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Ethical possibilities: towards participatory ethics

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The two viewpoints from practitioners, above, raise the prospect of more participatory ethics in research with young people. Save the Children are committed to genuine participation from children across the range of their activities. The questions that Caroline King and Andrea Priestley pose go far beyond, as they put it, the standard issues of ‘consent, anonymity and confidentiality’ to address the challenging issues of the purposes of research, of whose interests it is likely to serve, and about who ultimately benefits. As academic researchers we are often shy about confronting such questions directly, given that our research usually benefits us more than the young people involved.

Julie Dowds also raises the issue of participation with the specific example of consent; whether children under 16 are able to consent to taking part in research, and whether they should be asked to. She argues that whether young people should be able to give their own consent might be decided on a case by case basis, given the diverse backgrounds and contexts of young people in research. She also suggests, importantly, that we shouldn’t underestimate the duty and skills of the researcher to have full regard for ethical issues in working with children. Neither must we reach a situation, through increasing regulation from ethical codes and committees, that important work with children does not flourish.

The form and possibilities of participatory ethics were the subject of two conference sessions in 2006 at the Association of American Geographers in Chicago and the Royal Geographical Society/Institute of British Geographers in London. The issue has been a longstanding concern for researchers who work with children and young people using participatory approaches, and the sessions provided an opportunity to share experiences and strategies around negotiating ethics.

‘Participatory ethics’ increasingly feels like a contradiction in terms. It throws into sharp relief the fact that different definitions of ethics are circulating and becoming more contested. ‘Being ethical’, for many social scientists and practitioners who work with young people, is about not causing harm (or even doing some good), respecting young people and trying to work in their interests (see for example Christiansen and James 2000; Fraser et al 2004; Morrow and Richards 1996; Glasgow Centre for the Child and Society). However, for the ethics committees or human subject (IRB) panels who clear research proposals, priorities often seem to differ. Many experiences shared at the two conference sessions suggested that these committees’ priorities are not ethical in the way that we as researchers understand the term, and favour protecting Universities against litigation over genuinely forefronting the fair and
Respectful treatment of young people as research subjects. Institutional ethical codes and practices are rarely put together with input from young people, and sometimes with scant understanding of what qualitative or participatory research involves.

Several years ago, Cathy Bailey and I struggled to get a proposal for research on infant feeding with new mothers, which had already been funded by the National Health Service, cleared by the local medical ethics committee. The research had been designed to use intensive qualitative techniques to help the women to feel as comfortable as possible, and assured them they were free to quit at any time and able to influence the research agenda. The committee sent our application for clearance back three times, suggesting mothers’ homes were inappropriate places to conduct the research, that consent forms should be more traditional and that expected findings should be stated. Trying to take ethics seriously, and following the ethical codes and texts which are often most respected by qualitative and participatory researchers, often means coming up against problems when seeking clearance.

A participatory approach takes ethics further than standard understandings about ethical practice in qualitative research with young people. To date that has largely been an adult-led and adult–defined idea of what treating young people ethically means. Participatory ethics involves acknowledging that ethical concepts and issues are socio-culturally and contextually specific so may not be shared by researcher and researched (see Kindon and Latham 2002; Randstrom and Deur 1999; Sanderson and Kindon 2004), and many models of participatory research emphasise the ethical priority for action arising from research (on participants’ terms) (see Routledge 2004; Fuller and Kitchin 2001; Kesby et al 2005). In research with young people, then, it means taking account of young people’s own ethical perspectives and negotiating ethical practice with them. This may mean having discussions about how the research will be conducted, what working principles are drawn up, what issues matter to them in how they are treated, what happens to findings and so on, as part of a wider participatory process where young people are engaged as partners in the research (see Cahill 2007a, 2007b; Leyshon 2002; Maxey 2004; McIlwaine and Datta 2004).

Participatory ethics therefore raise some further tensions in getting clearance to work with young people:

**Developing ethics with young people**

Participatory research may still be a minority pursuit in the social sciences, but it is gaining popularity and credibility. It has long been used by those working in majority world contexts, and more recently by researchers in the North. The degree of participation in some studies is open to critique. Some include young people in fieldwork only, while others engage them in design, implementation and dissemination. Fewer involve young people in discussions and negotiations around ethics.

To do so is challenging; some feel that young people will not understand ethical issues (subtext: in the way that we do), that ethical issues are too complex and that young people lack experience. Are they competent actors in the process of negotiating ethics? Can we find a shared language? (Critics voice similar concerns at the mention of theorising with young people.) Added to these issues, there may be practical difficulties in reaching consensus about appropriate ethical frameworks between researchers, young people and gatekeepers (Beale 2006). There are always additional
concerns when young people are involved in research – as Julie Dowds discusses, the argument for young people to give informed consent alone has had a long and bumpy ride (see also Beale 2006). Kellett (2005) gives a useful account of training children in research, including in ethical practice. She also notes that even quite young children demonstrate ‘strong ethical scruples and great sensitivity towards participants’. Nonetheless there remain issues over who takes ethical responsibility for a study, and whether it is child or adult researchers who should police agreed codes of ethics (Kellett 2005).

Different answers to these questions will emerge as geographers and others working with young people explore shared practices. What is clear from studies of youth and participation is that young people want participation based on concepts of youth as beings in the here and now - i.e. ready and able to understand and act - rather than participation with them as becomings for the future (Skelton 2007).

**Developing ethics iteratively**
In participatory research ethical codes and agreements need to be iterative, i.e. able to respond to how the research develops. In standard qualitative research the research agenda may shift in response to knowledge gained from respondents (Glaser and Strauss 1967), however participatory research may involve choosing research topics, refocusing priorities, changing direction, and pursuing techniques or social action that have not been anticipated, all in response to young people’s input. Clearly this doesn’t fit the standard format of knowing exactly what you are doing (and, often, what you are likely to find) before you do it, as ethics committees as well as funding agencies often demand.

There are workable models for agreeing research priorities and ethics in a more realistic, iterative way, such as the memorandum of understanding Sara Kindon and Geoff Hume-Cook collaboratively developed with their Iwi (Maori tribe) partners in Aotearoa New Zealand. At the heart of the ongoing project is discussion and negotiation about every aspect of the research process and its products (see Kindon 2003, Kindon and Latham 2002). Even on short term projects, ethical agreements can be drawn up with young people which are reviewed and revised with them as the research progresses.

**Developing ethics based on young people’s feelings and beliefs about what is ethical and how they would like to be treated**
Caroline King and Andrea Priestley’s emphasis on the purposes of research as a key ethical issue strikes a particular chord. Participants in the various research projects I have worked on, regardless of their age, have often been less interested in the ethical concerns we tend to feel are important - consent forms, promises of anonymity, etc - and much more interested in what will happen to the findings and whether the research will change anything. Marginalised young people in particular, and the organisations that represent them and look after their welfare, are increasingly careful about what access they give to which researchers, and have well developed sensors for extractive and non-reciprocal research which has only academic outcomes.

In a recent research session with children in African refugee families and children of white British origin in north east England, carried out with Kye Askins and Amelia
Lake, we asked how they thought research with young people should be conducted. They said:

- Ask questions that don’t have any answers so young people can say what they think
- Mainly ask about issues important to them
- Make it real – research isn’t taken seriously – to be more supportive
- Talk to people who can sort it out

Other young people in other places, speaking about other issues, may have different feelings. The point here is that ethical imperialism of any kind has its problems. We need to ask what matters in each context, and how young people would like to be treated.

**Strategies**

Balancing this need with institutional constraints isn’t easy. Many feel their hands are tied in academic research, although as the practitioner pieces in this issue show, practices are sometimes better developed elsewhere. Success in negotiating all of this is greatly aided by personal as well as professional support from other like-minded researchers: as Meth (2003) deftly illustrates, ethical issues in research and emotionality are intertwined, but we often concentrate on the effects of our research on participants at the expense of considering its impact on ourselves. In terms of tackling ethics committees, participants at the RGS/IBG and AAG conference sessions talked about the need for participatory researchers to get onto committees, a prospect not all will relish, but one which provides some balance on those committees which have traditionally been peopled by ‘hard’ scientists who may not be familiar with participatory epistemologies. To get clearance for our infant feeding research proposal, we sought advice from seasoned health researchers who showed us how to couch our research in a particular language that bridged the gap, or at least woolled it, between our different conceptions of ethics. Others have talked more explicitly about the ‘ethics of deception’ (Routledge 2004), and this one must be left to your ethical consciousness: as one conference participant said, ‘fill in the forms and then do what is right’.

**Notes**

1 The committee also voiced several concerns which were not so easily answered, for example that new mothers might be unsettled when geographers, rather than medics, turned up to conduct the study.

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