Introduction to the Special Issue:
Research Ethics in Challenging Contexts

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Abstract
The rise in ethical regulation of social research has brought about an increased interest in research ethics; much of this has focused on concerns about ethical regulation and its impact on social research rather than exploring the everyday challenges that researchers encounter in the process of research and how these are, or might be, managed in ethical ways. This special issue explores some of the ethical challenges that are raised in conducting qualitative social research in contexts which raise specific ethical challenges because of the nature of the participants or the specific methodological approach taken. These include research with children, research in global contexts, longitudinal research, e-research and data archiving and secondary analysis of qualitative material. Drawing on a range of research projects, these papers explore some of the key ethical challenges raised by these contexts and how researchers have engaged with the issues that arise.

Introduction to Special Issue

Discussion of research ethics in social research has become dominated by a concern with the increasing regulation of social research which has occurred over the last decade or so. Various authors in qualitative social science (as well as in other methodological traditions) have contested the appropriateness of ethical regulation in social research, arguing that social research poses minimal risks to participants (Atkinson, 2009; Dingwall, 2008; Hammersley, 2009, 2010; Stanley & Wise, 2010). Ethical review by research ethics committees (RECs) is viewed by these authors as unnecessary and more importantly, as detrimental to the future of social science research in that it is perceived as having the potential to render some types of social science research impossible to undertake. Researchers using ethnographic, visual and online methods in particular have identified the threat to their practice posed by ethical regulation (Wiles et al., 2012).

An alternative view, less widely expressed, is that no research is ever risk-free and that systems of ethical review encourage researchers to think through the ethical issues that they may encounter across the process of their research – from defining research questions through methodology to the implications of research findings. From this perspective, research ethics review can encourage researchers, not only to improve levels of ‘ethical literacy’ in the research community, but more fundamentally, to reflect deeply on their research project and process from the perspective of all the possible stakeholders. That can include participants and others involved in their lives (such as family members or professionals), the researcher's colleagues and institution, and potential future users of the research data or research findings. Thus, ethical literacy means
more than learning how to achieve a favourable opinion from an ethics committee, it is a matter of research quality and integrity. It means encouraging the development of an attitude to research where ethical issues are foregrounded and one where attention to ethical issues is given throughout the process of conducting research. This means that consideration of ethical issues should be central to, and guide decision-making in, all aspects of a research project. In short, conducting ethical research should not be reduced to the process of ‘getting ethics approval’.

Despite concerns about unethical practice in social research, it appears that the ‘horror stories’ are both well-known and relatively rare. Milgram’s obedience to authority experiment, Zimbardo’s Stanford prison experiment and Laud Humphreys’ covert ethnography of homosexuality are unusual exceptions (see Wiles, 2013). In the main, there appear to be few cases of serious ethical breaches but this does not mean that researchers do not experience ethical challenges or that consideration of ethical issues is not (or should not be) at the forefront of researchers’ minds in conducting social research. Ethical challenges and dilemmas emerge at all stages of the research process; the most challenging are those that have been unanticipated and unplanned for. These are inevitably situated within the specific context in which research is conducted and general textbooks which cover the standard ethical issues of consent, confidentiality and anonymity may have little to offer the researcher seeking to resolve such ethical challenges. These considerations are especially pressing in the context of methodological innovation, where researchers are working in new or rapidly changing contexts.

The idea for this special issue arose from our interest in research ethics, as both an area of research as well as one of practice through our involvement as members of various research ethics committees. It reflects our broader interest in encouraging debate and discussion of ethical issues in qualitative research. The aim of this special issue is to explore the sorts of ethical issues that qualitative researchers experience and how they have managed them; not in order to provide answers about how ethical researchers should behave but rather to explore the varied ethical challenges that research can throw up and the ethical reflections in which researchers engage as they attempt to manage them. The papers presented here were developed following a session on research ethics that we jointly convened at the ESRC Research Methods Festival in 2012. The session focused on exploring some of the ethical issues that emerge in research contexts which pose particular challenges because of the nature of the participants or the specific methodological approach taken and, importantly, how researchers have managed the challenges they have faced. Our intention is that the reflections in these papers will stimulate social science researchers to further thought, debate and discussion about research ethics.

The papers that follow explore the ethical issues that have emerged in qualitative longitudinal research (Neale), in research conducted with children in global contexts (Morrow), in the archiving and secondary analysis of qualitative material (Bishop), in on-line research (Snee), and in visual research (Clark).

Bren Neale’s paper explores the ethical considerations that arise in the conduct of qualitative longitudinal (QL) research drawing on the experiences of the ESRC Timescapes initiative. Ethical issues such as consent, confidentiality and anonymity become heightened in QL research. The extended period of time in which participants engage in the research process means not only that significant demands will be made on participants’ time, but also that researchers gain access to detailed information about people’s lives. Neale explores the challenges inherent in maintaining research relationships over a long period of time, both for researcher and research participant. She notes the challenges in maintaining a balance between providing reciprocity and support to research participants while at the same time maintaining professional boundaries so as not to raise people’s expectations and create dependency. She also discusses the challenges of anonymity
and confidentiality in QL research and the balance between protecting individuals and presenting (and preserving) authentic data that allows people’s stories to be heard.

In the context of a growing emphasis on the importance of archiving data, Neale also explores data-sharing and the re-use of qualitative data. She argues for a ‘stakeholder’ ethics in which the needs of all parties who have an interest in research are recognised. This goes beyond the primary researchers and research participants to include secondary researchers as well as funding bodies, academic institutions and public stakeholders. She argues that ethical decision-making needs to recognise the needs and claims of all those who have a ‘stake’ in research.

Virginia Morrow’s paper explores the approach to ethics taken in another longitudinal study, Young Lives, which investigates experiences of childhood poverty in Ethiopia, Andhra Pradesh (India), Peru and Vietnam using both qualitative and quantitative methods. The project is co-ordinated by a research team based in the UK, working in partnership with colleagues in all the study countries. Morrow foregrounds the importance of considerations of context in ethical decision-making. She explores how understandings of consent and of research itself can have different meanings in different contexts. Drawing on the experience of Young Lives researchers in all four study countries, she examines the considerable ethical challenges in explaining research in contexts of poverty, where participants can have extensive experience of ‘projects’ in the form of organisations and initiatives offering intervention or support, which colours their understanding of research. Intergenerational questions also surface here, as Morrow explores the varying expectations that parents and children have about the research and how these have been managed in the context of Young Lives. Issues of reciprocity, compensation and rewards for participating in research are particularly challenging in situations of poverty and raise ethical questions of coercion and dependency.

Libby Bishop’s paper explores the vexed question of the basis on which ethical decisions can be made and in particular the role of ethical theories and moral reasoning. She notes that situated ethics are dominant in UK qualitative research which gives prominence to situation, context and case-based reasoning and she questions whether there is an ‘antipathy’ to principles and moral theories. Bishop discusses these issues through a focus on the re-use and secondary analysis of archived qualitative data. Using examples from a variety of previous studies, she explores two ethical questions. First, she asks how secondary researchers should respond when they uncover research practices of primary researchers that appear to be ethical breaches. Second, she asks if data sharing alters researchers’ moral relationships with their participants. In this analysis, she highlights moral relationships with two key stakeholders in research ethics – participants, and other researchers (past and future). In discussing research which looks into past decades, when ethics discourse and regulation did not have the prominence it does today, Bishop also highlights another key context for ethical decision-making, that of time. She argues that ethical debates, particularly in the area of secondary analysis, are best served by engaging with moral theories as well as the particulars and context of research.

The final two papers in this special issue address approaches which involve emerging and rapidly developing methodological fields. Helene Snee’s paper explores the rapidly-expanding area of online research in which the application of ‘traditional’ ethical issues such as consent and anonymity become problematic because of the blurring of boundaries in digitally-mediated environments. Drawing on research that utilised young people’s personal gap year blogs as primary data, the paper explores two key ethical issues inherent in online research: whether online communications can be considered public or private; and, whether the people who produce them should be considered subjects or authors. These considerations raise important issues of consent, anonymity and confidentiality; viewing data as public means that these issues have different salience than if these data are viewed as private. She critically reflects on her decisions to view the blogs as public accounts but at the same time to attempt to disguise authors’ identities and not to acknowledge their status as
authors. She argues for a contextual approach in resolving ethical issues in online research in which researchers critically reflect upon and evaluate the decisions they make.

Andrew Clark’s paper focuses on some of the ethical challenges inherent in working with visual material. Drawing on two research projects that made extensive use of visual material and techniques he reflects on ‘ethical moments’ that emerged in his research and considers how power, trust and emotion impacted on the decisions that were made. He discusses images that have ‘haunted’ him and reflects on his decisions to use or not use particular images for dissemination purposes. He argues for a situated ethics in which participants are involved with decision-making about images, recognising that research participants have their own ‘everyday ethics’ about the use of visual images arising from their increasing familiarity with photographing, uploading, downloading and sharing images on the internet. Such negotiations with participants necessitate the researcher taking account of the relational, power-laden context in which these discussions are played out, to ensure that ethical negotiation does not become persuasion or coercion. He also argues that, in cases of disagreement, researchers need to be prepared to take responsibility for ethical decision-making; not because they are more ethical than their research participants but because the responsibility for any negative outcome must rest with them.

Together, these papers explore a number of important themes that reflect contemporary debates both in research ethics and in research methods more generally. The first is that traditional thinking about ethics in research may not be applicable to, or at least is challenged by, recent developments in research methods. Social science research methodology is a rapidly changing and developing field. Such changes are being driven by developments in technology, and in the way technology is used in research. Visual methods, creative methods, digital and e-research (including the digital storage and re-use of archived data) are all areas which have been identified as challenging conventional research ethics. Are traditional research ethics frameworks applicable to these developments? The use of Web 2.0 and social media, the greater accessibility and affordability of cameras, and the burgeoning development of new technologies for ‘mining’ data from social media sources have all changed the way we interact with the world around us and blurred the boundaries between public and private worlds. These developments are part of how we live in a technological and multi-modal world, and they have huge potential value for researchers, but they do pose new ethical challenges.

A second theme concerns the rights of participants and the responsibilities of researchers. There is increasing movement towards what has been referred to as the ‘democratisation’ of research where researchers and research participants collaborate in the process. This is reflected in a range of different types of research undertaking encompassing ‘user-involvement’ in specific aspects of a project, in participants and researchers working together to decide on various aspects of the research as it unfolds and in lay people leading and undertaking a project of their own choosing with the support of researchers. It is also reflected in researchers’ concerns to carefully consider research participants’ views about how ‘their’ data should be used. This trend raises a number of challenges, such as how differing understandings of ethical issues between academic researchers and participants or lay researchers should be resolved. Should research participants have autonomy to decide how ‘their’ data is used and how they are presented? Does this result, as some have claimed, in the critical edge of social science being blunted? These issues are complicated by new technologies because they blur public and private, and ownership of data, and hence blur the boundaries of who is a participant. There is also the question of to whom researchers have responsibility and how competing ethical claims from different ‘stakeholders’ might be managed. While researchers and research participants are the primary players there are many other groups, including the general public and the research funders, who each have a stake in research and whose needs should be considered. How should the rights of these different groups be balanced?
The third theme concerns debates about the appropriateness of situational relativist approaches in ethical decision making as opposed to moral theory or principle-based approaches. Most qualitative researchers argue for a situated approach to managing ethical issues that emerge in research rather than adherence to a set of principles or rules that are seen to be central to the principlist approaches that form the basis for the work of most RECs. Clearly context is important and ethical decisions have to be taken in the light of the specific circumstances in which researchers find themselves. However, as Bishop demonstrates, this does not preclude the use of moral theory to explore the ethical issues that emerge. This tension looks likely to be a continuing source of debate among social researchers in the foreseeable future.

There is a risk that systems for review of research ethics can over-emphasise the technicalities of data gathering – consent and information provision in particular – at the expense of attention to other stages of the research process (from defining research questions to disseminating findings). Whilst diverse in their focus, the papers in this special issue all demonstrate that ethics considerations must be addressed in context and in process, throughout the project, with reflection and dialogue. Researchers in 20 or 30 years will be looking back at what we did to understand how we dealt with the ethics considerations of our day – just as Bishop describes researchers looking back at the work of past decades.

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