

Ethics and Ethnography: The ethical position of the researcher engaged in ethnographic observation

There is a broad consensus amongst academics that research involving the collection of data from people should include the consideration of any potentially harmful consequences for participants that may arise, either directly or indirectly, from the research process (O'Reilly, 2009, pp.57). Early codes of ethical practice, such as the Declaration of Helsinki in 1964, focused firmly on medical and biomedical research (Barrett & Coleman, 2005, pp.555-556). The Declaration of Helsinki itself was rooted in the 1949 Nuremberg Code, as the world reacted to the human atrocities committed by Nazi scientists during the Second World War (Fischer, 2006). Subsequent revisions to the declaration (the latest being in 2002) have broadly conspired to support the notion of research ethics as being primarily constructed around the physical body (Barrett & Coleman, 2005, pp.556). However, as research typically generates disparities in power, favouring the researcher over the researched within all aspects of the human experience (Skeggs, 2001, pp.428), there is an arguable moral imperative to safeguard more than merely the physiology of those under study. Expanding the OED's (2012) rather circular and unhelpful definition of ethics as simply '*The science of morals*' and morals as '*Thought and discourse about moral questions; moral philosophy, ethics*', Seiber (1993, pp.14) illuminates the concept for modern researchers as '*...the application of a system of moral principles to prevent harming or wronging others, to promote the good, to be respectful, and to be fair*'. These notions of preventing harm, promoting good, respect and fairness would be reasonably considered laudable within any aspect of human interaction and essential to any systematically unbalanced relationship, such as between the researcher and the researched. The key practical problem lies in the interpretation and application of these broad and fairly subjective concepts (what is good? what is fair?) across the diverse research arena in order to balance the protection of participants against the generation of valid research. This paper seeks to specifically consider the ethics surrounding ethnography as a particular branch of social research, and the position occupied by the ethnographer in relation to participants. It draws on examples from a number of published ethnographies, in which researchers have adopted varying ethical positions, in order to demonstrate the iterative and fluid nature of the methodology.

Although it is possible to categorise ethnographical research in any number of ways – insider/outsider, single site/multi-site/virtual, modernist/post-modernist – from an ethical perspective the distinction between whether a study is overt or covert is singularly important. The essential difference between an overt and a covert study is that in an overt study the participants are aware that they are the subject of research while in a covert study they are not (O'Reilly, 2009, pp.44). There are many reasons why a researcher might wish their intentions to remain hidden during their work, ranging from the benignly practical to wholly self-interested academic profiteering. The now somewhat infamous study entitled '*The Tearoom trade*' by Laud Humphreys (1970), a product of his PhD research at Washington University, is a frequently cited example of ethically dubious work. The research itself involved Humphreys covertly positioning himself as a 'watch queen', keeping lookout for the police as men engaged in homosexual acts within public toilets. Beyond the fact that none of the men involved in the study were initially aware that Humphreys was a researcher, a bigger issue was that Humphreys recorded the car registration numbers of the men that he observed engaging in, what remains, an illegal act, before tracking them down to their home addresses to collect further survey data. Although Humphreys study was, to a degree, a product of its time and his desire to be rigorous in his data collection, it is reasonable to suppose that his home visits were frequently the cause of some embarrassment, at the very least, to his participants. Although few academic

researchers today would consider the second element of Humphreys study to be ethically defensible, other more recent studies, such as that conducted by Monaghan (2002) on nightclub security staff, still seek to justify the use of a covert approach, often as a way in which to minimise the effect on participants of having a known researcher in their presence. This naturalist argument – that the social world is best observed where undisturbed by the researcher (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, pp.7) – responds to earlier criticisms levelled at the somewhat disruptive work of earlier positivist ethnographers, including Malinowski (Gonzalez *et al.*, 1995). The concept of complete abstraction of the researcher from the research setting, combined with an entirely covert data collection, is exemplified in a body of work that utilises CCTV cameras to observe participants without their knowledge. Smith (2007) provides an excellent example of this kind of study through the observation of both CCTV operators and those whom they themselves observe. Aside from any epistemological argument about the relative value (or otherwise) of a non-participatory ethnography, there is an arguably naturalistic purity to much of Smith's data, and the participants are not apparently harmed by the study, and Fielding (1982, in O'Reilly, 2009, pp.46) suggests that this type of covert participant observation is no more unethical than similar practices employed by businesses or the State in order to gain information about people. The issue of participant 'use' without consent, despite justifiable purpose and assurances of protection from harm, is still 'use' and remains difficult to fully resolve; Lincoln and Guba (1989, pp.228) warn that those who conduct research in this way risk devaluing their subjects by treating them entirely as objects. The degree to which a person's public behaviour and comments remain their property, or are divested into public property, is often a judgement made by researchers in the field. Although Lincoln and Guba (1989, pp.221) regard this approach as side-stepping the issue, if covert methods are to continue to be used a degree of pragmatism must prevail. Without it, valuable work on topics such as the hidden world of mental institutions (Rosenhan, 1973) or poverty associated with low-paid employment (Ehrenreich, 2001) could never have been conducted and our understanding of these socially important areas would have been much the worse for this.

In some circumstances the choice between being overt or covert may still be the choice between a researcher conducting research or not. Nancy Scheper-Huges (2004) conducted a multi-site ethnography on organ trafficking, which placed her at very real risk of physical harm, or even death, were she to be discovered. Her choice to adopt a covert approach was therefore as much about self-protection as it was the collection of valid data and she provides a robust account of the ethical considerations underpinning her choice to proceed. Naturally there is some degree of continuum between the overt-covert poles and it may be the case, as it was with Patricia Adler's 1985 ethnography on Southern Californian drug dealers, that some participants are cognisant of the researchers' intentions while others are not. As with Adler there may be distinct advantages associated with certain key informants or gatekeepers being aware of the researcher's role. By being selectively overt, those participants 'in the know' may be able to actively help to position the researcher into situations where they are more likely to obtain the data that they seek. However, there are two sides to this approach and once a participant realises that they are a participant then their behaviour may change and the quality of the data collected from them may be compromised; Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) refer to this change in participant behaviour as '*reactivity*'. In settings where being overt may either be likely to lead to poor quality data or place the researcher at risk of physical harm, the question arises as to whether it is more ethical to undertake covert research that produces valuable data and insight, or to adopt the view that covert research is roundly indefensible and forgo the opportunity for new knowledge that cannot be acquired overtly.

Intertwined with the question of overt versus covert research is the notion of informed consent. Informed consent also has its roots within the Declaration of Helsinki and underpins modern medical practice (Barrett & Coleman, 2005, pp.557). Within a research setting, the principle refers to the right for study participants to be fully informed of the nature and purpose of any research before being asked to agree to participate (Gromm, 2004, pp.378). In its statement of ethical practice, the British Sociological Association (2002) states that, '*As far as possible participation in sociological research should be based on the freely given informed consent of those studied. This implies a responsibility on the sociologist to explain in appropriate detail, and in terms meaningful to participants, what the research is about, who is undertaking and financing it, why it is being undertaken, and how it is to be disseminated and used.*' Although informed consent may be an important way in which to protect participants from potentially harmful elements of the research process, as well as incorporating a degree of fairness by rebalancing of the power relationship, it does come with some problems for ethnographers. Principally, informed consent is not possible within covert ethnographies and if a researcher is required to obtain *a priori* informed consent from participants then this essentially makes covert ethnography impossible, regardless of its broader merits. While informed consent may certainly be more practical outside of covert or strictly observational studies, it often still comes with potential difficulties, from the perspective of the researcher at least. Prime amongst these is the risk that individuals may not agree to participate or that the researcher may be barred from the research setting all together once their intentions are known. Work such as that by Fielding (1982) on the British National Front or by Adler (1985) on Californian drug dealers would have been impossible if they had required full and informed consent.

Ethnographies are concerned with observing, understanding and drawing meaning from human behaviour, and of relating this in a credible, rigorous and authentic way (Fetterman, 2010, pp.1). It is therefore necessary to accurately describe what occurs in the field but, as ethnographies should not be used as journalistic exposes, it is not necessary to specifically tie named individuals to any element of the narrative. In fact there are good reasons, beyond the ethical, that support participant anonymity in research, not least of which is the threat to future studies should participants feel that they might be exposed should they choose to take part (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007, pp.218). These points are particularly pertinent when the ethnography is to be published, especially if that publication is aimed outside the academic community, and sometimes merely disguising the details of the study is not sufficient. In their ethnography on the US community of 'Springdale' (actually Candor in New York State) Vidich and Bensman (1958) changed both the name of the study site and anonymized participants and yet both the location and several individuals were described in such detail that many were personally identifiable later on (Hopf, 2004, pp.388-389). The situation was made worse because the authors arrived at some rather uncomplimentary conclusions surrounding the exercise or power by non-elected individuals, which rather incensed those concerned (*ibid*).

Although many of these ethical considerations apply to all types of social research, ethnographies possess certain qualities which make them distinct. During the majority of ethnographies (but by no means all, for example see Smith (2007)), researchers often develop intimate and long-term relationships with at least some of those that they study. This potential for the development of social and/or emotional relationships generates numerous ethical concerns, which can be both complex and unpredictable. Further, as ethnographies are typically iterative-inductive, the research focus may change as new knowledge emerges over time. This means that ethical approval initially gained for the original line of inquiry may be somewhat stretched (or even broken) as the narrative or paradigm shifts in an effort to follow the data. Guidelines produced by Association of Social Anthropologists of the UK and the

Commonwealth (ASA) (ASA, 2011) outline the potential for ethical conflicts to arise throughout the research process, from the initial selection of the topic and population of interest, through to the final dissemination of findings and the uses to which these findings may be put. However, as with much research, this generates a potential juxtaposition between the need for new knowledge and the need to protect participants from the consequences of data collection and use. The tension between these two considerations arises because, while there is clearly an ethical obligation to participants, there may also be an ethical justification for inquiry in pursuit of the important unknown. There may also be difficulties associated with trying to apply prescriptive ethical codes, especially those rooted in biomedicine and agreed in advance of the research process, to the collection and use of data.

Hammersley and Atkinson (2007, pp.219-220) suggest four ethical perspectives that may be taken with respect to ethnographic research. The first, *ethical absolutism*, postulates the distinct objectivity that some studies should be considered ethically acceptable while other approaches should not. The second perspective, *ethical situationalism*, offers a more pragmatic approach in which the legitimacy of the research is balanced against the risk of harm and judgements are made with these factors in mind; this is how most ethics committees operate. The third paradigm is *ethical relativism* and focuses on the contextualisation of what is acceptable and what is not from the perspective of the participants. From a solely ethical position, this third approach would seem both to be fair and empowering; however, there is the risk that uninformed or hostile participants could make requests that might risk undermining the entire research process. The final perspective is referred to as *Machiavellianism* and relates to any research approach that gives no consideration to ethics (although not ethnographic, the Tuskegee syphilis study (Jones, 1981) would be an example of this). Although difficult to justify, there are researchers, such as Douglas (1976, in Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007, pp.220) who argue that such deception can lead to social good, adopting the view that the ends justify the ethical means.

Where informed consent is possible then the justification for failing to seek it becomes fraught with moral hazard and it is for this reason that most ethnographical work is subject to third-party ethical scrutiny. However, there remains the question as to who should ultimately decide on the ethical appropriateness of a research strategy and set the conditions that should apply to the collection and use of ethnographic data. For academics at least, ethical consent is traditionally required to be sought from academic ethics committees (many non-academic organisations have similar decision-making bodies, such as the National Research Ethics Service for the British NHS). Hammersley and Atkinson's concept of *ethical relativism*, on the other hand, would suggest that perhaps it should be the participants themselves who decide what is ethical and what is not through negotiation with the researcher. Naturally, it would be impossible to conduct a covert ethnography while seeking to embrace this paradigm, but for overt studies this approach would significantly empower participants to gain a further level of influence over the work. However, the idea that agreement should be considered to be a fixed and constant thing may also be over simplistic. Smythe and Murray (2000) suggest that the process of gaining ethical approval, like informed consent, should be on-going as well as negotiated, involving participants fully throughout the process and allowing them to adjust their level of consent as the narrative emerges.

The ethical position of the ethnographer is essentially one of power and privilege. The ethnographer chooses to enter the study site and chooses to live the life, albeit for a relatively short time in most cases, of those that they study. The participants give and the ethnographer takes, and this relationship places a moral duty on researchers to consider the wellbeing of

those that they study. The traditional idea of ethics committees setting the 'rules of engagement' for the ethnographer does provide a degree of protection for study participants but it does so in a paternalistic and colonial manner, deciding what is best for them but without them. Where a covert approach is considered to be the only way to address an important research question then this tactic may well be both valid and ethically defensible. However, adopting the paradigm of *ethical relativism*, wherever possible, through negotiated and on-going consent with participants should be considered the gold standard for ethnographies, and indeed for most types of social research. The cost may present itself in a subsequently more difficult research process but these difficulties are arguably made up for by a fairer and more transparent study that places participant wellbeing at its heart.

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