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WHOSE DATA ARE THEY? ETHICS IN CASE STUDY RESEARCH

The Nature of Ethics – A Situated Practice

Ethics is how we behave or should behave in relation to the people with whom we interact. This means establishing throughout the research process a relationship with participants that respects human dignity and integrity and in which people can trust. Participants need to know they are being treated fairly and that if difficult issues arise, these can be discussed and resolved, meeting both participants' concerns and the researcher's obligation to produce public knowledge.

Ethics is also a situated practice inextricably connected with politics and requiring deliberation of many factors – social, personal and political – in the precise socio-political context of a specific case. This is not always a straightforward process, as House (1993) has pointed out:

Ethical principles are abstract, and it is not always obvious how they should be applied in given situations ... Some of the most intractable ethical problems arise from conflicts among principles and the necessity of trading off one against the other. The balancing of such principles in concrete situations is the ultimate ethical act. (p. 168)

In this chapter I discuss some 'trade offs' I made in specific cases. But first I want to explore some general principles. I start with the fundamental principle of ethics – to do no harm, the nature of the dilemmas that often confront us in the field, and ethical issues we need to consider in designing case study research. I then explore principles and procedures for the conduct of the research within a democratic approach to ethics and offer some reflections on these in particular instances to illustrate my situated ethical practice.

Fundamental Principle – Doing No Harm

The fundamental ethical principle in research, whatever methodology you choose, is to 'do no harm'. This seems uncontroversial, and something with which we would all agree. However, it is not a straightforward concept. What constitutes harm is interpreted differently by different people and may be perceived differently by them at

different times. These differences can result in pressure to adopt procedures and methods that are not always relevant to the research in question or failure to recognize the potential harm that may result from use of particular methodologies.

Our focus is case study research where people and their experiences are closely described and interpreted in unique contexts.¹ We need to establish in any particular context what 'doing no harm' means to individuals, to review this in the process of gaining data and be particularly mindful when reporting. In the process, when you have developed a relationship of trust over time, participants often speak quite openly about their experience, and may inadvertently reveal something they did not intend. You need to be sure that you do not unintentionally misuse this information and exploit a person's openness or vulnerability.

When it comes to reporting, participants should not feel let down, 'at risk', or disempowered when they see in written text experiences closely shared with you in the field. On seeing how they are portrayed in the written case, participants, even if anonymized, may take a different, possibly more negative, view of themselves from the one they initially held. We cannot control for such a change of view but awareness of the potential harm this could invoke strengthens the argument for an ethical stance that places high priority on the primacy of relationships in specific contexts (Christians, 2003; Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 1984) rather than individual rights and universal principles. Where trust and respect have been created through establishing good relationships, difficulties that arise can be resolved cooperatively through mutual understanding and dialogue (Etherington, 2007; Schwandt, 1998; Torres and Preskill, 1999).

This concept of relational ethics helps us to see the principle of 'doing no harm' in a new light. While appreciating the ethical intent underlying this principle, I have often wished it was more positively stated to acknowledge an intention to research *with* people rather than avoid doing harm *to* them. Focusing too much on 'doing no harm' may prevent us seeing the potential in the research process to contribute positively to participants' experience – an aspiration that underpins the ethical stance outlined in this chapter.

Ethical Dilemmas

Ethical issues in the field, more often than not, present themselves as dilemmas – where two or more courses of action seem irreconcilable yet both seem to be right (House, 1993; Russell, 1993), and we have to make a judgement which to pursue. This will be guided by the ethical principles we have adopted and the ethical theory or theories we appeal to concerning how we relate to people in social and professional life. But it is our professional ethical judgement at the end of the day. In reaching a decision, where there is a conflict of principles, a number of questions run through my mind. In most cases this comes down to have I been fair?

- Who gains and who loses by the release of this information?
- What are the consequences for whom of each course of action?

- Which course of action is more justifiable in the context of the whole case?
- Will that person's career be ruined if I include that data or is it only a fear?
- Has the way I have reported data changed the participant's meaning?
- Have I fairly represented all legitimate interests?
- Have I balanced the authority of the most powerful stakeholders with the authority of knowledge of the practitioner?
- Have I ensured that the power I have, simply because I construct the case, has not diminished participants' perspectives?
- Can I justify my decision in a way all participants and stakeholders will accept?

In the following example, the dilemma I faced was how to maintain the integrity of the case (reporting what actually transpired) while at the same time being responsive to the concerns of the Director of a project who feared his career might be at risk when the report became public.

Example: An Ethical Dilemma

This example is from an evaluation case study of an innovative bilingual project in the UK funded by a local education authority.² The early history of the project had been problematic and there were expressed difficulties between the Director and the Manager who had appointed him. This led eventually to the Manager requesting the Director's resignation, believing that he was not doing an adequate job in the way the authority had envisaged the project. The dilemma arose when the Director objected to the way his potential dismissal was described in the interim case study report, claiming that his future career would be at risk if this became public. Yet this information and the ripple effects it created in the project were crucial to how the project was being implemented in schools, an observation with which the Director agreed.

My dilemma was whether to excise all reference to the Director's potential dismissal and remove his anxiety about the future (thereby failing to report accurately on the project) or whether to seek with him a way to report the issue in a way that *he* could see no harm. While empathizing with his concern over the potential threat to his future career, I negotiated how we might best present the issue which resulted in his resignation being sought. Together we found a way to modify the language of the narrative documenting the event, resulting in a slight overall change of tone. This did not alter the data and the importance of recording the issue, merely the way in which it was reported. Language is not value-free, of course, and the modification may have had other consequences, but it did lessen the potential adverse effect for the Director when the report became public.

Ethical Issues in Designing Case Study Research

Many ethical conflicts, according to a study by Morris and Cohn (1993), arise at the reporting stage, as in the case above. But ethical dilemmas also occur in the process. It

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may not be possible to anticipate precisely what these might be, but thinking through what ethical issues may arise gives you a head start. It may also be necessary to do this for your research proposal to be accepted by an ethical committee. Case Study Memo 13 outlines ethical issues to think about in designing research related to your specific topic, methodology, procedures, conduct and reporting.

Case Study Memo 13 Ethical Issues in Research Design

- Consider at the outset what ethical issues might arise in your particular case.
- Think through, in one or two instances, how these would be addressed.
- Be conscious of what kind of ethics you personally aspire to and what values you hold in relation to the research topic.
- Become familiar with any legislation that exists related to your topic and act within it.
- Think through the ethical implications of the methodology you choose – for example, does it respect participants' rights? Does it balance this with the responsibility for generating public knowledge? Does it provide scope for participants' ethical development if this is part of your purpose? Does it honour those who are less enfranchised? Does it respect cultural, gender and age differences?
- Pilot any potential methodological tools (for example, questionnaire or interview schedule) to ensure that questions are unobtrusive (though do not equate this with non-challenging) and culture-, gender- and age-sensitive.
- Think through how you might report individuals' in-depth experiences and what rights you will give them to edit or expand their data.
- Decide what position you will adopt on informed consent, confidentiality and anonymity, control over data, access before publication. Decisions on these issues will to some extent be determined by the choice you make as to whether you prefer to be guided by an ethical tradition that favours universal laws and principles, one that is more relational and situation-specific, or one that is democratic in intent and participatory in process and outcome.
- Draw up a brief set of ethical procedures to guide data collection and dissemination. Indicate how you will maintain respect for persons while making research public knowledge. Include a consideration of issues such as non-coercion (do you require an opt-out statement?), potential benefit to participants (what might they gain from this research? what might they learn?), and potential harm (what might they lose? what might be the consequences and for whom?).
- These procedures are important if you have to submit your research proposal to an ethical committee. It will not be possible to encapsulate all the ethical dilemmas that may arise, but it will demonstrate that you have thought about the issues and have some reference points for acting ethically in the field (Piper and Simons, 2005).

Beyond Ethical Committees and Institutional Review Boards

Often the first step in establishing an ethical approach to research is your journey through an ethical committee or Institutional Review Board (IRB), as they are termed in the USA. In recent years there has been an intensification of these institutional gatekeepers for social research. These committees seek oversight of research proposals before researchers enter the field, often requiring lengthy informed consent procedures and explanations of methodology. If you are conducting research in an institution, you need to follow such institutional procedures. However, these are limited as an *ethical process* for two reasons.

First, they are prospective only, outlining what should happen or what you intend to do. Rarely are they followed up by those who grant institutional permission to examine if they have been followed in the field. Secondly, they do not address the inherent nature of the ethical act itself, which is relational and field-based. It is not possible to govern ethical behaviour through forms and procedures. While principles and procedures are necessary to guide your actions in the field, these are just that – a guide to action.

It is important to be aware that in recent times there has been a tendency for some ethical committees or IRBs to over-step the boundaries of their legitimate role of ensuring human subjects' rights are protected towards controlling the kind of methodology that is allowed (Lincoln and Tierney, 2004; see also see Janesick, 2002; Simons, 2006). This can be quite direct in actually stipulating the methods researchers should use, or it may be demonstrated through favouring certain methodologies over others. In such a context, you may have more of a struggle to get your research accepted. This places even more of a burden on you to thoroughly justify your choice of methodology and to indicate that it may change in emergent designs. If it is challenged unduly or another methodology is prescribed by an ethical committee, seek your supervisor's help to argue why the approach you have chosen is most appropriate for your research topic.

Many research proposals include a general statement to the effect that the research will conform to the ethical principles of a professional association such as the British Educational Research Association (BERA) or the American Evaluation Association (AEA). To get closer to practice, I suggest you go further and spell out (through precise ethical procedures) how you will *act* in the field in relation to the people engaged in your research. Such procedures will still be prospective but they are a step closer to action.

Ethics in the Field

Establishing and maintaining trust

Once in the field, the first task is to build relationships and establish conditions of trust with the people you are studying. Trust is essential to good field relations but it cannot be assumed; it has to be created in the process of conducting the research. Formal procedures are necessary to this end, as Nias (1981) has persuasively argued, '... formal

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procedures and the interpersonal knowledge which they promote are not the anti-thesis of “trust” but the necessary conditions for it. Moreover they act upon each other. Formal procedures facilitate the growth of trust and help to ensure its survival’ (p. 22).

Having created trust, you need to nurture it throughout by adhering consistently to procedures and scrutinizing your ethical judgements in the field. One learns from case to case. Yet each case is different and may need a unique response. Questions it may be helpful to ask include:

- Are my questions in interview sensitive, not too intrusive?
- When observing, am I invading participants’ privacy? Or attributing motivations?
- When taking photographs or filming, do I have informed consent? What will be the likely reaction when participants see the photographs or video?
- Have I recorded participants’ perspectives accurately?
- Am I documenting participants’ stories or confirming my previous theories?
- Am I honouring participants’ requests to keep information confidential?
- Have my biases led to unfair selection of data or interpretation?
- Have I portrayed participants fairly in reporting?

Ethical principles and procedures – a democratic stance

In my own practice I have been guided by a set of ethical principles and procedures that stem from a democratic ethic underpinned by principles of fairness, justice and equity. This was explained to some extent in Chapter 2, in discussing the role I prefer to adopt in case study research to promote engagement of participants and informed action for stakeholders and audiences. It renders problematic the question of who owns the data and draws attention to the need to aspire to a more equitable relationship between the researcher and the researched and the audiences the research seeks to inform. MacDonald and Walker (1975) began to address this issue over thirty years ago in a paper on the concept of case study in educational research by raising the following questions:

- To whose needs and interests does the research respond?
- Who owns the data (the researcher, the subject, the sponsor)?
- Who has access to the data (who is excluded or denied)?
- What is the status of the researcher’s interpretations of events, *vis-à-vis* the interpretations made by others (who decides who tells the truth)?
- What obligations does the researcher owe to his [*sic*] subjects, his sponsors, his fellow professionals, others?
- Who is the research for? (p. 6).

Implicit in these questions is a concern not only for respecting individuals who contribute to the research but also those, beyond the case, who have a legitimate ‘right to know’. MacDonald (1976) went on to articulate the political implications of this research stance in his model of democratic evaluation, a term he used to distinguish this practice from autocratic evaluation or bureaucratic evaluation models in currency at the time.³

What is relevant for this particular chapter is the way in which ethical principles are derived from the central aspiration of the democratic model – how to find an appropriate balance in research between the individual's right to privacy and the public's right to know. This aspiration is translated into a set of power-equalizing principles and procedures for conducting the research that:

- accords equal treatment to individuals and ideas;
- establishes a flow of information that is independent of hierarchical or powerful interests;
- maintains that no one has the right to exclude particular interests and values.

The actual ethical procedures, an example of which is given in Case Study Memo 14, centre on the interrelationship between the three key concepts in the democratic model – *confidentiality*, *negotiation* and *accessibility*. Confidentiality helps to secure the trust and conditions necessary to gather honest, valid data. Negotiation is the means through which data that are not harmful to individuals can be released for public knowledge. Accessibility refers to the need to communicate to audiences beyond the case in ways they understand.

Case Study Memo 14 **Ethical Procedures for the Conduct of Case Study Research**

- The purpose of the study and the anticipated audiences for the information will be made clear at the outset.
- Permission will be sought for access to documents, files and correspondence; these will not be copied without explicit permission.
- Informed consent will be sought for each person interviewed and observed; this includes pupils in schools, even if the school decides to seek permission from parents.
- Interviews will be conducted on the principle of confidentiality.
- Use of data will be negotiated with participants on specific criteria (for example, accuracy, fairness and relevance) and within specific timelines.
- Individuals will be asked at the end of the interview for permission to use the interview and if anything needs to be excluded.
- Interviewees will have an opportunity to see how their comments or observations about them are reported in the context of the case study and to edit and add in, if necessary, criteria of accuracy, relevance, fairness.
- No data will be reported that a participant asks to be kept in confidence.
- Direct quotation and attributed judgements in reports require the explicit permission of the respondent.
- Non-attributable information used in summarizing findings across projects or in raising general issues about the programme does not require specific clearance.

- Pseudonyms will be used in reporting individuals and institutions; staff may be referred to in role. While this does not guarantee anonymity, it reduces the likelihood that individuals and institutions will be identifiable.
- Where it is not possible to anonymize (that is, with public figures or particular institutions), clearance will be sought for comments that may be identifiable.
- Where difficulties arise, all parties should be open to apology and be prepared to negotiate an agreed way forward.

While several of these procedures – for example, gaining access, informed consent, pre-publication access – are familiar in many forms of social research, the democratic perspective gives more weight to:

- ongoing informed consent – checking throughout what is valid consent in the specific context with particular individuals and renegotiating if necessary;
- involving participants in identifying and refining issues, having a voice in how they are represented, and checking interpretations;
- negotiation of what data becomes public on criteria of accuracy, relevance and fairness, with several opportunities for participants to edit or add to how they and their views are re-presented in the case;
- engaging in ‘deliberative dialogue’ (House and Howe, 1999) with stakeholders on the focus and use of the research to maximize its utility.

For examples of exact procedures used in different case study projects see Simons (1984, 1989).

Reflections on Principles and Procedures

Informed consent

The traditional way in which informed consent is sought is through a form participants are asked to sign prior to being interviewed or taking part in the research. While it is important to follow this procedure if sought by an ethical committee, it is insufficient for good ethical practice and inappropriate in certain contexts. It is, at the very least, provisional. There are four specific issues here.

The first is how to provide sufficient information so that participants are adequately informed. This is particularly problematic in emergent designs, where knowledge of which issues will be studied is not always known at the outset. The second is the possible need to revisit the concept of informed consent and if necessary secure it again in relation to difficult issues that may arise in the field. This is sometime called *process consent* (Ramcharan and Cutcliffe, 2001), *rolling consent* (Simons, 2005), or *provisional consent* (Flewitt, 2005a). The third is to be aware that informed consent should be obtained from each person you seek to interview. Do not accept that informed

consent given by a major stakeholder or gatekeeper of an institution, for instance, holds true for all participants in that institution.

Finally, it is important not to assume that the same approach to informed consent suits all circumstances. You need to decide in each case what constitutes valid consent. For example, gaining consent in certain indigenous cultures may mean meeting with the elders and deliberating collectively what will meet the values of the particular community. In the NHMRC (2003) guidelines, for example, the values of reciprocity, survival and protection, spirit and integrity underpin their cultural norms and specific ethical procedures. It may also mean agreeing the methodology to be used – questionnaires may not be appropriate, for instance, where an oral tradition is the norm⁴ (Smith, 1997 cited in Mataira, 2003: 6) – offering payment for information given, and deciding how any profits would be shared (NHMRC, 2003).

Informed consent with children and other vulnerable groups

In a school setting it is often assumed that consent by the school (acting *in loco parentis*) or parental consent constitutes informed consent for children to be interviewed or observed. Where large samples are sought, this is common practice and certainly facilitates the process of the research. In case study research where fewer children are likely to be involved, this falls short, for me, of valid informed consent. I think we should aspire to treat children and young people in our cases according to the same ethical precepts we adopt in research with adults – do no harm, respect participants, do not lie, treat people fairly, gain informed consent, allow the right to withdraw.

The age of the children may make a difference, though we should be wary about making assumptions about what age is appropriate. Children can speak for themselves, sometimes most definitely. From quite an early age they are capable of giving informed consent and showing, verbally or non-verbally, when they are withdrawing consent. (See Alderson and Morrow (2003) for an overview of ethical and legal considerations in research with children and Flewitt (2005a) for an account of ethics in research with very young children.)

The same is true for other ‘vulnerable’ groups who may have less control over their circumstances, such as those who have a terminal or degenerative illness. Participants should still be asked, but making sure that the consent was informed may mean assessing with a carer what would constitute informed consent for the specific individual at a specific time. It might also be necessary to keep checking throughout the research (daily if necessary) to see whether the participant is still giving agreement – based upon the careful recording of that person’s capacity and well-being and monitoring of the conditions under which process consent is given.

Giving voice and participant control

One reason for giving participants opportunities to edit their comments in the context in which they are reported is the power of the social dynamic of the in-depth interview. Frequently, interviewees have commented ‘I cannot understand why I am

telling you this', 'I don't know why I tell that man [speaking of a colleague] the things I do', 'I wished I had not said that'. Giving participants control over what information about them becomes public is a useful procedure in this context, though it may not be the only one to ensure no harm. There are still decisions you need to make about how to report these comments fairly.

Individuals also sometimes say things that *you* wish they had not said. This is more tricky. What do you do, for instance, with damaging comments interviewees make about colleagues which affect the research but which, if reported, would raise problems for all concerned? On reflection, interviewees might edit their judgements so they do no harm to others or to themselves, but if they do not, it is up to your professional judgement whether or not to include this material.

The dilemma here is that if you exclude the data you counteract the principle that individuals should have control over how information about them is used. It might also be seen as patronizing, even if it protects individuals from the approbation of others or repercussions on themselves. If you include it, you run the risk of causing harm to some individuals and disrupting the study. The issue here is not simply one for the individual. If the publishing of some data reflects badly upon an individual and it would create undue disturbance in the research setting, it may be wise both for the protection of that individual and the continuance of the study to omit those data.

Participant control over observations

Giving participants opportunity to check how they are portrayed in reports that are interpretative (based upon observations, interviews and documents) is not as straightforward as giving them an opportunity to respond to their interview scripts, but it is equally important. Observations are made by you, whether corroborated or not by interviews with the individual. You have added a layer of meaning in writing a portrayal. Given the risk of attributing motivations to a person from something observed and the power of the narrative in interpretation, it is essential to offer individuals an opportunity to see and respond to how observations of them are presented in case study reports.

Participant control in different cultures

The issue of giving voice and participant control may have different implications in cultures different from our own. In the context of researching a school set up by black workers in South Africa in a period in transition from apartheid, McKeever (2000) draws our attention to two important ethical considerations: first, that owning data was a collective not an individual concern; and secondly, that the primary audience for the research was not an academic one but the community itself.

Procedures she adopted to respect these differences included cataloguing documents as Workers' School documents and producing two texts, one for the university in her name and another, co-authored with the workers, to be sold for their benefit. The point she is making here is that the knowledge produced from the data owned by 'the people' in her story should not only be 'accessible' to, but also 'attributed' to them and, if profits are to be gained from such research, they should have a share, if not the sole rights (see also NHMRC, 2003).

Though these issues were raised in a particular context of post-colonial research, they do have wider resonance for case study research that aspires to be participatory, democratic and action-oriented. Gaining data from a collective means acknowledging collective participation and voice, and sharing ownership over any product.

Decoupling of confidentiality and anonymization

It is often assumed that anonymization deals with the need to protect the privacy and identity of individuals and assures confidentiality. Here I argue that these two concepts need to be decoupled and considered separately. While anonymization may protect the privacy of individuals to a degree when the research is published, this is not the same as honouring confidentiality in the research process. It is not a trade-off and it is certainly no guarantee to say we will interview you in confidence and anonymize you in reports, as though one takes care of the other.

Confidentiality

Offering confidentiality is a common principle at the beginning of the research, to gain trust and encourage participants to speak openly and honestly. It assures them that any information they reveal, which is sensitive, personal or problematic, that they wish to keep confidential, will be respected and that they will not be exposed.

At the same time there is a common understanding that findings will become public. It would be odd for participants to engage in a research study with the expectation that all information they give is retained in confidence. The principle of negotiation in democratic procedures is the means by which data obtained in confidence are checked with individuals for public release. This can take place at any stage but is particularly important at the reporting stage, as noted earlier. Participants can still request that data be retained in confidence if they think that how it is presented may affect them in harmful ways.

Honouring confidentiality also means staying alert in the process to issues individuals wish to keep private. They may state this in words – ‘I would prefer it if you did not use this’, ‘this is in confidence’ – or reflect it in their body language. It means not asking intrusive questions or pointing the camera where access has not been granted. In the final analysis, it means acknowledging that not all information obtained in interview or discovered about the person in the case becomes public.

Anonymization

Using pseudonyms – changing participant and institutional names – is a common principle in research reporting to anonymize individuals and offer them some protection of privacy. This principle has recently been challenged by Walford (2005), who argues that in small-scale studies there are good reasons for not adopting this principle: namely, that it is impossible to successfully anonymize – people can guess who

the protagonists are – and that it is useful for the sites to be known both for others to verify the validity of accounts and to celebrate the life and work of communities. Kushner (2000) has also challenged the principle of anonymization, arguing that there is an ethical issue in denying identity (p. 65). Anonymity, he says, is as potentially damaging to people as naming them in our reports. The issue is a complex one, not simply a case of anonymize or not. It depends upon who the anonymization or non-anonymization serves, styles of reporting and reception by readers of our reports.

The case for anonymization

In most case study research I have conducted (the exception was a case study of an innovative programme in a government department that was impossible to anonymize), I have anonymized individuals and institutions in case study reports. I have done this even when the head of a school declared that he was content for the school to be named. My reasoning is threefold.

First, while it may be relatively easy for the head of an organization if the organization is named, it can be difficult for staff who would be identified by it. I have often found that those who say ‘by all means use my name’, ‘I am quite happy to stand up and be counted’, are either anticipating ‘good news’, which will be helpful for image management of the organization, or are not fully aware of the possible repercussions from readers with different persuasions.

Secondly, identification may restrict what participants say. In the above situation, where the head was content for the school to be named, the teachers told me that they would not have spoken so openly had this been the case. However, the third and major reason for anonymizing people in case reports is that you cannot guarantee that those who read your case study will respond fairly and sensitively. This is something that we, as researchers, cannot control, especially in highly politicized contexts. However, by adhering consistently to ethical procedures, monitoring our judgements and actions, and engaging in dialogue with those in the field when dilemmas arise to seek joint resolutions, we can at least assure those within the case that we have treated them fairly and justly.

For all these reasons I think it is helpful to anonymize participants even when they have individually and collectively agreed to how they are represented in a case study. Further down the line when the research is published, it is some protection from unwarranted or unfair judgement from unexpected quarters and even agreed audiences. It can also be a protection from possible legal challenge. In a paper by Kushner published in Simons and Usher (2000), we respected and agreed with the author’s intention to honour the perspectives of the persons portrayed, who wished to be named, for their identity to be retained and celebrated. However, the publisher, concerned about possible litigation, asked us to change the names or withdraw the paper.

With hindsight I am not at all sure that I and the author should have agreed to change the names (and I would think twice about it another time). It gave into a potential legal risk instead of respecting the wishes of the individuals. Withdrawing the paper would have meant that the individuals’ stories were not told at all, but I am not sure, in retrospect, that this was an adequate justification for the decision we took. I remain uneasy. Whose interests did this course of action serve? The issue is a delicate

one and had poignancy in the particular context. The individuals concerned were dying and had allowed, and indeed wished, to have their words celebrated. Anonymization is not necessarily always the best moral course of action. If we had had the written agreement of the individuals concerned and that of their relatives, to maintain their identity and celebrate their work posthumously, I wonder if the imperative from the publisher would have been so categorical, and whether we could have negotiated to maintain their names.

When children are involved in case study reports I would also anonymize for similar reasons to those stated above (with the exception of the example just cited). Children may be less able to defend their privacy or agree that information about them become public. This is especially the case with young children, say from the 3–5 age group, where video is used, and where, as in a study by Waters (2004), emotionally disturbed young children were involved. In such circumstances, anonymization is often not possible and permission has to be obtained from parents.

The case for non-anonymization

While I argue in the main for anonymization, there are several research contexts (apart from the situation where people are breaching the law) where anonymization is not the most appropriate procedure to adopt. First is the single institution or programme which is unique. Referring to staff in role is commonly used in such contexts in an attempt to anonymize individuals. However, this does not protect the identities of all; it would still be possible to identify senior people in an organization.

Second is the case of high-profile individuals or public figures who are either difficult to anonymize or should not be anonymized as they are publicly accountable. In such contexts, even if all is on the public record, it is still important to maintain trust by negotiating what data about them is part of the case study and possibly sharing the final case report with them before dissemination, though this might be seen as privileged access unless such a procedure is extended to all participants in the study.

Where it is not possible to anonymize, in a government policy case study, for example, and agreement on the final report of the research cannot be reached, you might wish to add a procedure to the effect that 'participants will have the right to indicate the points at which they disagree or make a short written response'. I have adopted this on more than one occasion. In the case reported in the previous chapter, where negotiation reached a stalemate over the insistence that I remove and even change data in a final report, the offer was not taken up, possibly because it might have been seen to reflect badly on the organization that a resolution could not be reached. In another case, the managers wrote a two-page account indicating where they disagreed and this was included in the final case report.

Third is the situation, say in participatory case study research, where you wish to acknowledge the contribution of individuals who have been, if not co-researchers, key participants. Fourth is where you are aspiring to an ethical practice and open research relationship with participants where data are progressively cleared and professional judgements and reports negotiated. In these last two contexts anonymizing individuals after working transparently and collaboratively with them throughout the research seems antithetical to the very process you are trying to establish within it.

Balancing principles – open to apology and renegotiation

Given that it is not possible to anticipate all difficult situations that might arise in case study research, it is a useful policy to include a procedure that allows you to re-establish 'good' field relationships should something unexpected happen. If a problem occurs which is an error of yours (or even if it is not) being direct – offering a simple apology – invariably allows you to get back on track. If the issue is more intractable and involves several people, confront it openly with one of the key participants/stakeholders and invite them to help you resolve it: 'what shall *we* do about this?' I included the last procedure on renegotiation in Case Study Memo 14 – 'where difficulties arise, all parties should be open to apology and be prepared to negotiate an agreed way forward' – to acknowledge this point. The following is an example of such renegotiation in action.

Example: Renegotiation of Procedure –
Getting Back on Track

The opportunity to renegotiate arose in an external case study evaluation I was directing of a new curriculum in vocational education in a local education authority. In an interim report on the project, my co-researcher included a dialogue between a project manager and a project developer in which the developer voiced strong opinions about the manager. The issue seemed important to record, representing as it did a potential rift between these two key people in the case which was likely to affect the development of the new curriculum. Both had cleared their individual comments and the dialogue for public release. However, when other teachers in the project team read it, the manager became concerned about how he was perceived and wanted it retracted. He sought the advice of the Chief Education Officer (CEO), worried, he said, about the impact on the project as a whole. The CEO rang me to discuss the issue. I apologized and we agreed to meet to think of a strategy of damage limitation.

Though displeased that the report had raised an issue that was difficult for him internally, in the spirit of the last procedure in Case Study Memo 14 the CEO and I agreed a way forward that would ensure the project would continue with renewed goodwill on both sides. Issues that contributed to the resolution were the CEO's understanding of the reason for including the dialogue – to improve development of the project – and his realization that a conflict could easily have arisen between the protagonists. It was akin to a mismatch of styles. He then proposed that we organize a public meeting of all involved – teachers, heads of schools (there were six), the two protagonists and the evaluation team. The CEO, who chaired the meeting, acknowledged the important learning they had gained from the report, particularly through the dialogue which raised fundamental issues for development. He then persuaded the group to address the issues and in so doing diffused the problem the dialogue had presented. I agreed not to make the interim report public, only the final report.

I mention this incident to make three points. First, to highlight the importance of having a procedure that allows for renegotiation in the light of an unanticipated event which had unforeseen repercussions. Secondly, to underscore how important dialogue and good relationships are in interpreting and managing principles of procedure in action. In this case both the relationships and the procedures facilitated resolution of the incident. Thirdly, to illustrate the point raised at the beginning of this chapter that making ethical decisions entails not only negotiation and dialogue but balancing a conflict among principles or 'trading off one against another' (House, 1993: 168) in a concrete situation.

In this example, the principles that were in conflict were the protection of privacy of an individual (the project manager) and the responsibility to publicly report a situation that could, if handled appropriately, avert potential development failure. The trade-off was to retain the interim report within the local authority. It had served its purpose of informing decision-making at the point of need. The issue had been resolved internally. Not publishing the interim report was a compromise of the principle of public access I had negotiated at the outset but it was one I was prepared to take in the particular circumstances to ensure the project continued.

Complex Integrity

The principle of procedure in the above scenario was helpful in the resolution of the dispute, but it was not the only or even the most significant factor. It was the complex negotiation, reflection and judgement that took place between people in relation to it that led to the satisfactory agreed outcome. This is akin to Glen's (2000) concept of complex integrity.

In the context of practitioner action research in the health service, Glen draws a distinction between simple integrity, that undeniable belief and commitment to principles that tell us we are right, and complex integrity, which recognizes and needs to take into account the multifaceted and conflictual nature of much experience. Glen's essential thesis is that an adequate formulation of integrity as an ethical concept cannot be derived from ethical theory alone but needs to engage pragmatically with the researcher's reflective practice discourse.

Beyond being true to one's own principles and values, and those that circumscribe our professional moral practice, complex integrity, according to Glen (2000), means acknowledging and balancing mutually conflicting principles through reflection and dialogue in complex, particular moral situations (p. 15). This resonates with House's (1993) concept of ethical decision-making, with which this chapter began, and reminds us of its central theme – the relational and situated nature of ethics. It is only in and through relationships in the field, supported by procedures and negotiations over what is fair, relevant and just in the precise socio-political context, that we can *know* if we have acted ethically in relation to those who are part of our case.

Notes

- 1 For an overview of ethics in qualitative research in general, see Christians (2003); and Punch (1994); in quantitative research, Jones (2000) and Sammons (1989); and in evaluation research, Simons (2006).

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- 2 See Simons, H. (1978–9) 'Mother Tongue and Culture, First External Evaluation Report EEC-Sponsored Pilot Project', Cambridge and London: Cambridge Institute of Education, University of London Institute of Education and copyright libraries in the UK.
- 3 In the initial characterizations of these different forms of evaluation the author noted that these were ideal types. In practice, in the socio-political contexts in which we conduct case study research, there may be elements of more than one type. For further details of the concept of the democratic model see MacDonald (1976) and for the model in action, Simons (1987).
- 4 This is an inference from the Kaupapa Maori framework (prescribed by Smith (1997) and cited by Matairea (2003)), the second precept of which is *Kanohi kitea* ('the seen face', a requirement to present yourself 'face to face').

Further Readings

Alderson, P. and Morrow, V. (2003) *Ethics, Social Research and Consulting with Young People*. London: Barnardo's.

An extensive discussion of ethics of research with children and young people raising a series of questions and dilemmas in relation to traditional ethics and legislation and ethical practice.

Burgess, R.G. (ed.) (1989) *The Ethics of Educational Research*. Lewes: The Falmer Press. Explores ethical dimensions in different forms of educational research, including case study, action research, quantitative research and in different contexts. Several chapters outline specific principles and procedures to guide practical ethical decision-making.

Lee-Treweek, G. and Linkogle, S. (eds) (2000) *Danger in the Field: Risks and Ethics in Social Research*. London: Routledge.

Focuses through case examples on how researchers have faced danger in the field. Only one section refers to actual ethical danger (the others being physical, emotional and professional). Important for drawing our attention to the need to consider ethics for the researcher as well as for participants.

Oliver, P. (2003) *The Student's Guide to Research Ethics*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Explores ethical issues the research student may encounter at each stage of the research process from design to publication and dissemination. Ethical dilemmas and dialogues facilitate reflective thinking on the theoretical ethical positions outlined.

Simons, H. (2006) 'Ethics and evaluation', in I.F. Shaw, J.C. Greene and M.M. Mark (eds), *The International Handbook of Evaluation*, pp. 243–265. London: Sage.

An extensive review of the ethics involved in evaluation, including differences between ethical rules, principles, guidelines, theories; situated ethics and democratic ethics; re-interpretation of procedures of informed consent, anonymity and confidentiality, institutional reviews boards and ethical committees.

Simons, H. and Usher, R. (eds) (2000) *Situated Ethics in Educational Research*. London: Routledge/Falmer.

Makes the case for ethics as a situated practice in different research traditions and contexts – feminist, postmodern, evaluation, participatory, image-based. Each chapter is case-based, exploring the particular ethical issues that arose in unique socio-political settings, including those of race, post-colonialism and health care.