

TEACHING RESEARCH ETHICS THROUGH REALITY TV

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Session 1

TEACHERS' GUIDANCE: KEY ETHICAL PRINCIPLES AND THEIR POSSIBLE IMPLICATIONS FOR STUDENTS' JUDGEMENTS ABOUT THE BIG BROTHER EXTRACT

The teacher should brief students on each issue from sections in bold type before the start of discussions. During discussions, only prompt from 'possible implications' if it becomes necessary.

Informed consent

Participants should give their consent freely, without coercion. Consent should normally be based on a clear understanding of what participants are agreeing to and why it is being asked of them. However, some withholding of information or minor deception may be permissible, where this is the only way to carry out a potentially valuable study. In such cases, participants must be fully debriefed as soon as possible after the study, and the withheld information or concealed purpose should not be of a kind that it is likely to cause distress once revealed.

Possible implications

While students may assume participants gave consent in general terms to participating in Big Brother, they may feel that this does not remove the need for specific informed consent to individual tasks etc. They may feel that the social pressure to stick with the task even when they were distressed by it (as Kat appeared to be for example) constitutes coercion. Against this, they may consider that some withholding of information here is essential to the show, and that it is relatively trivial set against the possible benefits to Housemates from taking part in Big Brother

Confidentiality

Personal information should be kept as confidential to the research team, and that which needs to be made public should normally be carefully anonymised.

Possible implications

The normal expectations of anonymisation and confidential treatment of personal details clearly cannot apply in a situation such as Big Brother. Students might feel that Housemates know this from the start and so confidentiality is not a relevant issue. However, we might argue that the extent to which participation may lead to exposure of details of Housemates' personal lives outside of the House may not be fully grasped by all of them at the time they joined the programme.

Right to withdraw

Participants should have the right to withdraw from a study at any point, without having to explain their reasons for so doing and without any further consequences for themselves. They also have the right to request that their personal data be removed from the data set after data collection, where this is at all possible (and researchers will normally be expected to ensure that withdrawal of data *is* possible).

Possible implications

Students might feel that as Big Brother explicitly gives them the right to withdraw (as in Kat's visit to the Diary Room), this criterion is addressed. Students who have seen the show will also know that Housemates can – and do – choose to “walk” from the show as a whole. However, it is clear that there could be potential negative consequences for Housemates should they withdraw from the task: other Housemates may feel let down and react in a hostile way to anyone withdrawing, and it may affect how they are seen by the public and reduce their chances of winning a large sum of money. A further issue is that they cannot retrospectively insist on their material being removed – even if the programme makers were willing to do so (which seems highly unlikely), they could not prevent viewers from looking at material they had video-recorded and from sharing it with others.

Use of incentives

Participants should not be offered incentives that are of a scale that might induce them to take risks they would not otherwise take.

Possible implications

In the immediate task, the provision of a luxury shopping budget for the Housemates is the explicit incentive. Students may debate whether that is in keeping with the principle above – i.e. just how big an incentive is it? It could also be argued that refusing to take part in the task could have an impact on nominations and on viewers' votes for eviction which constitutes a much larger incentive – one that could persuade Housemates to do things they would not otherwise do.

Risk of harm

Psychological research should minimise the risk of harm to participants, and should warn people before they are recruited of any risks that are above and beyond those of normal everyday activities. “Harm” here includes physical injury, serious distress, psychological trauma, reputational damage and so on.

Possible implications

Big Brother announces at the start of the task that the electric shocks are “not dangerous”. Students may wonder how carefully individual Housemates have been physically assessed to ensure that this is so – though we have no way of knowing this from the show itself. Anyway, this announcement clearly only addresses the issue of physical harm. There are no warnings to participants about psychological distress, reputational damage and so on – which students might feel are real risks here.