Ethics in ethnography with young people

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What is ethnography?

A research method located in the practice of both sociologists and anthropologists, and which should be regarded as the product of a cocktail of methodologies that share the assumption that personal engagement with the subject is the key to understanding a particular culture or social setting. Participant observation is the most common component of this cocktail, but interviews, conversational and discourse analysis, documentary analysis, film and photography, life histories all have their place in the ethnographer's repertoire.

Description resides at the core of ethnography, and however that description is constructed it is the intense meaning of social life from the everyday perspective of groups members that is sought (Dick Hobbs, 2006)
• What did you observe?
• Did you assume a ‘position’?
• What place do emotions have in the practice of observation?
Respectful, relational, meaningful, honest
The irony of the ethnographic method

[the] ethnographic method draws on “resources of empathy, connection and concern .... also appears to provide much greater respect for and power to one's research subjects”

“I find myself wondering whether the appearance of greater respect for and equality with research subjects in the ethnographic approach masks a deeper, more dangerous form of exploitation” (Stacey, 1988:22).
The ethnographic blind spot

“the premise of ethnography is engagement and identification with the people we work and a sense of embarrassment that our academic careers are built on the of their suffering. It is uncomfortable to convey anything negative or compromising about people that we owe so much to and to whom we are in so many ways regarded as superior”

(Bähre, 2010)
Blackman’s Hidden Ethnography

• Emotional contact between observer and participants rarely made explicit
• Reluctance to describe emotion due to fear of losing legitimacy, or being discredited
• Secrecy surrounds fieldwork and the accounts provided seen to need an aura of mystery
• Disciplinary requirement, and an ethical demand, that the narrative should be ‘clean’

(Blackman, 2007)
Final reflections

Acknowledge the unequal and intrusive nature of participation
While the issue can be mitigated, it cannot be effaced
Rigorous self-awareness of the ethical pitfalls – monitor and mitigate risks
Awareness that the self-reflexive turn can serve to further marginalise, or even silence, research participants
Need for balance: be reflexive, whilst continuing to responsibly represent those being studied
Introducing the scenarios

- What would you do and why?
- What ethical implications would this decision have?
- What methodological implications would this decision have?
- How would you feel?
- How honest could you be with your participants in this scenario?
Scenario 1: Emma

I spent time in public spaces engaging with young people on a range of issues, often crime, alcohol / drug consumption and sexual behaviour. It was frequently not possible (or appropriate) to seek consent.

One evening, a group of young people (known to me, but none active participants in the research) tell me a graphic story about their involvement (and subsequent arrest) in a violent, racist attack. The incident was talked about as both ‘fun’ and ‘normal’ – all key emerging themes in the study.

On this occasion, no consent was sought from the group to include their discussion in my research. I am unsure whether this interaction can be included as data.
Scenario 2: Emma

During a youth work session, I was observing the use of space within the youth club. The interactions between males and females were revealing the gendered use of space, with the young males occupying the Centre’s physical and social space. I witness one of the males hit one of the females. She laughs the incident off, telling me it ‘happens all the time’.

I am the only adult present. How I am unsure how to react.
Scenario 3: Emma

About 6 months in the 18 month fieldwork I begin interviewing young people. Most of these young people know about the research and have chatted to me informally on the street or at the young club. No consent forms have been collected.

I have a consent form, designed for the ethics committee. However, I am not sure whether I should use it in the interviews.
Scenario 1: Christina

I spend a lot of time developing relationships with research participants, encouraging them to trust me and talk about the realities of their lives. Towards the end of my fieldwork one young woman approaches me and asks if she could speak to me in private, which is quite unusual in Laos.

We have talked previously about how she wants to study social work at university and I have encouraged her in this aspiration. However, she explains that her family are putting pressure on her to leave school as they cannot afford school fees. She is distraught and apologetically asks me if I can help her to find the money for school fees, the equivalent of £30 per year for 2 more years.
Scenario 2: Christina

When talking about the things that made them happy, the most common phrase used by young volunteers in Laos is “having a warm family” and we spend significant time in research workshops discussing what this means.

After one of these workshops one young woman is obviously quite distressed. Although initially reluctant to talk about what was wrong, in the course of a conversation it becomes apparent that her family doesn’t live up to the Lao cultural ideal of warm family and she is finding the other young people’s descriptions of their families upsetting. I feel a responsibility to the young woman but am also aware that this is interesting data for my research.
Scenario 3: Christina

Although the young volunteers with one project originally expressed a strong desire to participate in my research I am increasingly finding that their participation is dropping off and I’m not sure whether this is about challenging dynamics within the project or waning interest in the research. Whenever I try to talk to them about this they assure me that they are still interested but I am finding turning that interest into participation in workshops frustrating.

I am committed to participatory research – but am unsure how to progress with my fieldwork.
Suggested reading


