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New Directions in Qualitative Research Ethics

Editorial: Helen Kara and Lucy Pickering

This special issue brings together six papers examining ethical thinking and decision-making in practice throughout the research process, from learning about research ethics to fieldwork, to writing and beyond. The impetus for this collection, which sought to go beyond the more familiar ethical terrain of participant wellbeing and ethical regulation, emerged from discussion between the editors, who are the ethics leads for the UK and Ireland Social Research Association and the UK-based Association of Social Anthropologists of Great Britain and the Commonwealth. Being struck by the overarching focus on these two aspects of research ethics at the near exclusion of ethics 'beyond data collection', as we saw it, we sought to solicit contributions which could help take qualitative research ethics in new directions.

Discussion of issues around data collection is predominant in the ethics literature, probably because the main focus of formal ethical regulation is participant wellbeing. The literature regularly rehearses the issues of anonymity, confidentiality, and informed consent; recruitment, gatekeeping, and formal ethical regulation. IJSRM is no exception. An analysis of the 29 articles on ethics published between 2000–2015 showed that 22 of them addressed these topics, with only seven addressing other topics (three on ethics and secondary data; one each on the ethics of data analysis, theory, and life-writing; and an international comparison of ethics assessment). We wanted to find out more about ethical thinking and decision-making in practice. What are the ethical issues that researchers grapple with as they plan and design research, review literature, analyse data, present and disseminate findings? We were also interested in articles on ethical practice relating to wider themes, such as the ethics of open access, public engagement, or transformative research frameworks such as participatory or decolonising research.

The stranglehold of data collection and ethical regulation on the research ethics literature became evident as contributors struggled to respond to this brief. Despite our insistence that we were interested in other aspects of research, some articles still have an emphasis on data collection, participant wellbeing, and ethical regulation. Yet taken together, the articles in this special issue push beyond the usual preoccupations to explore ethics throughout the research process, from teaching ethics to presenting research findings.

The research ethics literature is also heavily biased towards qualitative research, and this special issue is no exception. However, we would contend that many of the points made are as applicable to quantitative and mixed-methods research as well as the purely qualitative. Quantitative and mixed-methods researchers also have to learn about ethics, perhaps work internationally, and certainly present their findings. They may also be involved in research with, and need sensitivity to the issues of, marginalised groups.

Martin Tolich from the University of Otago in New Zealand has worked with five students to collaboratively author a piece on teaching research ethics. This piece explores not only ways of teaching research ethics, but also ways of learning, creatively combining the voices of both teachers and learners on a course on

qualitative research ethics. Tolich's approach has the potential to inspire ethics educators everywhere with the method adopted or adapted for teaching new ethics students around the world.

We had commissioned an article on reflexivity and ethics in practice by co-authors from the Pacific Rim and the southern hemisphere, but unfortunately we learned at a late stage that they were unable to deliver the article. We are grateful to Matt Dawson from the University of Glasgow, and his colleagues from the University of Sussex in the UK, for filling the gap with a thought-provoking article on the potential role of archival data in supporting the ethical recruitment of asexual participants. This is a very useful account of an innovative approach to recruitment. It offers a method that could be adapted for use in many other contexts, while simultaneously raising broader questions about recruiting hard-to-reach identity groups.

Reetta Mietola and her colleagues from the University of Helsinki in Finland have considered ways of conducting ethical research with participants who have profound intellectual and multiple disabilities (PIMD). They argue that people with PIMD are routinely excluded even from disability studies because of the level of knowledge, skill and time required to communicate with them, yet they have every right to participate in research. Mietola et al argue, persuasively, that it is the responsibility of researchers working in this area to identify, utilise and critically reflect on ways to include people with PIMD in research, and present working with people with PIMD as a case study through which to examine the roles of gatekeepers, reflexive practice and patience in ethical qualitative research more broadly.

Gillian Fletcher, from La Trobe University in Australia, has written a fascinating account of the limitations of ethical regulation for international research/research across international borders, and how she managed adhering to both the letter and spirit of ethical regulation, which were sometimes in tension, having been written in one society (Australia) but being applied in another (Myanmar). Through a focus on the power dynamics within interviews, Fletcher develops the concept of 'critical languaging', i.e. the process by which meaning is made, knowledge developed, and experience shaped through language. She provides a powerful case study demonstrating one way to reconcile the sometimes conflicting demands of ethical regulation and fieldwork in international research.

Anne Shordike from Eastern Kentucky University in the USA, and her colleagues from Auckland University of Technology in New Zealand and Chiang Mai University in Thailand, have reflexively explored the ethical implications of analysis and writing, and specifically analysis and writing in international, cross-cultural collaborative research. Through their discussion of this process from a 10-year international research collaboration studying the celebratory food-related occupations of older women in Thailand, New Zealand, and the USA, they shine a light on complex and challenging relationships, power dynamics and linguistic barriers of longitudinal and cross-cultural research which remain frequently overlooked within current literature on research ethics.

Lucy Pickering from the University of Glasgow and Helen Kara, a UK-based independent researcher, provide a review of literature relating to the ethics of presenting research findings. This topic, too, is rarely discussed in the literature. The

increasing use of creative methods, and the growing importance of presenting findings beyond the narrow confines of the academy, require ever more careful decision-making by researchers about which methods to use, why and for whom. This review includes reflexive accounts of using both 'traditional' and more creative methods to present findings to academics, study participants, stakeholders and the public. Unlike much of the research methods literature, these accounts include both successful and unsuccessful efforts. These candid, reflexive accounts of motives, successes and failures open up a space for meaningful ethical debate around research presentation.

One common thread that runs through all these articles is that none of them offer smooth narratives of seamless research. They show researchers trying to do things that have not been done before; sometimes with more and sometimes with less success, but always reflecting on and learning from their practice. The articles are complemented by Lito Tsitsou's considered and helpful review essay of three books published in the second half of 2015, all of which focus on the links between research and social justice. We would also like to pay tribute to the reviewers of the articles in this special issue, all of whom made very useful contributions and some of whom did far more work than anyone could expect to help improve the articles you are about to read. They were: Linda Bell, Bob Burgess, Graham Crow, Salvatore Di Martino, Martyn Hammersley, Sylvia Meichsner, Anna Rader, Chrissie Rogers, Michaela Rogers, Ben Saunders, Kevin Walby, and Shaoying Zhang.

Academic journals are designed to be read by individuals. Individual researchers have a great deal of responsibility for managing ethical dilemmas and, in this era of complexity, trilemmas and quadrilemmas too. We believe that this special issue has a lot of help to offer. However, there are of course limitations. First, we have focused on research ethics, not research integrity. Placing the burden of responsibility squarely on individual researchers, as the virtue ethicists would have us do, does not seem entirely appropriate. This is because such a view overlooks the sorts of organisational, economic, societal and other structures discussed by our contributors. These structures shape ethical – and, sometimes, unethical – practice throughout the entire research process. Our focus on ethics rather than integrity also means this special issue does not cover topics such as research misconduct, misuse of research funds, or publication bias: topics that we know are heavily influenced by structural faultlines that are beyond researchers' control. Second, in a related point, despite our best efforts, the bulk of the content of this special issue, and its overarching paradigm, are effectively Euro-Western. It behoves us to remember that Euro-Western researchers do not have the whole story of, or the monopoly on, research ethics. For more of the story, we need to look to scholars such as Bagele Chilisa in Botswana (Chilisa 2012), Raewyn Connell in Australia (Connell 2007), Eduardo Bonilla-Silva and Tukufu Zuberi in America (Bonilla-Silva and Zuberi 2008), and Fiona Cram in New Zealand (Cram, Chilisa and Mertens 2013). The work of scholars such as these is helping to identify and define other ethical paradigms in ways that are important for all Euro-Western researchers to recognise and respond to in this time of globalisation.

Bonilla-Silva, E. and Zuberi, T. (2008) Toward a definition of white logic and white methods. In Zuberi, T. and Bonilla-Silva, E. (eds) *White logic, white methods: racism and methodology* 3-27. Lanham, MA: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc.

Chilisa B (2012) *Indigenous Research Methodologies*. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage.

Connell R (2007) *Southern Theory*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.

Cram F, Chilisa B and Mertens D (2013) The journey begins. In Mertens D, Cram F and Chilisa B (eds) *Indigenous Pathways Into Social Research: Voices of a New Generation*, pp 11-40. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press.