

The Ethics of Ethnography

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The ethics and the politics of ethnography are not clearly separable. Questions about the right way to treat each other as human beings, within a research relationship, are not wholly distinct from questions about the values which should prevail in a society, and the responsibility of social scientists to make, or refrain from, judgements about these. For ethnographers, ethical issues are also inextricably related to views about the ontological and epistemological foundations of their work. Our assumptions about the nature of reality, the possible knowledge of that reality, the status of truth claims and so on, all have significant implications for our judgements about the ethnographer's responsibilities. The lack of consensus about methodology, which marks contemporary debates in and about ethnography, is reflected in discussions about its ethics. This chapter explores the challenges that confront ethnographers as they design and carry out studies, and as they analyse, interpret and publish findings. It opens with an outline of different theoretical approaches to research ethics and the ways in which these are conventionally translated into guiding principles. We then consider the application of these principles to research practice, relating the discussion of ethics to wider political and methodological concerns.

ETHICAL THEORY

How can we form judgements about what will count as ethical practice in ethnography? *Consequentialist* approaches focus on the outcomes of research. Have participants been harmed in some way, or, if they have been harmed, has this been outweighed by the research's benefits? They can be contrasted with *deontological* approaches, which

focus on the inherent *rights* of research participants, such as the right to privacy, the right to respect, or the right to self-determination. In Kantian terms, researchers have a duty to avoid treating participants as a means to an end, rather than as an end in themselves (Kelman, 1982; Macklin, 1982). Ethical research does not just leave participants unscathed but also avoids infringing their rights. Have these been acknowledged, protected or violated (Beauchamp et al., 1982)? Consequentialist and deontological ethics are not necessarily in competition. Like all researchers, ethnographers have a responsibility not only to protect research participants from harm, but also to have regard to their rights.

These dual concerns with outcomes and rights are often translated by ethicists into sets of principles to guide research practice. The following list, from Beauchamp et al. (1982: 18–19), is typical:

Non-maleficence: that researchers should avoid harming participants.

Beneficence: that research on human subjects should produce some positive and identifiable benefit rather than simply be carried out for its own sake.

Autonomy or self-determination: that the values and decisions of research participants should be respected.

Justice: that people who are equal in relevant respects should be treated equally.

The first two principles are essentially consequentialist while the latter are primarily deontological.

At this level of abstraction, there is a wide measure of agreement among researchers, irrespective of whether they are using qualitative or quantitative methods. This ethical consensus, however, reflects the assumptions of welfare liberalism as understood

in the United States in the post-war period: about the rights to be afforded to individuals over collectivities, about the virtue of autonomy and about the nature of justice (Benatar, 1997). The consensus does not, for example, acknowledge that a collective interest could sometimes override individual rights. Most research ethicists live in Western societies at a historical moment when autonomy and self-determination are strongly valued. This esteem is not universal. The conventional approach is also troubled by the problem of 'false consciousness': what if the exercise of autonomy and self-determination by research subjects is at odds with the researcher's perception of their interest? Finally, the principle of justice struggles with the difficulty of defining what constitute 'relevant respects'.

Most controversy about the ethics of ethnography has, however, arisen at the level of practice, rather than principle. Professional ethical codes have been developed in an attempt to give effect to the abstract propositions of ethical theory. There has been wide criticism of the mechanical application to ethnographic research of codes and regulatory systems, including human subjects review, devised for biomedical and/or quantitative research (Barnes, 1979; Cassell, 1978, 1979, 1982; Dingwall, 1980; Finch, 1986; House, 1990; Kelman, 1982; Merriam, 1988; Punch, 1994; Thorne, 1980; Walker, 1980; Wax, 1980). This process raises two problems. First, ethical codes that are not method-sensitive may constrain research unnecessarily and inappropriately. Secondly, and just as importantly, the ritualistic observation of these codes may not give real protection to research participants but actually increase the risk of harm by blunting ethnographers' sensitivities to the method-specific issues which do arise. This is not to suggest that different ethical standards should be applied to different kinds of research so much as to recognize that common principles may need to be operationalized in different ways. We now consider each of the ethical principles outlined above and the contingencies that affect their application to ethnography.

PRINCIPLES IN PRACTICE

Non-maleficence and Beneficence

These two principles are commonly combined to argue that research is ethical if its benefits outweigh its potential for harm. In biomedical research this has led to subject risk-benefit analyses. Researchers should only proceed where they can show that the anticipated benefits of a study outweigh its potential risks. The difficulties of applying such calculations to ethnography arise from the different nature and positioning of risk. Any harm caused to the subjects of biomedical experiments is likely to arise directly from the researcher's intervention in administering

a drug or a new surgical treatment. The potential benefits are likely to be equally obvious. The argument against extending such analyses to ethnographic research is not, as some suggest, that its potential for harm is negligible. Admittedly, the risks associated with an ethnographic study are not normally of the same order as those which arise in trialling a new drug or surgical technique (Brewster Smith, 1979; Cassell, 1978; Diener and Crandall, 1978; Pattullo, 1982). Nevertheless, ethnography is not risk-free and its potential for harm cannot be lightly dismissed (Bakan, 1996).

Ethnographers can harm the individuals or groups they study. Research participants may experience anxiety, stress, guilt and damage to self-esteem during data collection. In observational fieldwork, participants may form close relationships with the observer and experience loss when the study is completed and the observer withdraws (Cassell, 1978, 1979; Patai, 1991; Stacey, 1991). Interview informants may feel embarrassed – about the opinions they hold or because they do not hold opinions on matters about which the interviewer expects them to have opinions (Kelman, 1982). Voysey (1975) described how some participants in her study of the parents of disabled children became distressed during interviews. In ethnography, however, harm is more likely to be indirect than direct, and open to interpretation. For example, a study of the division of household labour might include informal interviews, which lead some women to focus on their unequal domestic workloads. They may become dissatisfied and challenge current arrangements. This outcome could be regarded either as beneficial (increased self-awareness leading to positive change) or harmful (the disruption of previously happy and stable family arrangements), depending upon one's ideological position. As Patai (1991) has observed, any defence of research as 'consciousness-raising' risks the charge of arrogance. We cannot assume that increased self-knowledge is necessarily a benefit for all research participants in all circumstances (Brewster Smith, 1979). Similarly, claims about the cathartic effects of research interactions (see, for example, Bar-On, 1996; Miller, 1996) must be treated with caution. The harms or benefits derive from the participant's unpredictable response to the interactions rather than from the researcher's intentions. To recall W.I. Thomas's great aphorism, it is not the reality of the interview but the perception of it that leads to the consequences, whether negative or positive. That reaction is not directly controlled by the researcher and may not even be a stable one. Positive or negative feelings immediately after an interview may reverse later.

Perhaps the most significant difference between biomedical experiments and ethnography lies in the temporal positioning of risk. In biomedical research, the risk of harm is concentrated during the

experimental manipulation. The greatest risk in ethnography, however, arises at the time of publication (Cassell, 1978, 1979; Wax and Cassell, 1979). Here, the indeterminacy of risk becomes most obvious (Patai, 1991). Researchers have relatively limited control over the use of their findings in the public domain (Schneider, personal communication, cited in Brettell, 1993; Richardson, 1996). As Burgess (1985) has commented, ethnographic studies typically increase knowledge of the adaptive behaviours that actors use to accommodate to structural and institutional pressures. By uncovering such behaviours, ethnographers offer tools for those with power to control or manipulate those without. Nicolaus' attack on the American Sociological Association at its 1968 meeting in Boston, during the heyday of the New Left and the movement against the war in Vietnam, is a classic formulation of this charge:

Sociology is not now and never has been any objective seeking out of objective truth or reality. Historically, the profession is an outgrowth of 19th century European traditionalism and conservatism, wedded to 20th century American corporation liberalism ... Sociologists stand guard in the garrison and report to its masters on the movements of the occupied populace. *The more adventurous sociologists don the disguise of the people and go out to mix with the peasants in the 'field'*, returning with books and articles that break the protective secrecy in which a subjugated population wraps itself, and make it more accessible to manipulation and control. (Nicolaus, 1969; emphasis added)

The experience of being written about may be a matter for concern in its own right: 'I worry intensely about how people will feel about what I write about them. I worry about the experience of being "writ down", fixed in print, formulated, summed up, encapsulated in language, reduced in some way to what the words contain. Language can never contain a whole person, so every act of writing a person's life is inevitably a violation' (Josselson, 1996b: 62). Research participants may be wounded not only by what is contained in a report, but also by what has been left out: this may seem to treat as trivial or unimportant something which has great significance for them. Ethnographers who think of themselves as sensitive, respectful and caring people, may be surprised and chagrined to discover how their published accounts offend and distress those about whom they have written (Ellis, 1995). There is ample evidence that publications from ethnographic fieldwork can, and do, cause hurt and offence to those studied (Ellis, 1995; Messenger, 1989; Scheper-Hughes, 1982; Vidich and Bensman, 1958, 1964).

Ethnographic reports may be sensationalized by mass media in ways that cause distress or embarrassment to participants, even where anonymity is preserved (Gmelch, 1992; Greenberg, 1993;

Rosaldo, 1989). However careful researchers may be in their own writing, they cannot guarantee it will not be used to produce offensive characterizations of participants or settings. Social science researchers are currently under considerable pressure from sponsors to disseminate their findings beyond the academic community, increasing the likelihood that research will be taken up in ways over which the authors have minimal control or influence.

The widening dissemination of social science research increases the significance of the general obligations to protect participants' anonymity and to keep data confidential (cf. Beauchamp et al., 1982; Bulmer, 1982; Punch, 1994). However, these raise difficulties specific to ethnographic research (Finch, 1986). In quantitative research, anonymity and confidentiality can be treated as technical matters and managed through rigorous procedures for data anonymization and storage. Since most ethnographies are carried out in a single setting, or a very small number of settings, it is much more difficult to ensure that data are totally unattributable: field-notes and interview transcripts inevitably record sufficient detail to make participants identifiable.

Ethnographers can do much to protect settings and participants by removing identifying information at the earliest possible opportunity, routinely using pseudonyms, and altering non-relevant details (Burgess, 1985; Tunnell, 1998). However, they are rarely able to give *absolute* guarantees that the identities of people and places will remain hidden. Where fieldwork is overt, many people come to know that it is taking place and will be able to identify the source of data after publication. As Morgan (1972) discovered, a refusal to disclose the site of observations may not be enough to prevent journalists uncovering it (see also Liebllich, 1996). Even where anonymity is preserved beyond the setting, members are likely to recognize themselves and one another (Ellis, 1995). Burgess (1985), for example, described the impact on staff at Bishop MacGregor School when he presented some findings to them. While his report used pseudonyms, this was not completely effective in disguising individuals. His research had focused on one department within the school. Since this only involved four members of staff, it was not difficult for the head teacher and others to make educated guesses about who was involved in various reported incidents.

However successful ethnographers may be in protecting the anonymity of those they study, participants and informants will remain identifiable to themselves. This raises the possibility that publication will cause private (or community) shame, even where it does not lead to public humiliation (Ellis, 1995; Hopkins, 1993). If the purpose of ethnographic research is more than the mere reproduction of participant perspectives, it is possible that the

researcher's analysis will disrupt the assumptions that participants make about their world (Borland, 1991; Messenger, 1989; Scheper-Hughes, 1982). The publication of ethnographic accounts may expose individuals to other versions of reality held by those close to them, breaking down protective silences. As Lieblich reflected, 'The most painful reaction [to the publication of her work] was that of family members who became aware, through the pages of the book, of memories, opinions, and feelings that belonged to their family life and relationships that had never been discussed among them before' (1996: 182).

Accepting that positivism is the currently dominant epistemology, participants are likely to expect an ethnographic report to define reality in some objective sense, whatever the author's position (Josselson, 1996a). Ethnography, however, treats all versions of the social world as just some of a set of possible formulations (Dingwall, 1980: 873). Given the conditions of intimacy that arise in prolonged periods of fieldwork, this sociological stance may be experienced as betrayal or rejection by participants who expect researchers to affirm or endorse their version. In the nature of sociological analysis, people's views of themselves and their social worlds are likely to be deflated (Becker, 1964: 265-6). It is not always straightforward for ethnographers to decide what will and will not cause offence (Davis, 1993). The translation of individual accounts into examples of larger social phenomena, with the attendant loss of uniqueness, may be disconcerting (Chase, 1996). Responses to this problem have included suggestions that reports should be co-produced in dialogue between researcher and researched (Horwitz, 1993; McBeth, 1993), or that participants should be offered a 'right to reply' (Blackman, 1992; Lawless, 1992). Indeed, research participants may exercise such a right quite independently, through, for example, the letters pages of the local press.

Autonomy/Self-determination

Deontological discussions have conventionally focused on autonomy. Research participants are said to have certain rights, notably to privacy, respect or self-determination, that may be infringed. As MacIntyre (1982) observed, people can be wronged, even when they are not harmed. Historically, much of the debate about these rights has centred on the ethics of covert research. Discussions of privacy have been fuelled by the occasionally hostile response to ethnographic reports from the communities studied and from native (or nativist) anthropologists (Brettell, 1993; Davis, 1993; Ellis, 1995). The rights of research subjects in ethnographic work will not be respected simply because consent forms have been signed: indeed, as in much biomedical research,

these forms may offer more protection to the researcher than to the subject in the event of litigation. Moreover, as Price (1996) noted, signed consent forms may actually jeopardize the confidentiality of participants by making them identifiable. There are genuine difficulties about the means of respecting rights to autonomy and self-determination. The answers depend more on the moral sense of the researcher and their ability to make reasoned decisions in the field than upon regulative codes of practice or review procedures.

Critics of covert research (such as Bulmer, 1980; Dingwall, 1980; Erikson, 1967; Warwick, 1982) hold that such studies violate participants' right to autonomy. Defenders of covert observational studies (for example, Bolton, 1995; Holdaway, 1982; Homan, 1980; Humphreys, 1970) tend to justify their position in consequentialist terms, arguing that the research benefits outweighed any compromise of participants' rights. Indeed, Bolton (1995), who actively participated in sexual relations while studying the gay scene in Brussels, without always disclosing his research interests to his partners, suggested that informed consent was only relevant where there was a possibility of harm to those being studied.

Recent work has recognized that the distinction between covert and overt research is less straightforward than sometimes imagined. In complex and mobile settings, it may simply be impractical to seek consent from everyone involved. Unlike experimental researchers, ethnographers typically have limited control over who enters their field of observation. All research lies on a continuum between overt and covertness. If ethnographers, whether radical constructivists or not, accept that there is no single true version of a setting, the same must be true for the accounts of their proposed research that they present in negotiating access. They cannot combine a commitment to multiple perspectives in data collection and analysis with a naive assertion that the simple, unmediated truth about the research has been communicated to the participants. The versions they offer are both necessary and appropriately designed for their audiences. Otherwise they might well be true but incomprehensible. This is a particular concern in sociological (and anthropological) research where it may be difficult fully to explain the objectives 'without sending informants and cohabitants to graduate school' (Brewster Smith, 1979: 14). Signed consent forms do not guarantee participants' understanding, although, as Wong (1998) suggests, they may be a useful, albeit uncomfortable, reminder to both parties of the nature of their relationship.

The ethical concerns raised by the opacity of sociological and anthropological interests to non-social scientists (Glazier, 1993) are further complicated by the emergent nature of research design and analysis in ethnography (Josselson, 1996a). At the point of negotiating access, researchers typically do

not have all the information that fully informed consent might require. At the outset of the study cited earlier, Voysey saw the outcome as a description of the problems facing families with a disabled child in order to improve health and social care services. This goal seems both comprehensible and likely to be attractive to the parents approached to participate. However, her focus was transformed in the course of the research. She came to recognize that her interviews were irreducibly social encounters and must be analysed as 'situationally appropriate accounts' where participants sought to present themselves as 'good parents'. The initial consent was clearly not fully informed. This was, though, unavoidable, both because her approach changed as the study progressed and because the sociological issues addressed in her final analysis were unlikely to have been fully accessible to the parents. This also suggests some caution about the current enthusiasm for depositing qualitative data in archives accessible to other researchers. The problem is not just that the data may be used to harm participants but that the original investigator may have a duty to respect the autonomy of participants and the information about the purpose of the study on which their consent was based.

Conventionally, discussions about openness in research have focused on what participants are told about the objectives and nature of the fieldwork and analysis. More recently, a number of researchers, particularly feminist and post-colonial anthropologists, have raised concerns about deception in relation to self-disclosure. Diane Wolf (1996a) described her unease at having lied to her Indonesian informants about her religious affiliation, marital status and finances, at the same time as seeking frankness from them on the same issues. Blackwood (1995) hid her lesbian orientation from the people in her fieldwork village, maintaining a fiction about a fiancé at home. She described her discomfort at this, which 'at worst established my superiority over the people in the village because it implied they should not, or did not need to, know such things about "their" anthropologist' (p. 57). In both cases, the researchers' reluctance to disclose arose from concerns that their identities would make them unacceptable to potential participants and compromise their fieldwork. Edelman (1996) has discussed some of the discomfort associated with his reluctance to reveal his Jewish identity in some field settings. This led to a false presentation of self, colluding with the tacit assumption that he was a Christian and with those who held negative images of Jews.

The concern with self-disclosure is related to wider issues about the power relations between researcher and researched. Once again these have particularly exercised feminist and post-colonial researchers. At the extreme, they have argued that the research relationship is irreducibly oppressive

and exploitative and that truly ethical research is impossible (Patai, 1991). Particular concerns include the way in which research objectifies participants and then controls and exploits them during fieldwork and in subsequent publications (D. Wolf, 1996b). Such arguments are often associated with suspicion of expertise, which is seen as elitist (Eisner, 1997). Researchers who claim special competence to devise and design research and to analyse and interpret data may be regarded as authoritarian. Their claims to 'know' are inappropriate in a post-colonial world (Brettell, 1993). In the light of this critique, feminists have experimented with more collaborative approaches, where participants have been invited to join in defining research questions and designs, using models of action research or participative enquiry (D. Wolf, 1996b). These experiments have raised a number of practical problems, not least the unwillingness of some participants to engage in such collaborative approaches (Chase, 1996; Swadener and Marsh, 1998). Moreover, collaborations do not necessarily lead to agreement and the researcher cannot escape the residual responsibility for deciding how to 'respond to, negotiate or present disagreement, and, in so doing, she continues to exercise control over the research process' (Chase, 1996: 51).

Both Hammersley (1992a) and Eisner (1997) have questioned the underlying assumption that researcher control is necessarily wrong or an offence against participants' autonomy. Hammersley argued that researchers' claim to expertise is not made *ex cathedra*. In Eisner's terms, this expertise is 'attained' rather than 'ascribed' and is subject to critical evaluation. From an explicitly feminist position, Marjorie Wolf (1996) has observed that power differentials between researchers and researched do not necessarily lead to exploitation. Exploitation only occurs when ethnographers use their superior power to achieve their objectives at real cost to those they are studying. Research should be judged in terms of its effects, particularly on the collectivity, rather than in relation to issues of power and control. Here she is balancing a deontological concern with participants' rights against a consequentialist focus on effects.

Some feminist researchers (Finch, 1984; Oakley, 1981, for example) have attempted to redress the power imbalances between researcher and researched by replacing the hierarchical stance of the 'neutral researcher', characteristic of conventional approaches, with more intimate, 'authentic' and 'sisterly' relations with those studied (Patai, 1991; Reinharz, 1983). Others (for example, Stacey, 1991) have responded with caution, pointing out that the development of closer, more empathic relationships between researcher and researched may mask 'a deeper, more dangerous form of exploitation' (Stacey, 1991: 113) and create more subtle opportunities for manipulation. Research participants

may be *more* likely to disclose private information to those they consider friends than to those adopting a more traditional fieldwork stance (D. Wolf, 1996b). As Diane Wolf (1996b) and Reinharz (1992) have suggested, attempts at down-playing inequalities and developing reciprocal relationships with participants may be disingenuous, not least because researchers have the privilege of eventually leaving the field. Any attenuation of the power imbalance between researcher and researched is likely to be temporary (D. Wolf, 1996b). Reinharz (1992: 265) observed, 'Purported solidarity is often a fraud perpetuated by feminists with good intentions.' Moreover, participants may not want a reciprocal relationship or aspire to friendship (Ribbens, 1989): as Altork's informant, Goldie, so frankly remarked, 'I wanted you to use it [interview material] for something. That meant more to me than our friendship idea, because I have lots of friends. I do!' (Altork, 1998: 20).

It is also important to recognize that the distribution of power is often less clear-cut in ethnographic than in other kinds of research (Sheehan, 1993). In experimental studies, once consent has been granted, power lies almost exclusively with the researcher, manipulating passive subjects who have surrendered their right to self-determination for the duration of the intervention. This asymmetrical relationship is attenuated in ethnographic research. The different 'positionalities' (D. Wolf, 1996b) of researcher and researched, in terms of race, class, nationality, gender, education etc., may render participants vulnerable to exploitation (Patai, 1991). However, participants still have substantial capacity for exerting power over ethnographers (Hammersley, 1992a; Wong, 1998). A number of researchers have described how powerful actors obstructed access to communities and prevented them from taking full control of their research design (see Abbott, 1983; Abu-Lughod, 1986; Brown, 1991, cited in D. Wolf, 1996b). Wong (1998) observed that the women he studied actively controlled the direction and temper of his ethnographic encounters with them. Participants may use the research for their own ends: Bilu (1996) described how the participants in his research into the life of a legendary rabbi-healer were able to use his involvement as a way of legitimating the mythologization and popularization of the rabbi-healer as a saint.

A preoccupation with not objectifying participants has called into question some principles that were previously treated as axiomatic by ethnographers. Until recently, an embargo on sexual relations between researcher and researched largely went unchallenged (in principle, if not in practice). Indeed some, including Lincoln (1998), still see sex in the field as an 'oxymoron'. However, a number of, mainly gay, lesbian and post-colonialist, researchers (Blackwood, 1995; Bolton, 1995; Dubisch, 1995; Kulick, 1995) have begun to argue

that refusing to consider a sexual relationship with participants reflects the objectification of them as 'Alien or Other' (Blackwood, 1995: 71). The consequence, Bolton argued, may be to increase rather than decrease 'ethnocentrism, racism, homophobia, religious intolerance, and sexism' (Bolton, 1995: 140). By contrast, he suggested, 'sex is arguably the ultimate dissolution of boundaries between individuals'. If this is the case, then sexual relations with participants seem to raise, in even starker form, the problems, discussed above, which emerge when researchers seek to develop close reciprocal friendships with the researched. Whether the participant is harmed or not, the opportunities for exploitation and manipulation are greatly increased.

Concerns about participants' rights have also been raised in relation to the research product (Sheehan, 1993; D. Wolf, 1996b). Arguably, the career and financial benefits that researchers derive from their work are expropriated from research participants (Dubisch, 1995). Some (for example, Razavi, 1993; Scheper-Hughes, 1992) have attempted to counter-balance such potential exploitation by acts of reciprocity during the fieldwork or by sharing royalties from publications with participants (Glazier, 1993; Shostak, 1989). Others have tried, in various ways, to 'return the research to participants'. However, as Patai (1991) observed, participants are not always particularly interested in follow-up and researchers must be wary of further burdening them with expectations of intense involvement, arising more from their own needs for affirmation than from any need or desire among the participants themselves. The argument that the product should be 'returned' to participants as a means of empowering them and undermining their hierarchical relationship with the researcher, is particularly problematic when the participants represent perspectives or political positions which are abhorrent to the researcher. As Blee (1993) observed, in the context of her study of former members of the Ku Klux Klan, even where the researcher does not actively seek to strengthen the political agendas of such groups, the mere acts of eliciting, recording and publishing such accounts may have this effect.

Alongside rights to autonomy and self-determination, some researchers have argued that research participants should be accorded the right to self-definition (Stanley and Wise, 1983). This concern is related to the so-called 'crisis of representation' (Clifford and Marcus, 1986). If, as Clifford (1986) argued, ethnography is 'always caught in the invention, not the representation of cultures' (p. 2), then questions are raised about the authority of ethnographers to 'invent' a version of participants' realities which they may not acknowledge. If ethnographic texts are indeed based on 'systematic and contestable exclusions' (Clifford, 1988: 7), issues arise about the 'representational politics' (Neumann, 1996) of the ethnographer's authority. Who has the

right to interpret another's reality, to define what should or should not be excluded and what meanings should or should not be attributed, and by what right do they do so?

Some postmodernists have called for a democratization of representation and rejected the writer's right to interpret any experience other than his or her own. Attempts to interpret the experience of others have been seen as a new form of colonization (Fine, 1994; Price, 1996). The concern about usurping participants' rights to self-definition has been associated with a growing enthusiasm for auto-ethnography (see, for example, Kolker, 1996; Ronai, 1996; Tillman-Healy, 1996). Neumann (1996) suggested that auto-ethnography may offer an opportunity to 'confront dominant forms of representation and power in an attempt to reclaim ... representational spaces that marginalize individuals and others' (1996: 189). Auto-ethnography is a 'discourse from the margins and identifies the material, political and transformative dimensions of representational politics' (1996: 191). However, auto-ethnography does not escape ethical problems. Authors present accounts of events, interactions and relationships in which they are intimately involved: Ronai (1996), for example, described her experience as the child of a 'mentally retarded' mother. At one level, auto-ethnography appears to resolve some of the ethical problems generated by studying other people's lives. If one's research subject is oneself then the issues around autonomy and informed consent may be solved at a stroke. However, the author is never represented in a social vacuum. Auto-ethnography typically presents the actions and interactions of others from the author's perspective. What is the basis of the auto-ethnographer's authority to represent those others in this way? Should the consent of other players in the auto-drama not be obtained before publication? Are those judged to be the villains of a narrative to be denied privacy and autonomy but not the heroes/heroines? Does the auto-ethnographer not have a duty of beneficence and non-maleficence to those about whom (s)he writes?

Concern that researchers are usurping research participants' right to self-definition is related to the particular weight granted to the authorial voice in our culture (Josselson, 1996a). Critics of conventional ethnographic accounts argue that the rhetorical construction of ethnographic texts elevates the researcher's definition of the situation to a status that makes it impossible, or at least very difficult, for the participants to sustain alternative definitions of their situation. Some argue that the *only* legitimate role for researchers is to *reproduce* participants' perspectives: to go beyond this usurps the right of people to define their own reality. This position is linked to preoccupations about 'voice' and has given rise to calls for multivocality, polyphony and 'messy texts' in research reports

(Fox, 1996; Ginsberg, 1993). The ethnographer's interpretations may represent a powerful, uninvited intrusion into participants' lives which robs them of some element of their freedom to make sense of their own experience (Josselson, 1996b). The ethical issues of interpretative authority are particularly marked where the analyst treats a participant's account as an exercise in narrative persuasion, rather than as the literal description originally intended (Ochberg, 1996).

The debate on interpretative authority again brings together a complex of representational, epistemological and ethical issues that it is important to disentangle. At the level of presentation, there can be little disagreement that ethnographers are, at least potentially, able to exploit their authorial position by imposing interpretations on their data. Nor is there any doubt that, in doing so, they may disempower and abuse research participants. The capacity for doing so is particularly great where authors are rendered invisible in the text so that the authority of their interpretations is assumed and ascribed rather than attained. It is therefore incumbent upon researchers to make themselves visible in the texts they write (Chase, 1996) and to present the evidence upon which their interpretations are based. By making the process of data analysis 'public and reproducible' (Dingwall, 1992) and separating out the data from the researcher's interpretation, authors open the possibility that their interpretations may be challenged.

However, for some ethnographers the ethical issues surrounding interpretative authority are more complex. The issue is not the *validity* of the interpretations, but the question of control over the interpretative process (Chase, 1996). Some, particularly feminist, researchers have argued that only by sharing control of interpretation, can we break down the hierarchical relationship between researcher and researched and avoid exploiting participants. Chase (1996), on the other hand, has suggested that we need to acknowledge our interests and the extent to which they may differ from those of participants. The analyst's concern to construct second-order accounts that generalize individual experiences inevitably involves reshaping the originals. Moreover, we must acknowledge that participants may not be in a position fully to grasp all the relevant aspects of context. Borland (1991) described the particular problems which this raises for feminist researchers: 'We hold an explicitly political vision of the structural conditions that lead to particular social behaviours, a vision that our field collaborators, many of whom do not consider themselves feminists, may not recognize as valid' (1991: 64). Experience cannot be treated as the sole source of authority (Hammersley, 1992a). We do not necessarily understand a phenomenon just because we have experienced it. Oppressed groups may experience oppression but have little understanding of

it (M. Wolf, 1996). It is for researchers to take responsibility for the interpretative processes they engage in. Perhaps, as Chase (1996) suggests, the ethical problem raised by our interpretations is less that we usurp participants' rights to self-definition than that, in negotiating access, we fail to alert participants to the ways in which we will re-frame their versions.

There are problems in naively asserting that the researcher's sole responsibility is to 'let the people speak'. As Hammersley observed, reliance on participants' definitions ignores the fact that these are, at least in part, products of the context: as context and audience change so will narratives. Even more fundamentally, this position raises the problem of how participants' interpretations of the situation are to be accessed. In practice, this depends heavily on participant accounts, verbal or written, involving what Atkinson and Silverman described as 'neo-Romantic celebrations of the speaking subject' (1977: 305). As Borland (1991) observed, reflecting upon the conflicts of interpretation arising from her analysis of a narrative elicited from her grandmother, such accounts are always governed by the narrator's 'assumption of responsibility to an audience for a display of communicative competence' (Bauman, 1977: 11).

At times, these concerns about the usurpation of interpretative authority involve an elision of epistemological, political and ethical issues. Where ethnographers endorse the radical solipsism of some versions of postmodernism, which make truth-claims a matter of choice, then it is indeed difficult to see how the ethnographer could make any claim to authoritative interpretation. His or her interpretation can only be placed alongside those of any other participant (or indeed non-participant) and, since multiple, contradictory realities can exist, there is no basis for choosing between them. It is at this point that some ethnographers appeal to consequentialist ethics, claiming that the justification for usurping the interpretative authority of those one researches lies in the power of the research to produce valued social outcomes (Fine, 1994). This, though, simply raises the problem of how to value social outcomes (Price, 1996).

Not all ethnographers endorse radical relativism. Many seek to combine a commitment to social constructionism with the pursuit of truth as a regulative ideal. Such 'subtle realism' (Hammersley, 1992b) leads to an alternative perspective on the issues around interpretative authority. Subtle realists accept the possibility of multiple, *non-contradictory* versions of reality which, although different from one another, may nevertheless all be true. However, they reject the possibility of multiple, *contradictory* versions of reality which are nevertheless true. This opens up the possibility that participants' versions of events may be 'reality tested' through empirical

work. The researcher is not obliged to treat any particular version as authoritative simply because it is offered by a participant. The ethical imperative shifts to a concern with fair dealing, discussed in the next section.

Justice

The issue of fair dealing is an expression of the final ethical principle, that research participants should be treated equally. For some the argument that all research is inevitably shaped by values has led to the question, 'Whose side are we on?' (Becker, 1967). Researchers have been warned against a deferential posture, privileging the perspective of the elite or powerful in the research setting and paying scant attention to the less powerful (Guba and Lincoln, 1989; Marshall, 1985; Sandelowski, 1986; Silverman, 1985). Set against this is the concern that preoccupation with the so-called under-dog has led to a neglect of the powerful and privileged (Dingwall, 1980, 1992; Silverman, 1993). As a result, elites are sometimes presented as 'cardboard cutouts who are either misguided or wilfully putting their own interests first' (Voysey, 1975: 61). Similarly, Blee has reported some of the challenges she encountered in studying former members of reactionary race-hate groups (Blee, 1993). Traditionally, the emphasis had been upon 'caution, distance, and objectivity in interviews with members of elites and egalitarianism, reciprocity, and authenticity in interviews with people outside elites.' (1993: 597). Studying former members of the Ku Klux Klan highlighted the 'epistemological dichotomy' and 'romantic assumptions about the subjects of history from the bottom up' that are implicit in such recommendations. The principle of justice demands that the ethnographer should aspire to even-handed treatment of all participants or informants. This does not mean the suspension of all personal moral judgements. Indeed, acknowledging such responses may be vital to the ethnographer's reflexive engagement with data. However, it does demand that the researcher remains committed to developing an analysis which displays an equally sophisticated understanding of the behaviour of both villains and heroes – or heroines (Dingwall, 1992).

This is, in some respects, a return to Weber's argument, that the vocation of science requires 'the intellectual integrity to see that it is one thing to state facts, to determine mathematical or logical relations or the internal structure of cultural values, while it is another thing to answer questions as to the *value* of culture and its individual contents and the question of how one should act in the cultural community and in political associations ... the prophet and the demagogue do not belong on the academic platform' (Gerth and Mills, 1970: 146).

Of course, others may see the adoption of such a position as a political challenge. Much of what is sometimes known as 'standpoint ethnography' rests upon the argument that science is an inherently political activity. Mies (1991: 65), for example, asserts the need 'to question contemplative science, which veils power and exploitation ... [and to create] an alternative scientific paradigm which supports emancipatory movements and does not limit them as dominant science does'. Mies happens to be writing from a feminist perspective but her arguments have many echoes in other writers associated with queer, black or post-colonial studies. 'Truth' does not depend on 'the application of certain methodological principles and rules, but on its potential to orient the processes of praxis towards progressive emancipation and humanization' (Mies, 1983: 124). As Hammersley (1992a) has pointed out, however, the problem is to determine what actually constitutes 'emancipation and humanization' and for whom. It may be as much an expression of a sectional interest as the dominant ideology to which it is counterposed and it is unclear what right the researcher has, other than self-appointment, to speak for the oppressed interest. The Weberian approach acknowledges the difficulty of separating questions of fact and value. However, it has the virtue of setting a goal for investigators to strive towards and of creating a disciplinary regime that regulates the possibilities of interpretation rather than leaving these wholly to the fancy or interest of the researcher. As Oakley (1998) notes, the cause of women may in practice be advanced much more by systematically disinterested work than by an obvious fitting of data to a prior position. Having said that, one is still left with the problem of 'partial truths' (Clifford, 1986: 18) in that what may appear to be 'systematically disinterested' is constantly changing and reflects both the historical and political context in which it is defined. In Clifford's words, 'a great many portrayals of "cultural" truths now appear to reflect male domains of experience'. The corollary of this is that the partiality of current versions of reality will in time also be seen as partial. As Denzin (1997) has argued, theory, writing and ethnography are inseparable. What is required is a reflexive form of writing that exposes theory to ethnography and ethnography to theory. Truth and facts may be irreducibly socially constructed but this need not undermine the self-conscious pursuit of the separation of fact and value as a regulative goal.

CONCLUSION

Like all research that involves human participants, ethnography raises significant ethical concerns. All researchers share the same minimal responsibility

to protect participants from harm even where such participants may, themselves, be cavalier about the risks they are taking. Similarly, the justification for research lies at least partly in the belief that it will 'make a difference', although the benefits may well accrue to the collectivity rather than to the particular individuals who take part in the research. However, these concerns with beneficence and non-maleficence do not exhaust the ethical imperatives encountered by ethnographers, who must also be concerned with the extent to which their research practice affects the rights and interests of participants. These obligations are complex and will not be fulfilled through simple adherence to a prescriptive list of requirements. Indeed, given the diversity and flexibility of ethnography, and the indeterminacy of potential harm, a prescriptive approach may be positively unhelpful. It can fail to protect participants and, perhaps even more importantly, may deflect researchers from the reflective pursuit of ethical practice.

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