ethics committees in education research?	no
	yes
Who or what has been the focus of your research over the last 5 years?	children
	families
	reflective practice
	adult vulnerable groups
	action research
	educational institutions
	adult learners
	documentary analysis
	communities or practice
	other
When you have received feedback from an ethics committee how have you responded?	accepted all comments
	accepted more than half
	rejected more than half
	substantially changed the project or abandoned it
Illustrative open questions	Response
What is your primary role in your institution?	open
What role does your research ethics committee play in your own institution in determining a research project?	open
If you indicated there are specific tensions between research ethics committees and education research, please provide examples.	open
What type of data have you referred to or gathered over the last 5 years to inform your research? For example, documents, lesson plans, observations, interviews, etc.	open
Are there any other aspects of education research which increase ethical complexity? Please provide details.	open
What, if any, are the challenges in considering power or dependent relationships within your educational research context?	open
Please suggest actions that might enhance the relationship between education researchers and research ethics committees.	open
Please share an example of good practice that you have experienced in relation to research ethics committees and education research projects with which you have been involved.	open
If you would like to provide any other thoughts on how and why you have responded to an ethics committee in a certain way, please do so.	open

complexity, challenges, good practice, researcher response, and ethics: researcher relationships. The third process was a word frequency count and was applied to two questions deemed to yield demographic and factual information: firstly a definition of the respondent's 'primary role(s)' in their institution, and secondly a list of 'typical data sources' drawn upon to inform their research.

Findings

Descriptive quantitative analyses

The sample largely comprised UK-based researchers (78%, $n = 43$), although some were based outside the UK (22%, $n = 12$). These were included as they responded as members of the recruiting professional networks and generated useful data which might be explored in future research.

The main methodological approaches normally taken by respondents were qualitative (44%, $n = 24$) and mixed methods (46%, $n = 25$). Few researchers identified themselves as quantitative researchers (7%, $n = 4$). Two respondents selected other approaches and identified a combination of mixed methods and qualitative approaches and literary criticism as their main methods.

In the last 5 years, participants reported a wide range of experiences with research ethics committees. Most commonly, respondents had contact with ethics committees for between one and three projects (38%, $n = 21$) and for more than six projects (35%, $n = 19$). Fewer respondents had been involved in four to six projects (16%, $n = 9$) and 11% ($n = 6$) had no contact with committees at all.

Whilst 64% ($n = 35$) of respondents reported specific tensions between ethics committees and education research, just over a third of participants (36%, $n = 20$) did not perceive this to be the case. Contrary to much of the negative rhetoric found in the literature (e.g. Tierney *et al.*, 2007; Hammmersley, 2009; Sikes and Piper, 2010; Parsell *et al.*, 2014), these findings therefore suggest that research ethics committees are not always perceived as foe in educational research, or that perceptions may have changed subsequent to those publications.

The data in Table 2 indicates that the participants in this study conduct research with a number of different groups and arenas associated with education. As might be expected, educational institutions (44%) and children (38%) were the main areas of focus, with families also a popular focus of research (15%). Just over a third of research was also conducted as action research (35%) or with adult learners as the focal group (36%). Reflective practice was used by 27% of respondents, and communities of practice were researched by 22%. Documentary analysis was used by 9% and vulnerable groups were the least researched, with only one participant (2% of the sample) reporting this as their chosen sample. A wide range of other areas were reported, including academics studying their own practice, classroom practices and interactions, higher education, the National Curriculum, interviewing experts for policy-related research, styles of teaching, technology in education and visual methods. This reveals the scope of research applications ethics committees are likely to review from educational researchers.

The area of research perceived to increase ethical complexity the most is that involving children and families, as 60% of participants believed this was definitely the case and a further 24% of participants believed it probably was (see Table 3).

Table 2. Focus of participants' research over the last 5 years

Focus of research	*n*	% of participants
Children	21	38
Families	8	15
Reflective practice	15	27
Adult vulnerable groups	1	2
Action research	19	35
Educational institutions	24	44
Adult learners	20	36
Documentary analysis	5	9
Communities of practice	12	22
Other	12	22

Table 3. Areas of research that are perceived to increase ethical complexity

Type of research	Definitely yes % (*n*)	Probably yes % (*n*)	Might or might not % (*n*)	Probably not % (*n*)	Definitely not % (*n*)
Children and families	60% (33)	24% (13)	11% (6)	43% (2)	2% (1)
Action research	31% (17)	36% (20)	22% (12)	9% (5)	2% (1)
Own practice	31% (17)	29% (16)	27% (15)	9% (5)	4% (2)
Own context	36% (20)	27% (15)	24% (13)	11% (6)	2% (1)

Approximately a third of respondents also felt that action research, researching own practice and own context definitely or probably increased ethical complexity (31% definitely and 36% probably for action research; 31% definitely and 29% probably for researching own practice; 36% definitely and 27% probably for own context).

Overall, the data in Table 4 indicates agreement that ethics committees exist to strengthen research (46% strongly agree, 36% somewhat agree), protect the institution from litigation (51% strongly agree, 38% somewhat agree), provide useful feedback to researchers (36% strongly agree, 42% somewhat agree), protect the reputation of the institution (58% strongly agree, 31% somewhat agree), support the development of effective research (38% strongly agree, 36% somewhat agree) and encourage a shared set of values (44% strongly agree, 36% somewhat agree). There was little agreement, however, that ethics committees exist simply to tick boxes (9% strongly agree, 16% somewhat agree). Such findings, overall, suggest that research ethics committees are therefore perceived as friend rather than foe in educational research by the participants in this study.

The results support the assertions in the literature that committees exist to protect universities from litigation and to protect their reputation (e.g. Gunsalus *et al.*, 2007; Hammersley, 2009; Sikes and Piper, 2010). The results also add to the debate by identifying many perceived benefits of ethics committees, such as strengthening research, providing useful feedback, developing effective research and encouraging shared values in educational research, all of which are more rarely captured in the literature (Simons and Usher, 2012; Coghlan, 2015).

All comments provided by the ethics committee were accepted by just over half the sample (54%), with most also accepted by a further 38%. Very few projects were

Table 4. Perceived reasons an ethics committee exists

Reasons an ethics committee exists	Strongly agree % (*n*)	Somewhat agree % (*n*)	Neither agree nor disagree % (*n*)	Somewhat disagree % (*n*)	Strongly disagree % (*n*)
To tick boxes	9% (5)	16% (9)	16% (9)	20% (11)	38% (21)
To strengthen the rigour of research projects	46% (25)	36% (20)	7% (4)	7% (4)	4% (2)
To protect the institution from litigation	51% (28)	38% (21)	6% (3)	6% (3)	0% (0)
To provide useful feedback to researchers	36% (20)	42% (23)	9% (5)	6% (3)	7% (4)
To protect the reputation of the institution	58% (32)	31% (17)	7% (4)	2% (1)	2% (1)
To support the development of effective research	38% (21)	36% (20)	15% (8)	7% (4)	4% (2)
To encourage a set of shared values	44% (24)	36% (20)	9% (5)	6% (3)	6% (3)

either rejected (2%), substantially changed (2%) or abandoned in response to feedback (see Table 5), contrary to reports in the literature of research being constrained or denied by committees (see Parsons *et al.*, 2015).

Table 5. Participants' response to feedback

Response	*n*	% of participants
Accepted all comments	26	54%
Accepted more than half of the comments	18	38%
Rejected more than half of the comments	1	2%
Substantially changed the project	1	2%
Abandoned the project	2	4%

Qualitative analysis

Positive perceptions. Unlike the tendency in the literature to report negative relationships between researchers and ethics committees, the data indicates many valued interactions between researcher and research committee (see Table 6).

Table 6. Positive comments in relation to the seven coding themes

Theme	Positive
Researcher: research ethics roles	RESEARCH ETHICS OFFICER PERSPECTIVE I have taken the role to lead our educational ethics committee as a way **to facilitate a better relationship** and to **speed up turnover**, as these are key issues we face. RESEARCHER PERSPECTIVE I defer completely to my ethics committees. I work with vulnerable people so I need to ensure that everything I do in my research has **the best possible chance of causing no harm** to anyone involved.

Table 6. (Continued)

Theme	Positive
Tensions	A **respectful** interaction is critical to working productively.
Ethical complexity	Research ethics panel **suggested a strategy for** identifying when two pieces of anonymised data are written by the same informant (**sharing good practice ideas** from other projects).
Challenges	RESEARCH ETHICS OFFICER PERSPECTIVE I chaired a working group a few years ago to address directly the growing demands for ethics approval of research involving learning analytics and pedagogic research. The key outputs were revised texts for ethics committee application forms and guidance notes, to **help academics navigate the relevant challenges**.
Relationships	The ethics committee '**is respected by everybody**'. Ethics is **fundamental** to my methodology of narrative inquiry, therefore ethics feedback is an **essential** part of research.
Good practice/ethics processes	Some suggestions had to be tailored on the basis of my understanding and knowledge which the ethics committee learned from. This is **how collaborative working should take place**. Often comments are the product of a misunderstanding which is **quickly resolved** through a chat with the committee chair. **Genuine discussions** around research goals and methodologies, and the ethical issues likely to arise and how to deal with them.
Researcher response	**I welcome** my ethics committee's advice and **am reassured** by their approval of my projects. I also think it matters to my participants—they feel they are **in safe hands**. The ethics process **enhances** the project methodology.

Phrases connected with communication were the highest in frequency and included: face-to-face conversation, chat, genuine discussion and positive actions such as: navigate challenges, share good practice, suggest a strategy. The data also indicates the positive value attached to these actions, with adjectives such as: supportive, collaborative, essential, fundamental and grateful. The positive comments also indicate strategies and practices deemed to be helpful, such as putting me in touch with other research projects, speeding up turnover and revised (clearer) ethics documents.

Negative perceptions. The negative comments from the data, as might be predicted, often represented a reverse of the features identified above as positive: failure of research committee and researcher to communicate and discuss; lack of strategies for making processes clear, transparent and meaningful (see Table 7).

Table 7. Negative perceptions in the seven key themes

Theme	Negative
Researcher: research ethics roles	Ethics committees are becoming increasingly and inappropriately **intrusive** and frequently create unnecessary difficulties for researchers when there are no real ethical concerns.

Table 7. (Continued)

Theme	Negative
Tensions	Most discipline ethics committees **do not understand** pedagogic research/ anything but experimental research/ how under-18s interpret information sheets and data protection/consent issues/pressures on researchers. **Exaggeratedly cautious lens** that magnifies ethical sensitivities and vulnerabilities.
Ethical complexity	Some 'gold-standards' such as anonymised data **might not be possible** in e.g. action research or small-scale case studies, or even what participants want (in the tradition of oral history interviewees who want to go 'on the record'). **Difficult** for practice-based research/action-based research to comply with ethics. E.g. teaching innovation made as routine part of work, get student evaluations/evidence to show that it is successful and then want to present at conference/write up in journal as case study—at what point should ethical approval have been sought? My institution **doesn't allow** retrospective ethics applications, but there can be a very blurred line between teaching and research that makes it difficult. There seems to be a **lack of understanding** about what happens in a primary classroom so restrictions are put in place which are not supportive of good research or compatible with classroom life. E.g. how and where you film pupils, what to do if a child protection issue arises, etc.
Challenges	**Limited acceptance** of multimedia data-gathering methods, forms of presentation of reports.
Relationships	**Vexatious interference** in research projects is matched by **unequal power relationships** between faculty and university decision-making.
Good practice/ethics processes	The process feels **obstructive**. Forms change without notice. The peer-review process is not developmental or supportive. **Arbitrary** and **bureaucratic** rules. The timelines of to-ing and fro-ing with the wording of information letters, with the boxes that need to be ticked on application forms, and the workload associated with doing this is leading to **fatigue**. There are **no clear** guidelines.
Researcher response	I am aware of institutions now increasingly encouraging PG students to do self-studies or documentary studies in order to avoid delays due to seeking ethical clearance. I think this is **unhelpful** to the broader education enterprise.

However, the highest frequency in this category related to phrases concerned with mutual understanding. The phrases 'lack of understanding', 'do not understand', 'limited understanding' occurred widely in the data. This lack of understanding is recorded mutually: ethics committee members who report researchers 'do not understand the nature of conflicts of interest' and researchers who report that ethics committees 'do not understand pedagogic research'. The lack of mutual understanding is apparent as the base for negative perceptions on both sides, whether lack of 'genuine

discussion', disciplinary differences as discussed in the literature (Gladwell, 2001; Parsell *et al.*, 2014) or burdensome processes (Hammersley, 2009).

Positive projected future. The following question provided an indication of positive best practice for the future:

> Suggest actions that might enhance the relationship between education researchers and research ethics committees.

The suggestions in Table 8 offer a view of good practice which mirror those raised in the sections above: improved communication, development of mutual understanding and respect, making systems clear and meaningful.

Table 8. Future and projected good practice: suggested positives

Suggestion for good practice	Example	Expansion
Clearer communication		'More **collaborative** working'
E.g. supervisors attending ethics discussion of their students' projects		'I worked with the chair of the School EC to invite supervisors to the section of the meeting where their students' work was discussed. This enabled **better clarification of issues** and **eliminated the frustration** that supervisors had with outcomes'
Clear advice and guidelines	2	'Perhaps a flow chart could be developed to aid decision making'
E.g. flow-charts, guidance notes		'I chaired a working group a few years ago to address directly the growing demands for ethics approval of research involving learning analytics and pedagogic research. The key outputs were **revised texts for ethics committee application forms and guidance notes, to help academics navigate the relevant challenges**'
More conversations and fewer forms!		'It makes the process **much better** if people come and discuss projects in early stages of development'
E.g. one-to-one meeting between researcher and ethics officer		'More face-to-face contact perhaps and development meetings'
		'**Open dialogue** between committee/ applicant'
		'Talking through potential responses and considerations to be negotiated'
		'One-to-one conversation with the relevant research ethics officer'
		'**The really helpful aspects** of these were talking through potential responses and considerations to be negotiated and this was a **valuable input** into our approaches to project participants'

Table 8. (Continued)

Suggestion for good practice	Example	Expansion
Educational researchers on research ethics panels	2	'Researchers being committee members' '**It would be nice** to have at least one education researcher as part of the ethics committee'
Ethics committees **having more understanding** of participative research methods		'Possibly a **more can do attitude** on the part of the research ethics committee' 'Research ethics committees work from a position of **how can I help** to make this project work ethically? (rather than what is wrong with it)'
Enhanced research training for the researcher		'My uni runs termly ethics training which is open to all staff/tutors/supervisors and to all post-grads. **Helps to break down barriers** & **show we are all working to same principle'**

Discussion

Table 5 shows that, out of 48 participants, 2 abandoned their projects, 1 substantially changed it and 1 rejected more than half the reviewer feedback. Amongst the other 44, reviewer feedback was all or partially accepted. It is the substantial influence of such feedback which emerges as critical to the 'friend or foe' perception. When the ethics committee works collaboratively with the researcher in a spirit of mutual understanding, researchers characterise them with highly positive language: constructive, collaborative, incredibly hard-working. Where the ethics panel appears to be closed and judgemental, functioning without collaboration or shared core values, researchers describe them as bureaucratic, demoralising and unhelpful.

Similarly, researchers recognise there is indeed a legal, institutional requirement to research within a rigorous ethical framework. This too determined whether the researcher perceived the committee to be friend or foe. Researchers that saw these legal requirements as part of a shared endeavour towards excellence used positive phrases such as reassuring, in safe hands, grateful, necessary and respectful to describe their relationships with the ethics committee. Those who saw this legal requirement as corporate, disconnected from their research endeavours and excessive used negative phrases such as risk-averse, intrusive and frustrating. One respondent reflects on the critical importance of researchers appreciating the role of the ethics panel:

> . . . as publicly funded institutions we are bound by codes of practice in research integrity. Partners would not work with us if we did not protect the University as a trustworthy research community, and partners include schools we work with and students we teach. To imagine that ethics is just for brand protection as some kind of neoliberal agendum is truly misguided.

Friend

Local practice determines whether the ethics committee is perceived of as friend or foe. The ethics committee at best is the friend that is able to inform, guide and mediate so that researcher and researched are assured of being in 'safe hands'. Vadeboncoeur *et al.*'s (2016) study of obtaining ethical approval from 101 universities for a low-risk study involving an online survey is pertinent to the notion of friend or foe. Although they were not investigating committees as 'friend or foe', some similar inferences may be drawn from their findings and observations. Of the 89 institutions they accessed, 60 institutions gave approval, 20 gave no response and just 10 declined. Variations were highlighted in the processes by which ethics committees granted approval and there were procedural inconsistencies, with styles ranging from liberation to paternalistic and protectionist. Overall, they surmised that their experience suggests that most universities in England lean towards a liberation style, parallel with the idea that committees may be perceived as a friend rather than a foe. This style sees the committee facilitating institutional consent whilst allowing students to subsequently decide on their own individual participation. Here the rights and freedoms of researchers are advocated, as well as those of the participants.

The findings in this research support the practice of a 'liberation' rather than paternalistic approach by ethics committees. Respondents felt the ethics committees to be 'friends' where there was mutual understanding (Parsell *et al.*, 2014) and a 'flat' hierarchy (McAreavey and Muir, 2011). Specific strategies valued by the respondents included one-to-one meetings at an early stage of research, researchers sitting on the ethics committee (Connolly and Reid, 2007) and panels working with researchers in a spirit of 'how can I help?'. Researchers describe best practice where the ethics committee suggests strategies for resolving ethical complexity rather than seeing this as a roadblock, or introduce researchers to others who have experience with similar projects. Disciplinary differences need not mitigate against friendship between researcher and ethics committees, where the committee acts as 'lay reader' offering fresh outsider insight (Alderson and Morrow, 2006), and where there is mutual learning. The ethics process as developmental for both sides is apparent from the data, mirroring the view of McAreavey and Muir (2011). One ethics reviewer in this study recommends researcher training, whilst another researcher describes ethics panellists learning from her to appreciate 'practical knowing' as an alternative to other paradigms (Gladwell, 2001; Coghlan, 2015).

The committee was also seen as 'friend' when the processes were made navigable and transparent, rather than the administrative burden described by Wiles *et al.* (2005) and Hammersley (2009). Respondents from the research ethics committee describe proactive strategies for helping academics navigate processes, and for speeding up the turnover of applications to improve relationships.

Foe

Reasons for perceiving research ethics committees as foe emerge clearly from both the literature and the data in this study. We have seen educational researchers describe a gulf between their core goals and values and those of the ethics review committee (Gladwell, 2001; Coghlan, 2015). In this data (Table 5), two respondents

abandoned their research project and one significantly changed it as a result of the ethics process. Respondents in this study described changing their focus from children to teachers, or giving up important research due to the ethical blocks likely to be imposed, echoing comments made by Halse (2011) on the stifling of educational research. Negative terms describing this situation include: intrusive, invasive, frustrating. Meanwhile, from the ethics committee perspective, respondents describe researchers simply 'ticking boxes' to be compliant, not taking ownership of the ethics process, and sending incomplete or cursory paperwork.

What connects this negative data are frequent references on both sides to lack of understanding. Where there is a perceived power imbalance, with the ethics reviewers standing as anonymous judges, researchers experience them as 'foe' (Parsons *et al.*, 2015). This is compounded when the paperwork is viewed as bureaucratic and unnecessarily onerous, and where this paperwork is the main form of communication between researcher and reviewer (Smyth and Williamson, 2005; Wiles *et al.*, 2005).

Conclusion, contributions and future research directions

Theoretical contribution

This study foregrounds how the changing research landscape challenges both the educational researcher and research ethics committees to enter into dialogue about ethical good practice. More recent literature reveals new practices and perceptions held by contemporary educational researchers. Whilst there is much literature related to the ethics committee and its impact on the educational researcher, there is still little conceptualisation of how the educational researcher and research committees might work together to take account of certain methodologies—such as action research—and arrive at shared interpretations of the acceptable range of ethical good practice. This study has identified the central role of ongoing and transparent communication in building and maintaining positive working relationships as a core component to mutually beneficial outcomes for institutions and educational research. Despite this study, re-examination of the role of the ethical review and its relationship to the many varieties of research and researcher in the contemporary educational world remains overdue.

Implications for practice

The results of this study have practical implications for the ways that education researchers approach research ethics and the way committees work with such researchers. The findings may be applicable to many in the education field—to researchers, stakeholders and institutions encouraging education research.

When research ethics committees are perceived as 'foe', there are dangers for all concerned: that the researcher will be forced to abandon or distort important work, to change goals unnecessarily or lose the originality of a research idea. Educational researchers may wish only that their ethics applications indeed 'tick a box' and may not fully integrate ethical reflections into the research design.

It is clear from this study that none of these need be the case, and that it is within the power of both researcher and the ethics committee to reverse this unvirtuous circle, by opening channels of mutual communication and learning. Ethics committees might engage in training to learn about a wider range of research approaches to enhance their understanding of the values, purposes and processes within educational research. Similarly, educational researchers could undergo training sessions to acquaint them with contemporary good practice in research ethics, as well as update them on regulatory changes such as GDPR 2018, which are requirements needing to be built into research design. Training for both sides and more open, ongoing dialogue between educational researchers and ethics committees will facilitate a sense of mutual and informed endeavour towards ethical excellence in research (McAreavey and Muir, 2011).

Limitations and further research

Whilst this study provides valuable insights, limitations also need to be acknowledged. It is interesting to note that whilst many academics appear to have views on the role of ethics committees, and despite the wide circulation of this survey via large membership networks and social media, only a small number of responses were generated, possibly due to the time of year, or owing to the survey format (Bryman, 2012). As such, quantitative analysis was limited to descriptive analysis and excluded the possibility of analysing between group differences, for example. This research is based on a small self-selecting sample of participants from a narrow selection of networks and while generalisability of results was not the aim of this study, claims cannot be made of generalisability. Qualitative research, however, does allow us to draw implications from a small sample, so while these findings cannot claim to be generalisable in terms of group size and representativeness, they do offer a starting point in which themes, questions and concerns emerge which may be 'relatable' to other researchers (Robson, 2002). However, further research extending networks of recruitment and widening participation to include more educational researchers could build more representative findings. Further research could extend networks of recruitment to include more educational researchers, including those in specific educational settings, thus leading to more representative findings.

In addition, research investigation into the experiences of non-UK-based educational researchers could yield comparative data about ethics committees and educational researcher relationships internationally. Also, the critical incidents described in the qualitative data could be a source of further analysis, as well as questions about the nature and value of good practice incidents, and the impact on researcher development in terms of embedding good ethics practice in their research.

In conclusion, and to respond to the title of this paper, contemporary educational researchers regard research ethics committees as friends, when best practice is taking place and when researcher and ethics committees are transparently engaged in a shared endeavour. When this shared endeavour breaks down, for a variety of reasons including apparently unreasonable demands or mutual misunderstanding, the ethics committee can become foe. The difference between foe and friend lies in quality of communication, clear systems and a culture of respectful mutual learning.

Ethical guidelines

This research was conducted within the BERA/BPS guidelines and approval was granted through the Institutional University Research Ethics Committee.

Conflict of interest

There are no conflicts of interest. Two of the authors do, however, hold the role of Ethics Chair and Faculty Ethics Officer within their academic institution.

Data availability statement

Research data are not shared.

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