IMPROVISATION, ETHICAL HEURISTICS AND THE DIALOGICAL REALITY OF ETHICS IN THE FIELD

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ABSTRACT

Purpose – This chapter builds on our personal experiences of researching primary schools. The chapter begins by discussing some important subjective accounts of conducting qualitative research, and the unavoidable (often unexpected) dilemmas that confront researchers whilst ‘in the field’. This provides the backdrop against which our own experiences of conducting research will be considered.

Methodology/approach – Whilst it is vital and necessary for researchers to abide by the relevant code(s) of ethical conduct, the authors argue that the contingent nature of qualitative research necessitates a degree of personal ethical discretion. The ethical frameworks of bodies such as The British Educational Research Association and the British Sociological Association are prima facie generalised, and cannot cover all ethical potentialities. Ethically sensitive researchers not only will be vigilant in adhering to the guiding framework, but will also be acutely aware of the situated nature of many ethical issues.
Findings – Researchers can never be fully prepared for the ethical issues they will confront in the field. However, the authors believe that if researchers share the eccentricities of their empirical experiences with others in their field, then researchers can be better prepared for the ethical challenges awaiting them. As such, this chapter draws upon our own fieldwork experiences in a rural village school in Norfolk and in a series of suburban/rural primary schools in North East England. The chapter does not offer a series of recommendations, but rather an exploration of the practical lessons that the authors have taken from the field.

Keywords: Situational ethics; educational research; primary school; reflectivity; case study

INTRODUCTION

The chapter stemmed from a conversation regarding the ethical issues that both authors confronted when conducting research in primary schools. Reflecting on our individual experiences in rural and suburban schools, we found that some ethical issues commonly faced by researchers are not widely discussed in standard methods textbooks. As a result, we felt it important to examine some of the issues we encountered whilst conducting our individual research projects in primary school contexts. Following the tradition set by Whyte’s (1993) [1943] Street Corner Society and Liebow’s (1967) Tally’s Corner, what follows is less a ‘how to’ methods guide than a reflective, ‘confessional tale’ of our research experiences, with a specific focus on the ethical issues that arose. Whilst introductory methods textbooks remain an important resource for social researchers, there is a danger in such texts to present normative guidelines of an unproblematic research process. Whilst the ‘messy’ nature of social research is increasingly acknowledged (Law, 2004), often the empirical work one plans to do is transformed by a wealth of unforeseen circumstances that arise ‘in the field’. The chapter will begin by introducing the two research projects that provide the material to be discussed throughout. Attention will then go on to consider some contributions to the tradition of reflective research accounts before the importance of what we have termed a situated ethics, and a situated ethical account of how we faced and responded to such circumstances is discussed. The main part of the chapter will therefore explore the unique ethical issues that
surfaced whilst conducting our own research projects – and how we addressed them at the time and now again in reflection.

Edwards’ doctoral research was an evaluation of the impact of School Sport Partnerships (SSPs) in primary schools in North East England. The core element of the case-based study consists of interviews with teaching staff. The purpose of the interviews was to understand what individual schools believed the impact of SSPs to be. Gaining the views of teaching staff was considered the most effective way in which an overall assessment of the SSP’s impact on the school could be made. Three schools with divergent characteristics (relative to the sample population) were selected so as to include a range of contexts and outcomes. One of the case study schools, with over 250 pupils, is located in a deprived ex-mining town. The second had a pupil body of around 150 children and was positioned in a small affluent village on the outskirts of a mid-size town. The final school had fewer than 50 pupils and was situated in a relatively isolated rural area with an above average level of affluence. Certain characteristics of each school varied significantly – the size of the pupil body and staff force, rural/urban location, Ofsted inspectorate grading, location vis-à-vis the school’s SSP, and the relative affluence of the locality and the process of conducting research in the three schools also differed significantly.

Hillyard’s research was a case study of a primary within the context of its rural village – challenging to what degree the school could be argued to be ‘at the heart of the village’. The village was in north Norfolk, the East of England, with a population of circa 600. The village, in addition to its school, had a pub, a shop and Post Office and a Church of England church. It was located approximately five miles from the nearest market town and around an hour’s drive from the nearest city (Norwich). The school role was circa 50 pupils, arranged into three classes. The fieldwork in the village involved three periods of residence, in September, Easter and early summer and the research methods drew on those within an ethnographic research tradition. It is the issues we encountered whilst conducting research in these schools that provides part of the material to be discussed in this chapter.

THE IMPORTANCE OF SUBJECTIVE RESEARCH ACCOUNTS

The seminal works of Whyte (1993) and Liebow (1967) are as celebrated for the reflective accounts of the research process as for their important
theoretical contribution. Both authors provide a candid and insightful commentary on their ethnographic work, which locates the respective studies in a rich contextual framework. For Whyte (1993, p. 279), a lengthy narrative was necessary as he believed his contemporaries placed the discussion of methods ‘entirely on a logical–intellectual basis’ – an observation that retains much of its significance 60 years on. Whyte (1993, p. 279) contends that such reticence results in a failure to identify the important effect that researchers have upon the observed; he argues that a ‘real explanation’ of how the research played out necessitates ‘a rather personal account’ of the empirical process. Indeed, without such a subjective account of Whyte’s research, readers would be ignorant of the extraordinary extent to which he immersed himself into one Italian family, and the impact that this level of submersion ultimately had upon his research. In Tally’s Corner, Liebow (1967) also provides a fascinating insight into the research process, shedding some light on the ethical issues that arose as a result of his relationship with one respondent, Tally. After selecting a research site on the suggestion that it would be ‘a good place to get [his] feet wet’, Liebow demonstrates how one’s research plans can be transformed as a result of unforeseen circumstances. As he reflects, ‘I went so deep that I was completely submerged and my plan to do three or four separate studies, each with its own neat, clean boundaries, dropped forever out of sight’ (Liebow, 1967, pp. 236–237). The actual path Liebow’s research took was fashioned ‘almost without [his] being aware of it’ (Liebow, 1967, p. 237). Liebow found himself acting as a leader for some of his delinquent associates and, in one particular situation, acting as a spokesman in an extradition hearing. Similarly, Whyte (1993) found himself fronting a protest march on City Hall; standing up for members of the local Italian community who he had come to know intimately.

Liebow’s account of how the research changed due to the unique situation in which he found himself supports the central contention of this chapter – no amount of organisation in advance can fully prepare researchers for the idiosyncrasies of the research site and the negotiations that must be made throughout the empirical process. The style in which Whyte and Liebow present their reflective accounts can be seen as catalysts for a trend towards more subjective insights into social research. It is not the content alone that prompted interest, but the style in which both reported on their research – more literary, perhaps essayistic, than academic; descriptive, engaging and humorous. A number of edited collections providing similar accounts were published from the 1970s onwards (e.g. Bell & Encel, 1978; Bell & Newby, 1976; Bell & Roberts, 1984; Burgess, 1984), and several collections
specifically relating to educational research were also produced (Burgess, 1985, 1989; Walford, 1991). Indeed, to the extent that some reflective commentaries could be argued to have exceeded the length of some original research monographs! It is beyond the scope of this chapter to review the findings of these texts, other than to note that this is now a valued addition to the qualitative research canon.

At the heart of this movement, personified by such edited collections and this volume, is a belief that ‘accounts of doing sociological [and educational] research are at least as valuable […] as the exhortations to be found in the much more common textbooks on methodology’ (Bell & Newby, 1976, p. 9).

For a thorough account of the research process, authors should reflect on both the theoretical and subjective aspects of their work, so as to provide a broad, reflexive account. The predilection towards the former at the expense of the latter systematically evades important information about the research process. Walford (1991, p. 1) produces a damming critique of the conventional – ‘careful, objective, step-by-step’ – model of the empirical process.

He argues that such traditional methods of teaching and reporting on research methods contribute to ‘a myth of objectivity’, leading to a situation whereby:

Most social science and educational research methods textbooks have abstracted the researcher from the process of research in the same way as have natural science textbooks. The social dimension of research is omitted and the process is presented as a cold analytic practice where any novice researcher can follow set recipes and obtain predetermined results. (Walford, 1991, p. 2)

The emphasis on objectivity leads to what Burgess (1984, p. 1) terms a ‘conspiracy of silence’. At the expense of striving towards objectivity, research often fails to adequately discuss the subjective, emotive and personal nature of the process. Many issues that are confronted in the field are, therefore, bypassed in the write-up and the opportunity for the dissemination of practical experience and advice is significantly reduced. The result is that researchers fail to learn from the experience of others and, for novice researchers in particular, enter the field with a naive (but justified) belief that their research will ‘work itself out’ as it does in methods textbooks. The myth of simply ‘going forth into the field and doing likewise’ as the early, great anthropologist instructed their students is no longer sufficient. A specific element of the process which is often skimmed over and treated more like an obligatory chore in the publication or research grant approval process than an insightful, constructive and important component, are that ethical considerations often overlap with the subjective realities of conducting
fieldwork. The chapter now moves on to discuss examples of subjective ethical accounts, but defines these broadly: as situations or contexts in which the researcher sensed significant implications for the fieldwork were at stake. It also takes a steer from Delamont’s (2009) confessional account – and concern – that her fieldwork was not ‘getting at’ the very processes with which she sought to engage. It attends to recent moves within the research community to appreciate the embodied and emotive nature of doing fieldwork (Coffey, 1999; Wolcott, 2010) and the potential dilemmas being in the field unwittingly and wittingly entails. As Wolcott’s (2010) account almost ruefully discusses in relation to his own fieldwork conduct, what feels appropriate in the course of the data collection may warrant justification later.

**SITUATIONAL ETHICS**

The reflexive turn in ethnographic and qualitative research has drawn attention to ethical issues in social and educational research. The majority of methods textbooks now include a section, if not a chapter dedicated to the subject – whereas once such issues were buried, as Thomas and Znaniecki’s (1958) [1919] now famous ‘methodological note’ testifies, in the appendices. Ethical statements – such as the British Educational Research Association’s [BERA] (2004) and British Sociological Association’s [BSA] (2002) ethical guidelines – are general principles, to be applied to all research conducted within the respective field. Of course, it would be beyond the scope of such a framework to attempt to cover all ethical potentialities. The BSA’s *Statement of Ethical Practice* goes further than BERA’s in acknowledging this situated character of ethical considerations, for example; ‘The statement is not exhaustive but summarises basic principles for ethical practice by sociologists. Departures from the principles should be the result of deliberation and not ignorance’ (BSA, 2002, p. 1). This statement implies that, *as far as possible*, researchers should abide by the stated principles, but in circumstances in which they become questionable, sensitivity and knowledge should guide the researcher.

Generalised frameworks, of which the BERA and BSA codes are examples, are of great importance, and few would refute their necessity; they provide researchers with ‘an essential shared framework and reference point for checking the integrity and consistency of [their] actions’ (Simons, 2000, p. 53). As the above quotation from the BSA code implies, though, such frameworks do not cover all eventualities and, as such, an additional form of ethical guidelines is needed. What is required is a situated ethics that takes into
consideration local and specific practices. A situated ethics, by its nature, cannot be universalised and therefore no framework can theorise such an ethical code (Simons & Usher, 2000). Yet one way in which researchers can learn of, and reflect upon, ethical potentialities is through reading about the issues faced by others. A candid documentary of ethical problems, such is our ambition here, can raise the awareness of other researchers as to potential issues they may encounter. This chapter hopes to add to the existing repertoire of knowledge by highlighting ethical issues that may confront researchers, specifically in primary school contexts.

It should be noted that, combined, general codes and past research should be used as guidelines only, for ethical issues cannot be solved sufficiently in abstract or theoretical terms (Figueroa, 2000). The decisions that are taken should be firmly situated in the context in which they emerge. The actions one makes when confronted with an ethical dilemma must conform to ethical guidelines and ideally be informed by past research. Ultimately, however, decisions should be made responsively, with a thoughtful and reflective approach (Figueroa, 2000; Glen, 2000). As Wellington (2000) has suggested, one of the most frequent exercises researchers engage in is compromise.

THE IMPACT OF RESEARCHERS IN THE EDUCATIONAL SETTING

Prior to engaging in any empirical work researchers should be confident that the project’s potential benefits outweigh any infringement on the research subjects. Expressed another way, the researcher should be able to leave the field reasonably confident in the knowledge that their presence has had no deleterious effect – akin to a ‘countryside code’ for fieldwork. Much qualitative research in schools necessitates children and/or teaching staff being observed within, or having to be absent from, the classroom setting. Be it through interviews with teachers, focus groups with children, observation of lessons, or any other method, the presence of researchers inevitably alters the educational – and fieldwork – setting. The legitimacy of any research that detracted from children’s education would be highly questionable. This is not to pretend or deny that the presence of a fieldworker will have some kind of impact. Three significant ways in which a researcher can affect the normal operation of a school are by: (a) affecting the behaviour of staff and pupils, (b) detracting from the time teachers or pupils spend in, or preparing for, classroom activities and (c) becoming a
logistical problem or a hindrance on the school’s finite resources. It is the responsibility of the researcher to develop and adapt their own situational ethical code to ensure any potential infringement – witting or otherwise – is kept to an appropriate level.

In relation to affecting staff and pupils, overt observation is known to impact upon the behaviour of research subjects, the so-called ‘Hawthorne Effect’. In schools, for example, teachers may adapt their teaching style or ‘impression-manage’ in the presence of an observer, or children might behave uncharacteristically so as to impress (or unimpress). It is impossible to determine the extent to which researchers affect those being observed because it is problematic to predict what ‘the behaviour would have been like if it hadn’t been observed’ (Robson, 2002, p. 311). However, our own research suggests the researcher’s presence does affect participants’ behaviour, to the extent that even the possibility of a researcher’s presence may risk or threaten access.

In Edwards’ observation of physical education (PE) lessons specifically, it frequently appeared as though children and teaching staff altered their behaviour to project a ‘front-staged’ image of themselves. The purpose of the lesson observation was to monitor the total length of lessons, the duration for which children were engaged in physical activity, to record the lesson content, and to assess the motivational climate (competitive or task based) that was facilitated (see Solomon, 1996 on motivational climates). Therefore, it differed from the more generic ethnographic task, simply to see what was occurring in that context. Teachers were told that no notes were being made on their pedagogical approach or the structure of the lesson – in short, they were assured that no judgments were being made about their teaching, Ofsted-style. Staff were also asked to tell the children of the researcher’s purpose, so that they understood there was no affiliation to a sports team or any other body interested in assessing their behaviour or performance. In most instances the class teacher would say that Edwards was conducting research for Durham University, based around what happens in PE lessons and how long they last. The children were told, in every lesson, that their behaviour or performance was not being assessed. Despite these measures, some teachers appeared to adapt their teaching style to influence Edwards’ perception. In numerous lessons staff members would look to the observer for a reaction when a new activity began, or when particular announcements were made towards, or by the pupils. Regardless of the teacher’s pronouncements that children were not being assessed by the observer, it appeared as though some pupils still attempted to impress with their talents (presumably believing the observer was a scout for a sport
club) – despite the sensitivity on the researcher’s behalf to the lesson being observed. In order to adapt to this unexpected situation, Edwards found himself having to direct attention away from those most eager to demonstrate their skills. After identifying this phenomenon, the importance attached to the children understanding the researcher’s role was further stressed to teachers.

Whilst it is impossible to prove that the observed lessons would have progressed in a different manner if they were not being observed, the researcher’s presence appeared to alter particular aspects or dynamics of the lesson. Again, whether this was a positive or negative affect is also difficult to ascertain. Whilst teachers looked in the direction of the researcher when they began new tasks, or disciplined/complimented pupils, it was the children who appeared to adapt their behaviour most significantly. Children would go to extra lengths to ensure their input was seen by Edwards; in particular, those (mostly male students) whose skills and technique appeared more developed than their peers would stand within close proximity of, and regularly glance towards the observer while executing tasks. This example demonstrates how the researcher’s presence impacted upon the lesson; both on the teaching of, and the motivational climate within (Solomon, 1996).

Given that both teachers and students were aware of the genuine research goals, but decided to reinterpret these, there was little more that could have been done to avoid such outcomes each lesson was observed, literally, from the ‘side-lines’, and due to the small size of most facilities I decided that moving position during the lesson would draw more attention to my presence.

The most obvious and unambiguous way that qualitative researchers affect schools is through the demands they make on research participants. For Edwards and Hillyard the greatest demand they placed on the schools’ resources was the time taken up by interviews with teaching staff and pupils. All of Edwards’ interviews were conducted within school time, thus meaning that teachers had to leave their class, or sacrifice their free time/lesson preparation, for the interview to take place. In one case a supply teacher was hired to cover the absence of staff, whereas in others the children were supervised by teaching assistants. Hillyard also interviewed groups of pupils during the school day, hence removing them briefly from their lessons. It is vital that such demands on respondents’ time are fully justified by research that is able to make good or effective use of such opportunities. In the unexpected case of the supply teacher being hired to cover staff absence, Edwards ensured that the school was financially reimbursed to reduce the burden on resources. Researchers should also be mindful of the sheer
logistical demands their research can place on schools; accommodating researchers and allowing them to observe lessons, view confidential data, interview teachers or whatever else their project demands, can be time-consuming to arrange. With the gatekeeper often being a senior staff member, with their own significant administrative and organisational commitments, this inevitably places an additional pressure on their workload.

In the Norfolk context, the concentrated periods of fieldwork placed pressure on ‘getting into’ the school and making good progress by facilitating a rapport and making good opportunities for further fieldwork. Prior to arriving in Norfolk, access had been negotiated via letter and follow up telephone calls with the head teacher and the school manager. Like Edwards, several schools were approached before a positive response was secured. Therefore, there was undeniably a concern to consolidate this preliminary contact and further engender a working relationship within the school once we had met face-to-face. As Edwards described, initial meetings with members of staff were arranged or liaised by the gatekeeper – the head teacher – in a semi formal way. Such interviews, whilst useful for familiarising the researcher with the school and its staff were however conducted briefly, in semi-public areas of the school (such as the reception foyer seating area) and hence limited in the rich kind of insight into the school Hillyard was keen to gain. In such a small school, it was possible to speak with all key members of staff within a short time frame, but it was not until she returned after the Christmas period, and again in the summer, that Hillyard came to understand some of the pressures and tensions the school was experiencing. Like Edwards, she had a sense that much was going on, but had little opportunity or access in the early stages to observe or to explore. Whilst opportunistic in negotiating access to lessons, school files and information, the pace could not be forced and entailed the repeated negotiation of access via different heads and class teachers. The continuity of contact with the school manager was also vital to maintaining a dialogue and the opportunity to spend a great deal of time in the school.

Ironically, in the case of Hillyard’s fieldwork in Norfolk (and she remains unclear to what degree this impacted upon her access), it was the school facing difficult circumstances that led to a greater insight. This arguably improved Hillyard’s ability to demonstrate appreciation, sympathy and sensitivity towards their circumstances. As Rojek (2007) notes, ‘traditional British values are slippery abstractions [...] Often it is only when these ideals are infringed or violated that they become a cause célèbre’ (Rojek 2007, p. 11). In this instance, the school changed their head teacher again (there were three different heads during the course of my fieldwork); hosted an
Ofsted inspection at short-notice and both of their core, permanent members of teaching staff experienced significant illnesses. It seemed that every time Hillyard returned to the school for another period of fieldwork, or spoke with staff via telephone, that another challenge had arrived. By the end of the fieldwork, with a new head appointed and staff recovered or new appointments made, combined with an improved Ofsted inspection result, the year had been tumultuous. Yet by understanding this context, Hillyard was able to ask questions that demonstrated insider knowledge of their circumstances and hence to celebrate their successes, albeit as an outsider. This involved the renegotiation of fieldwork relationships with gatekeepers, such as the new head teachers.

The knowledge of an insider also brought with it responsibilities. As Hillyard became privy to some points of conflict between staff, the surrounding community and also former employees, I had effectively come to know more of the school’s history and its past role in the village than many residents or school staff. I had also come to see a variety of points of view, not all of which were supportive of the pupils, school or community. This included overhearing a racist discussion of newcomers in the village pub one evening (Hillyard promptly left); accusations of bullying in the school (which she explored but considered unsupported by her fieldwork) and several allegations of embezzlement and fraud. As we have attempted to acknowledge, our concern was exploratory and non-interventionist. It is, as Payne (1996) argues, a misnomer that fieldwork will only involve meeting nice people and pleasant experiences. Hillyard did not expect to encounter such a variety of opinion in such a sleepy rural setting, but it demonstrated that fieldwork retains an important capacity to shock and surprise (Delamont, 2002).

This section has attempted to show through our own fieldwork that regardless of access or arrangements secured in advance, the realities of being in a school impacted upon the quality of data we were able to gather. It also highlights some of the logistical difficulties encountered in the field, and highlights the necessity of dealing with such issues in a situated manner. The situational ‘issues’ that confronted both researchers warranted immediate responses, in the absence of a prescriptive ethical framework, and in an appropriate manner. All researchers will inevitably differ in how they respond to unexpected occurrences, and it would be futile to expect researchers to manage their response directly in accordance with – what may be a situationally inappropriate – ethical code. Researchers must apply their knowledge of ethical frameworks in a sensitive, but largely *ad hoc* way in order to satisfy the issues confronting them.
WHY TRUST SOCIAL RESEARCHERS? THE ‘INNOCENT FIELDWORKER’ IN LITIGIOUS TIMES

On the first day observing PE lessons in one pilot school, Edwards found himself in an uncomfortable and ethically challenging situation. Prior to the lesson beginning he was invited to wait in the classroom whilst the year one children got ready for a PE lesson. After sitting in the corner finalising the observation schedule, Edwards looked up to find the whole class in the middle of changing into their PE kits. Children were partially dressed (at best), walking about innocently in their underwear whilst they stumbled around putting their PE kits and footwear on. Being immediately struck by the degree of exposure to the children, he vacated the room, telling the teacher that he would wait outside. Sitting in the corridor waiting for the children to emerge for their lesson the severity of the situation was considered. The researcher had been in the school for an hour at most, had no prior knowledge of any teachers, and the school had only received a basic explanatory letter from him. A Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) certificate had been provided, but no further investigations were made. A series of questions ran through Edwards’ mind; What if a person with ulterior motives had been granted such a degree of trust? How would parents react if their child told them a man was watching them get changed? What if another teacher had walked past and reported the researcher’s presence in such a setting to the head teacher? The possible outcomes of any of these scenarios could have severely damaged the research project and reputation of the researcher, particularly in such litigious times for adults researching young children (Pole, 2007). Fortunately, none of these potentialities occurred on this occasion.

The school had consented to lesson observation, and the teacher evidently felt it acceptable to allow the researcher to be present whilst the children undressed. Ethically and morally, however, Edwards was uncomfortable with the situation and thus decided to remove himself from the classroom. This, he decided, was the obvious action to take. Should the teacher have been told that the researcher felt it inappropriate to be in attendance for such a situation? Or should the incident have been reported to the head teacher (to avoid the same thing happening in future)? In this instance the decision taken was not to say anything as it may have reflected badly on the teacher in question, the senior academic who had negotiated access for the research, and may possibly had even damaged links between the university and school. This is not to say that the safety and well-being of the
children was not considered. There appear to have been several reasons that help explain the high level of trust received, and thus influenced the decision not to voice concerns. Being attached to a reputable university may have increased the level of trust, as possibly would the credentials of, and close links to the school that the academic staff member who negotiated access had. The age and appearance (a young, white, middle-class student) also may have given a positive image to teaching staff, that was interpreted as being ‘trustworthy’. This is not to excuse the degree of freedom that was so quickly given to the relatively new outsider, but it does help explain the reasoning behind the apparent indifference of staff. It contrasts with Hillyard’s experience in Norfolk, where attending the village pre-school, she was asked to leave her mobile phone (which contained a camera) in the secured staff room and was closely supervised in her contact with the children until confirmation of her CRB check arrived.6

A second issue that relates to trust is the different level of rigour with which schools conduct initial security checks of researchers. Visitors to schools must produce a CRB certificate on entry if they are spending any sustained period of time in the school and in contact with the children. Whilst a recent CRB was viewed in each school, the formality of the procedure varied widely. In one school Edwards was asked to provide photographic evidence so that the CRB certificate could be cross-referenced to ensure its legitimacy. The documents were then photocopied for reference. In another school (not case study) no request was made to view a CRB certificate. The CRB was viewed only at the researcher’s (insistent) suggestion. It was glanced over by a teacher and then quickly handed back. All schools had a signing-in process but, again, only one asked for proof of identity. As researchers are often unsupervised in schools (or find themselves present within dubious situations – as discussed above), the onus is upon the ethically minded researcher to present the appropriate documentation, regardless of whether it is asked for, in the interests of good practice.

A further issue relates to gaining access. In two of the three case study schools that Edwards visited, the gatekeepers (head teachers) had PhDs in Education. Both of these gatekeepers were notably more accommodating than any other school that was visited (n=8), with both allowing the researcher to interview staff, observe lessons and analyse PE files, as well as going to extra lengths to accommodate the researcher’s needs. On several occasions these teachers empathised with the difficulty PhD students face when accessing primary schools and offered as much assistance as required.

Whether or not this is a general issue would be interesting to know,
although much research avoids mention of such issues. The implications of such a trend could impact significantly upon the reliability and representativeness of research in schools. If only a minority of schools frequently grant researchers access, this is also ethically problematic as pupils within these schools may have their education disproportionately affected by observation, or class teachers being absent from classrooms for research purposes. Indeed, in selecting her fieldwork site for her PhD fieldwork, Hillyard was steered away from approaching several local schools, which had already participated in university projects. Similarly to Edwards, the continued access into the Norfolk school was further eased by the new head teacher’s son having attended Durham University.

An acknowledgment of the role that a subliminal-Old Boy Network plays in conducting field research itself risks ethical question marks being raised. The cross-permeation of business, political and social networks by the elite is long-acknowledged (Scott, 1992). Instances where professional networks impacted upon our fieldwork were discovered during fieldwork, and did not alter our research’s trajectories or aims. Nevertheless, it further supports our argument that the situations researchers are confronted with vary widely, and in a way that contains ethical implications for the data that it is, or is not possible to collect. In some instances they are made good by networks, in others there is a need to withdraw or be pro-active in managing the circumstances in which you may find yourself.

DEGREES OF FREEDOM AND ‘STAGE MANAGEMENT’

Head teachers often play a pivotal role in granting access to researchers in primary schools. As mentioned above, the likelihood of gaining access can be improved via several strategies – a referral from a mutual associate or even being an Old Boy (former pupil) yourself, such as when Hillyard once conducted research at her former primary school. When a head teacher – or any other gatekeeper – grants access to a school site, whilst they may be in a key position within the institution, it does not – and should not be taken to imply – that the individual staff members are consenting. The head teacher is merely allowing a researcher into the school; it is, theoretically, the decision of the teachers themselves as to whether they want to participate and engage with the research. When allowed into a school, however, it is difficult for researchers to establish the degree of freedom that teachers or pupils have in
consenting to participate in research. That is, researchers may not be privy to
the kind of conversation that preceded the research, or the manner in which
the research was introduced or presented to the institution’s members.

In both Edwards’ and Hillyard’s research, it was head teachers who
granted initial access. It was they, also, who arranged for the interviews to
take place with teaching staff (albeit in the first instance in the case of
Hillyard). Edwards, for example, was told to arrive at school for a particular
time to interview $X$ number of teachers. This is clearly a more practical
method than approaching each member of staff individually given the
relatively limited time Edwards anticipated spending in the field. However,
there remains the degree to which class teachers and those in the schools
were given a free opportunity to opt out of the research. In accordance with
BERA and BSA ethical codes, all respondents were briefed on the research
and asked to sign an informed consent form in Edwards’ research. Edwards
found at least two respondents were dissatisfied with taking part in the
research; although the individuals ‘agreed’ to be interviewed and gave
informed consent, it was clear that they would rather not partake. As a result
of their subsequent reticence, the interviews were short and the interviewees
apathetic – a form of resistance from participation in itself. Similarly, in the
early days of her fieldwork, Hillyard was very much a passing visitor-in-
school and initial rapport with staff stood in the way of the more detailed and
confidential conversations-with-a-purpose that unfolded across the year.

Our point here is that these stages of negotiation or ‘buy-in’ for participants
is key. Our concern was that participants may consent to be interviewed, but
not in a situation in which they are completely at-ease. The institutional
hierarchy of all schools and the relative power of the head teacher must
be acknowledged, and it may or may not be possible to broker a more
sustained relationship across the fieldwork or in order to allay participants’
concerns and then generate a richer insight into that social setting. In the case
of Edwards’ fieldwork, he retained a sense that there was much more to
‘unlock’ in that social setting than his research had accessed. For Hillyard,
the unfortunate co-incidence of a series of unforeseeable circumstances was
to some degree eased by the background of the new head teacher and also the
possibilities that extended periods spent in the field permit.

A further problem relating to the relationship between class teacher and
head teacher concerns a certain degree of ‘stage management’ that can take
place. When speaking to teachers in one school it became clear that they had
been provided with information reminding (or telling) them to mention
particular physical activities that the school had offered. When a teacher
was asked to see the day’s interview schedule there was, written on the
opposite side—and clearly not intended for the researcher’s viewing—the following handwritten notes:

Wide range offered.
Cheer leading—multi sports
Link with other experts/agencies—dancemats
  – cheerleading
  – tennis
  – rugby
  – hockey
  – karate
  – table tennis

This invites an interpretation that respondents were given a clear ‘steer’ by a senior staff member as to what information to discuss during the interviews. The staff member who made this list had thought about possible lines of questioning, and in order to provide the researcher with a positive impression of the school, then wrote down some prompts or potential answers. This of course challenged the very validity of the research and its ability to answer its core questions about SSPs. Little can be done to reduce the chances of such occurrences as all interviewees, in most social research, can be briefed by a superior prior to being interviewed, and of course in schooling contexts, a great deal of preparation or staging is arranged prior to formal evaluations, such as Ofsted inspections (Jeffrey & Woods, 1998). In this particular case of Edwards’ research, the ‘briefing’ bears little impact on the overall findings, as it merely summarised the activities on offer within the school. What was of more concern to Edwards was the degree of freedom with which teachers could offer their own experience and interpretation of the initiative.

One of the challenges Hillyard faced was to attempt to get behind the ‘front-stage’ presentation of the school, in order to understand its relationship with the local community. Unlike positivistic research, there is rarely a clear-cut hypothesis to confirm or reject during fieldwork, or a moment where a clear sense of having become an ‘insider’ is gained. It is only a blurred and indistinct sense that you have become part of an accustomed ‘daily round’ of the school day—a familiar figure who is included in events, rather than a visiting researcher who is wheeled out before a class or
assembly and formally introduced. It also, akin to Liebow’s (1967) reflection on coming to care about the community he was researching, includes a sense of when to withdraw from the research setting and when to be sensitive about questioning. For example, during the Norfolk fieldwork, I was trawling through the school’s early logs (a series of substantial volumes) and working in a small room outside the staff room after school hours. The school had just appointed its new head and I knew how important this was for the future of the school, as several people had questioned its viability and even whether the post would attract a field of suitably qualified applicants. The new head was visiting that afternoon and met the temporary head in the staff room. The school was by then empty and I was concerned not to hamper their conversation by continuing to work in a room within earshot. I therefore made my excuses, suggesting I hadn’t the stamina of head teacher-types for working late (which invited a joke about university-types) and then left. I still was able to complete my review of the logs before leaving the field. Therefore, at times, exercising discretion becomes more appropriate than further data collection.

We have attempted to offer a few examples from our own time spent in primary schools as a means to raise some issues for further thought. Whilst we acknowledge that fieldwork preparation cannot anticipate every even-tuality, we were still struck by the diversity of freedoms and opportunities that our case study schools and research sites permitted. Not all can be explained by the different characteristics of the researchers themselves, but it does seem to suggest that much responsibility must be taken on by individual researchers: both in their own interests of safety and also discretion and respect for the research site and social actors they will spend time with. Ironically, this includes being provided with too much access to unsupervised settings as well as being sensitive towards why respondents may be inhibited or less forthcoming in their engagement with the research.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has sought to demonstrate, via reference to our separate experiences of conducting research in primary schools, that researchers need to employ an ethical sensitivity that is responsive to the situations by which they are (often unexpectedly) confronted. We suggest that, in addition to adherence to wider ethical codes, researchers have no choice but to be reflective and adaptive. This ‘situational ethics’ is vital for, and perhaps
unavoidable in, conducting ethical sound research. We hope that the various examples discussed above will aid readers in contemplating the kinds of situational issues that may emerge in their own research.

All fieldwork involves feeling uncomfortable and out-of-place at times, as the strange becomes familiar to you (Delamont, 2002). But the ethics of this become more serious and can hold greater implication when you also feel you are being steered towards a particular definition of the situation or receiving only ‘half the picture’. There are also moments, as we have shown, when you may be shocked and unsettled by what you encounter. Some instances may threaten your professional standing and it is vital to be prepared – or at least mindful – as best you can. At other times, it is more apt to exercise discretion. In the interests of professional conduct, not all one hears will be appropriate for publication (less for fear of libel, as Bell and Newby (1976) reported). Qualitative research involves encountering opinion and ‘gossip’, but how this features warrants both careful reflection and careful use. In a similar respect, not all that one sees whilst conducting research – particularly in the presence of vulnerable persons – should be ‘seen’. Researchers must use their disciplinary training, understanding of ethical codes and personal discretion to ensure that they act appropriately, even if this means the cessation (albeit temporarily) of their work.

We therefore follow with interest the arguments made by others in this volume as to the appropriate role for an ethical public ethnography, where intervention is embedded and an impact agenda championed.

NOTES

1. The relative deprivation/affluence of the schools’ localities was determined by the assertions made in the most recent Ofsted inspection of the school (for further information see http://schoolsfinder.direct.gov.uk/).
2. ESRC research grant no. RES-000-22-3412.
3. The note was important in the impact it had upon fieldwork good practice (a landmark reflective piece). Nevertheless, if was placed in the appendices rather than embedded in the main research monograph volumes.
4. A cheque for just under £90 was written for the school, coming from Edwards’ Researcher Training Support Grant.
6. The timing of the fieldwork coincided with the Vanessa George’s Plymouth playgroup abuse breaking into the UK news. The careful management of Hillyard’s participation at the playground by the group’s co-ordinator protected both researcher and the children in that first instance.
REFERENCES


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