



Ethical dilemmas in the field: the complex nature of doing education ethnography

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To cite this article: Barbara Dennis (2010) Ethical dilemmas in the field: the complex nature of doing education ethnography, *Ethnography and Education*, 5:2, 123-127, DOI: [10.1080/17457823.2010.493391](https://doi.org/10.1080/17457823.2010.493391)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17457823.2010.493391>



Published online: 26 Jul 2010.



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GUEST INTRODUCTION

Ethical dilemmas in the field: the complex nature of doing education ethnography

Education ethnographers face the question of ethics in at least two general domains – an academic institutional domain and the domain of interactions with our participants. The academic institutional domain is monitored largely through accountability to Institutional Review Boards (IRB) with somewhat indirect monitoring through the peer-review process. This institutional domain is garnering a burgeoning interest amongst education researchers, particularly with respect to discussing the practices and effectiveness of IRB for qualitative inquiry. Education ethnographers continue to face hurdles in satisfying and attending to the basic standardised ethical expectations outlined by their institutions' boards. IRB ethical requirements for ethical research provide important limits and guidelines for the protection of human subjects in the research, though often the spirit of the ethical intentions is not well manifested in the rigidity of IRB guidelines. Many more ethical questions emerge than one could address through formal institutional reviews and even IRB aspects become more nuanced in the field. Education ethnographers place themselves in the practical domain of everyday life where the course of one's ethical actions is much more interdependently and situationally forged not prior to the conduct of research, but as a part of the process itself. Many more ethical questions emerge than one could address through formal institutional reviews. Behaving ethically in the field is a complex, dynamic endeavour for education ethnographers. The articles in this special issue take up ethical questions by looking at concrete practices and the challenges and opportunities that arise when researchers explore what it means to behave ethically in the field when *doing* education ethnography.

Establishing what one ought to have done and what lessons have been learned requires reflection on the part of the researcher. As will be obvious from the papers, such reflection is neither independent of IRB expectations nor fully satisfied by them. Each of the authors uses the words reflection or reflexivity to talk about how an ethnographer takes an ethical position within and in their own field practices. Each of the papers exemplify a reflective process illustrating the use of dilemmas, questions, challenges and thinking through the strategies to resolve them in the best interests of affected participants. A second feature of this issue is the way dialogue/communication and caring in situational interactions with participants structures the ethics on the ground. We have little in the literature that explores, in concrete ways, how ethical reflection and reflexivity, is identified in the situated, interactive context of research practice. However, from these articles we learn that there are communicative and dialogic principles which structure ethnographers' ability to judge their own research activities as ethical or in need of some ethical guidance.

Each of the papers reports on studies where the researchers entered their field with ethical arrangements that accorded with IRB standards and principles but the reality showed that there were problems enacting them as Dennis Beach and Anita Eriksson show in the first article. Theoretical approaches constitute an *a priori* commitment, but starting commitments that include social goals affect the ethics as Pat Sikes, in the next paper, shows as she overtly attempts to counter master narratives about social phenomena which serve to unfairly disadvantage others, in this case teachers involved in teacher–student sexual relations. Researchers sometimes become entangled in ethical dilemmas that permeate the ethnographic site itself and they draw the researcher into the ethical complications already at play amongst participants in their own lives as the next paper by Andrew Barbour discusses. Ethnography is interactive and participatory and as a result researchers often develop close relationships with their participants, but they are intrinsically mired with complications concerning insider and outsider issues as Joan Parker Webster and Theresa Arevgaq John show in their reflections of their research work with Native Alaskan peoples. Conflicts and problems often arise from the frameworks established by the ethical review but the situated reality, particularly around the practice of obtaining consent, is often problematic as is shown in the papers by Martin Levinson and by Deborah Romero and Dana Walker. Levinson found that his long-term consent engagement with Romani Gypsies resulted in an evolving, somewhat tacit shift in the agreements – a shift not specifically foreseeable at the outset. Moreover, he illustrates other ethical dilemmas concerning the difficulties in protecting individuals from harm when their interests differ. Romero and Walker complete our special issue by showing how consent involving participatory and multimedia research leads to problems concerning representation and how they resolved them.

Across these papers, we are urged to use reflective practices as a way of thinking through ethical practices. Our analysis is that it is crucial to continually reconsider the situation in the light of researcher experience, a form of position-taking which includes a constant review of differing perspectives of the experience of fieldwork, a constant dialogue and interaction with their research site. Further, these deliberative ethical arrangements have to be explicit and part of a communicatively achieved consensus, in which respondents recognise that researcher action meets with either good or at least benign benefits for all who are affected by the research and affords equal opportunity for participants to engage in the communicative activities free from fear of misrepresentation and exacerbating local tensions. Continual deliberation is at the heart of an ethnographer's ethical practice.

The papers in this special issue move from a macro perspective of ethics involving consideration and critique of current typologies (Beach and Eriksson) to the micro focusing on sensitive areas of research (Sikes) and on to a consideration of the dilemmas faced by researchers (Barbour). This is followed by the construction of a possible solution to the insider/outsider issue through the construction of a specific space (Parker Webster and John) and more problematisation of the difficult issue of the study of differentiated participants within local groups and communities (Levinson) and lastly we focus on the ethical issue of representation (Romero and Walker).

Dennis Beach and Anita Eriksson examined the approaches to research ethics taken by Scandinavian education ethnographers, looking particularly at the

connection between espoused theoretical approaches and the corresponding descriptions of ethics offered by ethnographers. They conversed with experienced ethnographers and reviewed theses, books and articles written by Scandinavian researchers. Their insights set the stage for the remaining papers through which authors reflect on their own ethics in the context of doing education ethnography. They point out that ethnographers locate ethical decisions as internal to the research process itself, linked to the everyday interactions and ongoing research activities, rather than as a set of principles established external and prior to the conduct of the research. They also note, in congruence with other findings, that the researchers' worldviews and beliefs influenced an interpretation of what was considered ethical. The authors identify their own theoretical commitments and provide details regarding how their reflections on ethics are linked to those commitments. They use their findings to complicate the descriptions of ethics as primarily about 'fidelity' to persons.

Pat Sikes has been involved in the study of sex offences and sexual engagement between teachers and pupils. Her work locates the margins of a 'master narrative' on child sexual abuse which assumes that even an interest in garnering the stories of adult participants is tainted and suspect. She argues that it is eminently ethical to raise questions about the role these master narratives play in our social lives. She has cultivated a research agenda that focuses on representation of the silenced, understudied experiences and marginalised voices constrained by this master narrative. Her arguments compel education ethnographers to consider the extent to which their very choice of research topic is an ethical one. She also reflects on particular ethical concerns that have been raised about her studies into teacher–pupil sexual behaviour. Readers will see that she is drawing on both her understanding of the general expectations of ethical codes, while locating the nuances and inadequacies of those codes in the context of her research into a 'taboo' topic.

Andrew Barbour did not expect to face many ethical challenges in his study of digitalised classrooms in a further education programme in England, however, while in the field, he encountered actions that both he, and a subset of his participants, considered to be unethical. He was posed with an ethical problem when he found that instructors were not behaving in ways that befitted their responsibilities. His paper explicates the possibility that doing education ethnography may put researchers into contact with unethical behaviour that is part of the everyday lives of participants. His encounter was complicated for him because of conflicting expectations across the various roles he played in relation to the participants. He was a friendly colleague of the instructors, having known them prior to carrying out this research. He was a concerned educator in relation to the students and he was a researcher who had taken up the responsibility to do no harm to participants, including the instructors. Barbour primarily conceptualises ethics as an interlocking set of responsibilities, which are made increasingly problematic when the various role-related responsibilities are not harmonious. His reflections on this experience will help other education ethnographers to anticipate and reflect upon possible unethical behaviour amongst participants and the significance for the research and the researcher.

Joan Parker Webster and Theresa Arevgaq John write about their experiences of working together with Native Alaskan communities with the latter being the insider – indigenous – and the former the outsider – academic. The historical

context, in which they worked, of university-based researching local communities is riddled with unethical, exploitative research agendas and projects. By dialoguing with one another about their separate and intersecting experiences in a shared research project, they were able to challenge the binary conception of insider and outsider dynamics. They propose a continual and dynamic relation which is communicative in nature and not, strictly speaking, about simple membership. The insider and outsider dynamics of doing education ethnography have a large literature, but Parker Webster and John progress what has become stale and clichéd treatment of those dynamics. They link these dynamics to research ethics in ways that are likely to resonate with the experiences of many education ethnographers.

Martin Levinson's paper is a passionate reflection on some of the ethical 'fault lines' he encountered through his years of doing ethnographic work with Romani Gypsy groups in England. He critiques the depiction of participant communities as homogeneous and argues that diverse communities include a range of interests and values to which researchers must be held accountable. He notes interestingly that ethical issues emerge as a result of competing interests and values within the community itself and that this is a major resource for the ethnographer. A consequence of this recognition is the argument that behaving ethically in the field requires increased honesty at all levels. Levinson's own experiences with honesty, both with himself and with those with whom he was ethnographically engaged had major benefits in that participants were more fully included in the research – engaging in interpretation and benefiting from the dissemination of findings.

The same point is made in a different way by Deborah Romero and Dana Walker who reflect on the ethics of representation and participation in ethnographic studies of youth multimedia collaborations. They describe the way assumptions about knowledge and what counts as knowledge informs how ethics are conceptualised and provide a discussion of what this might mean for a post-text-based inquiry. They illustrate how new forms of representation, particularly audio-visual forms of representation, create new ethical dilemmas for education ethnographers and they developed a multifaceted way of thinking through what it means to ethically represent youth engaged in multimodal projects. Their research focused on how textual representation of others is disembodied and they also focused on the consequences of engaging youth in the representation of the research. Their explorations bring to light the ethical promise and compromise of using digitised multimodal media in research with youth. Romero and Walker's questions are basic for they examine the ethics of both re-presenting and substantiating research claims.

The title of this special issue suggests that the papers will examine the ethical complications of *doing* education ethnography. When one conducts ethnographies with communities who are at risk in some social way, ethical commitments must reflect a special concern for the unique and potentially harmful effects of the research for vulnerable peoples and their communities. Additional complications involve the histories of relations between researchers and communities of people and an ethnographer's engagement in the field will produce, of itself, ethical complications. By closely examining the ethics which emerge on the ground through ethnographic practice, researchers can begin to understand the role of interactions and dialogue in

both the assessment of ethics and the resolution of ethical questions. Further links, in future, could be established to integrate the interactive/dialogic understanding of ethics with the general principles and guidelines promoted by IRB.

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