Ethics in Research: Capote

Cassidy Freeman

University of Mary

NUR 551 Critique and Design of Nursing Research

Dr. DiAnn Ecret

July 31, 2022

Ethics in Research: Capote

Ethics in nursing has been around for many years. The American Nurses Association (2015) adopted the code of ethics for nurses in 1950. However, the need for ethical guidance was recognized in the mid-1800s (Epstein & Turner, 2015). It was found that 60% of nurses identified ethical issues on a frequent or daily basis according to a study of the ethical problems encountered by nurses (Epstein & Turner, 2015). The code of ethics is crucial when conducting research because it guides nurses in ethical analysis and decision-making. The nursing profession encompasses protecting, promoting, and restoring the health and well-being of individuals, families, groups, communities, and populations (American Nurse Association, 2015). For example, when evaluating the movie Capote (Miller, 2005), it was clear Truman Capote violated several ethical principles and Benedictine values.

**Compare and Contrast Ethics in the 1950s to today**

Ethics in the 1950s were very different than they are today. Today ethics is utilized in every research project, especially when primarily involving human experiments. In the 1950s, many ethical issues were occurring worldwide, especially in the United States. For example, in 1953, James Watson and Francis Crick proposed a DNA structure model, and they obtained secret x-ray diffraction data from Rosalind Franklin without her permission (Resnik, n.d.). Using Rosalind’s data resulted in Rosalind being excluded from the project, and she did not receive credit for her work. The American Nurses Association adopted the code of ethics in 1950, so ethics in research was something relatively new in the 1950s.

**Respect for Human Dignity**

Respect for human dignity includes the right to self-determination and the freedom to full disclosure, which Capote violated several times throughout the movie. There was no approval for Truman Capote’s research from an IRB, research ethics board, or any other entity to ensure that Truman Capote was acting ethically. It is unclear if anyone knew that he was conducting research in the first place, which goes against the ethical principle of the right to full disclosure. A technique that violates the right to full disclosure is covert data collection, which collects data without participants’ knowledge or consent. Truman Capote used this technique when interviewing the community members and Perry Smith. Initially, it was inferred that the community members thought Capote was just a concerned citizen as no one questioned why he was inquiring about the murders. Eventually, Capote did disclose to Alvin Dewey and Perry Smith that he was doing research for a book he was writing. Truman Capote deceived Perry Smith because Capote stated that he was trying to help portray Smith in a way that would not make him a criminal. This was false information as Capote’s book described Smith as a cold-blooded killer, hence the title, *In Cold Blood*. The community members were unaware they were even participants in his study, so they did not have the opportunity to withdraw. The only type of refusal or withdrawal that could have occurred is if the community members or Perry Smith refused to be interviewed. Truman Capote manipulated Perry Smith into thinking that Truman Capote really cared for Perry and truly wanted to help him. Truman strengthened this manipulation by giving Smith reading materials and small gifts. This manipulation was a form of coercion to get Perry Smith to tell Truman about the murders of the family in Kansas. By not informing Perry Smith and the community members did not have the voluntary right to partake in Capote’s research, he is violating the right to self-determination.

**Beneficence**

Participants were not subject to physical harm or discomfort; they were victims of psychological distress. Many of the interviews Truman Capote conducted on the community members and Perry Smith caused a lot of psychological distress instead of preventing or minimizing the distress or harm. For example, when Capote was interviewing Smith, he manipulated Smith by telling him that he was his friend so Smith would tell him what had truly happened the night of the murders (Capote, 2005). Causing psychological distress goes against the ethical principle of beneficence. Polit and Beck (2016) state that beneficence should maximize benefits and minimize harm. The benefits of Capote’s research do not outweigh the potential risk or discomfort that Smith or the community members had. Truman Capote’s basis for his research was to write a successful book instead of diving into the psychological reasoning behind the murders. This means that the benefits to society do not outweigh the costs to the participants.

**Justice**

The ethical principle of justice includes the right to fair treatment and the right to privacy (Polit & Beck, 2016). Safeguarding the participants’ privacy did not appear to be a concern that Truman Capote considered when writing his book. It was never articulated whether he used the community members' names when discussing their interviews in his book. Unfortunately, since this occurred in the 1950s, the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996 (HIPPA) was not in place. This means that the right to privacy was not something that would have been considered. Truman did not keep any of his interviews private or disclosed when talking to his friends or other community members. As discussed earlier, there was not a process of informed consent for the participants of Truman Capote’s research since the participants did not even know Truman was conducting research. Therefore, it was not justifiable for Truman not to get informed consent from the community members or Perry Smith to conduct his research. Informed consent is vital when conducting any form of research. This informed consent process allows participants to have full disclosure about the research they will be participating in and allows them to make a conscious decision on whether they want to participate (Polit & Beck, 2016). The right to fair treatment imposes special obligations toward individuals who are considered vulnerable populations (Polit & Beck, 2016). When Truman Capote was conducting his research, Perry Smith was a prisoner in the Kansas State Penitentiary. Truman Capote did not utilize special precautions when interviewing Perry Smith. It could be assumed that Truman Capote benefited from the fact that Perry Smith was a prisoner because he could coerce Smith to tell him what he wanted to hear by giving him books and pretending to be a friend that believed he was innocent.

**Benedictine Values**

The Benedictine value of community and hospitality are utilized by the community members of the small town in Kansas. They initially hesitate to let Capote into their community. However, Alvin Dewey’s wife displays the Benedictine values of community and hospitality by welcoming Truman Capote and his friend into their home when her husband was not so friendly. Capote attempted to display the Benedictine value of respect for persons; however, he was doing just the opposite. Capote portrayed as if he respected Perry Smith as a human being, but instead, he used Perry Smith to write the “greatest book of all time.” According to the University of Mary (n.d.), the Benedictine value of prayer is “attending to the mystery and sacredness of life, abiding in the diving presence, and listening and responding to God.” This Benedictine value was unfortunately not displayed by Capote. He also did not display the Benedictine value of moderation. Moderation is living simply with balance and gratitude (University of Mary, n.d.). Capote did not live with balance while he was writing *In Cold Blood*. He obsessed over writing that book, which is shown in the movie when Capote chose to stay and talk to Smith instead of going on vacation to Spain. Capote did end up going to Spain for a little while; however, it was not when he was initially supposed to go. While in Spain, Capote still obsessed over the book instead of focusing on other writings. Capote vaguely displayed the Benedictine value of service. For example, Capote acted like he was a servant leader for Smith when he would meet with Smith so Capote could get more information from him. Capote convinced Smith that he was trying to get the best lawyer when Capote was doing the opposite. This became evident when Capote thought of the ending of his book being when Smith would die by execution.

**Conclusion**

Capote did not have Perry Smith or the community members' best interests in mind when writing *In Cold Blood*. Instead, Truman Capote’s goal was to write the best book in history when in reality, he violated several ethical principles and Benedictine values. The ethical principles he violated were respect for human dignity, beneficence, the right to privacy, and justice. The Benedictine values he violated were hospitality, community, respect for persons, prayer, moderation, and service.

References

Association, A. N. (2015). Code of ethics for nurses with interpretive statements (Second ed.). American Nurses Association.

Epstein, B., & Turner, M. (2015). The nursing code of ethics: Its value, its history. OJIN: The Online Journal of Issues in Nursing, 20(2). <https://doi.org/10.3912/ojin.vol20no02man04>

Miller, B. (Director). (2005). Capote [Film]. United Artists; Sony Pictures Classics; A-Line Pictures; Cooper’s Town Productions; Infinity Media; Eagle Vision; Capote Productions.

Polit, D. F., & Beck, C. T. (2016). Nursing research: Generating and assessing evidence for nursing practice (10th ed.). Wolters Kluwer Health.

Resnik, D. B. (n.d.). Research ethics timeline. National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences. <https://www.niehs.nih.gov/research/resources/bioethics/timeline/index.cfm>

University of Mary. (n.d.). Benedictine heritage. <https://www.umary.edu/faith-service/benedictine-heritage>