Positionalities and Knowledge: Negotiating Ethics in Practice

Peter E. Hopkins[1]

School of Geography, Politics and Sociology, Newcastle University,
Newcastle, UK NE1 7RU
Email: peter.hopkins@ncl.ac.uk

Abstract

In this article, I draw upon my experience of working on two research projects – one with young Muslim men (Hopkins, 2006) and one with unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (Hopkins and Hill, 2006; Hopkins, in press) – in order to reflect critically upon the negotiation of ethics in practice. The paper charts two of the ethical issues which were central to these projects; concerning multiple positionalities, and different knowledges and understandings of ethical practices. Although neither of these projects constituted a fully participatory research approach, they were both designed and conducted with participatory values in mind, and the issues raised and discussed here are of particular relevance to research of this nature.

Positionalities of researchers

For some time now, human geographers have been called on to recognise 'our own positionality' (Jackson, 1993: 211), to explore the 'politics of position' (Smith, 1993: 305), and to examine this reflexively (Rose, 1997). In particular, the work of feminist and other critical geographers has been crucial in highlighting the importance of reflecting critically upon the multiple positionalities of the researcher

(Anderson, 1998, Kobayashi, 2003, Mohammad, 2001, Vanderbeck, 2005) and thinking through the ways in which various identities may influence and shape research encounters, processes and outcomes (Skelton, in press). Examples of this work include the reflections of Valentine (2002) and Vanderbeck (2005) on the ways in which constructions of gender and sexuality influence and shape research encounters, and the perspectives of Archer (2003) and Mohammad (2001) with regards to the complex ways in which the race and ethnicity of the researcher can determine the structure of everyday interactions when doing research.

Critical reflection upon the positionalities of the researcher and the researched is now regarded as accepted practice amongst many feminist and critical geographers. However, such approaches have also been critiqued as part of 'cultural geography's fragmenting, reflexive self-obsession' (Peach, 2002: 252), and Kobayashi (2003: 347-348) has 'struggled' over the 'reflexive turn' as she is concerned that it is 'actually a privileged and self-indulgent focus on the self' that is at odds with the philosophies of feminism and anti-racism. Kobayashi (2003) also clarifies that reflexivity has little purpose unless it is connected to a wider purpose and agenda about how the world should be, and how the world needs to change. Therefore, it is important for researchers to consider what they are doing and how and why they are doing it, as well as thinking about who they are. A key question connected with participatory ethics is the level of involvement, consultation and participation afforded to the different groups involved in research (Cahill, 2004, Pain, 2004, Pain and Francis, 2003). Being reflexive is therefore only a small part of the overall research process, as there are a range of other important questions to be asked about the motivations for doing the research, the methods used, analysis techniques and processes for dissemination.

Although the importance of researchers' positionalities is a subject matter for continued debate within the discipline, it is still a significant aspect of the ways in which researchers are read and interpreted by research participants. It is therefore also an ethical consideration that requires reflection throughout the research process. There is a disjuncture, therefore, between the negotiations of this aspect of ethics in practice and the process of receiving ethical approval from an ethics committee. The detached, disembodied and 'tick-box' approach adopted by many ethics committees often renders absent the positionalities of the researchers, downplaying the significance of researchers' life experiences, biographies and complex identities. Ethics committees draw conclusions based on the experiences and qualifications of research teams and may have access to particular information about the age and gender of individual researchers. Many other aspects of an individual's identities and positionalities are overlooked. For example, Hill (2005) points out that children – and in particular young children – tend to be smaller and physically weaker than adults. The height, size, build and general deportment of a researcher working with young children may therefore have important consequences for the nature of the research process, the type of data collected and

the responsiveness of the research participants. I am not suggesting that tall or large people cannot do research with young people, however, researchers 'can seek to minimize the authority image they convey, for instance … sitting in a position and level comfortable for the child' (Hill, 2005: 63).

In doing research, it is important that researchers are considerate of both the similarities and differences between themselves and the research participants. As Harvey (1996: 360) clarifies:

> Difference can never be characterised, therefore, as "absolute otherness, a complete absence of relationship or shared attributes." The similarity deployed to measure difference and otherness requires, then, just as close an examination (theoretically as well as politically) as does the production of otherness and difference itself. Neither can be established without the other. To discover the basis of similarity (rather than to presume sameness) is to uncover the basis for alliance formation between seemingly disparate groups (Harvey, 1996: 360).

Pratt *et al*. (2007) make a similar point in suggesting that cultural, social and economic differences can be used productively in research: 'Indeed, recognizing this productivity is one means of working with – rather than attempting to overcome – difference'. So, as well as considering differences, it is also useful to think 'past difference' (Jacobs, 2000: 403) and recognise positions of 'betweennness' (Nast, 1994: 57) in conducting ethical research.

My research with young Muslim men in Scotland (Hopkins, 2006) provides a useful example of the importance of considering differences as well as similarities. The perceived difference between the research participants and myself are often raised by other researchers as ethical issues. I am not Muslim nor do I have a Pakistani or South Asian heritage (as most of the research participants did). In this sense I am different from the research participants. At the time of conducting the research, I was a young Scottish man, and so possessed a number of personal characteristics similar to the young men. Like the majority of the young men, I was born in Scotland, speak with a Scottish accent and have lived most of my life in urban Scotland. Furthermore, I attended one of Scotland's largest multi-racial secondary schools, Shawlands Academy, a school attended by some of the research participants. All of these factors helped me in 'alliance formation' (Harvey, 1996: 360) as I was able to establish a rapport with the young Muslim men involved in the research drawing upon our shared experiences and attributes. Before commencing the research, it would have been unlikely that I could have predicted these points of connection and difference, which emerged during the research process. The multiple, interweaving and intersecting ways in which our various positionalities and identities are revealed, negotiated and managed in research encounters are crucial to the conduct of ethical research. It is important

that, where possible, these issues are conveyed throughout the research process in order that researchers can demonstrate the various ways in which they seek to conduct ethical research and the methodological strategies they intend to adopt in advancing such aims. It may be challenging – and almost impossible to do this – however; this is still an important issue and often requires a greater openness and adoption of less inflexible perspectives.

Knowledges and understandings of ethical practices

The growing importance afforded to conducting ethical research has been accompanied by a proliferation of guidance, codes and policies on doing ethical research (Bell, in press) and in thinking through participatory ethics, these guidelines offer an important reference point (Manzo and Brightbill, in press). There are a number of guidelines on which geographers may usefully draw. The Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) in the UK has recently developed a 'Research Ethics Framework', the British Sociological Association has a 'Statement of Ethical Practice and the American Anthropological Association have a 'Code of Ethics'. Guidance for working with specific groups also exists. For example, researchers working with children may find it useful to refer to Alderson and Morrow's (2004) framework for doing social research with children and the Glasgow Centre for the Child and Society (undated) recently produced a code of practice on research ethics (see Hopkins and Bell, in press). As well as official guidelines, local organisations and agencies also often have sets of guidelines and best practice procedures for working with particular groups. It is important that researchers are familiar with the different guidance that exists with regards to the research participants they intend working with. It is also crucial that researchers are sensitive to areas of ambiguity within and between guidelines as well as any contradictions between the practices of practitioners and the best practice examples of particular ethical codes. The plural sense of knowlege*s* and understanding*s* is important here as although knowledge of ethics is important, researchers also need to be sensitive to varying contextual knowledges about appropriate ethic. This means learning from others involved in research – organisations, research participants, children, families – about what they want, what suits them and what they perceive to be ethical.

In conducting research with unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (Hopkins and Hill, 2006), I came to recognise how important it is that researchers are familiar with ethical practices and 'best practice' in the particular fields in which they are doing research and the need to consider and shape these with research participants through the research process. Having read much of the guidance about working with unaccompanied minors, I was aware that interpreting and translation services were a particularly sensitive area. Crawley (2004: 48) observes that 'insofar as possible, interpreters should be skilled and trained in interpreting for children. Children should be asked if they want a male or female

interpreter' (Crawley, 2004: 48). This was supported by Chester (2001: 165) who clarifies that: 'when picking an interpreter it should not be assumed that because the interpreter is from the same country as the child that they speak the same language or dialect. The interpreter may in fact come from another ethnic, religious, cultural or political group that may hold views opposite to that of the child' (Chester, 2001: 165). Lynch and Cuninghame (2000: 386), alongside a number of experienced professionals that I consulted in this research, note that it is inappropriate to use children as interpreters (Lynch and Cuninghame, 2000: 386). I was therefore aware of this for a number of reasons, especially when, with their consent, the children were being asked about sensitive and personal information connected with their pre-flight experiences (see Hopkins and Hill, in press).

However, when negotiating access with gatekeepers and making arrangements to interview unaccompanied minors in their care, some service providers suggested to me that they could ask the children to interpret for each other. This clearly contradicts existing guidelines, and since I was aware of this, I conveyed this to the service providers concerned and suggested that we used the interpreters provided by the Scottish Refugee Council. Had I not been aware of the existing guidance with regards to interpreting, aside from the ways in which interpreters actively shape research encounters (Edwards, 1998), I could have taken up the suggestions of these service providers, motivated by having gained access and an opportunity to hear about the views and experiences of another child. This could have risked the well-being of the children involved, possibly heightening their traumatic experiences, causing distress and breaching principles of confidentiality. This would clearly have been unethical (Hill, 2005). This example demonstrates how important it is that researchers familiarise themselves with the various ethical guidelines and best practice documents available in their field of study, and be willing to discuss, put into action and reflect upon these with the people they do research with. Furthermore, different communities may have different conceptions and competing understandings of what ethical research is (Sanderson and Kindon, 2004) and care should be taken to be open and transparent about discussing such issues. This also links back to issues discussed earlier as those involved in participatory research could usefully draw upon the expertise of research participants understandings of their own everyday experiences in order to help shape the direction of research projects. Research about the ways in which children can be regarded as experts in their own lives (e.g. Morrow, in press) may provide useful examples for advancing participatory ethics in this regard.

Conclusions

In conclusion, it is useful for researchers to think critically about the positionalities of researchers and the researched, to ask important questions about the ways in which these are negotiated in practice and to question how this relates to issues of ethical research practice. Furthermore, many of these issues emerge,

change and develop throughout the research process, are open to change and transformation, and so may alter in nature during the research process in ways that researchers are often unable to predict. It is also crucial that researchers are familiar with the range of ethical guidelines and best practice advice available to them in their research contexts. It is important to have a working knowledge of these, be willing to implement these where appropriate as well as being aware of the need to apply ethical practices appropriately in different contexts, with regard to the needs and views of the participants and others involved in the research process. It is crucial to be open, constructive and cooperative in negotiating ethical practices with research participants and other organisations during the research process.

However, although the two issues of positionalities and knowleges are presented separately here, they also relate to each other. Positionalities may include aspects of identity – race, class, gender, age, sexuality, disability – as well as personal experience of research such as research training, previous projects worked on and the philosophical persuasion of the researcher. For example, being sensitive to contextual ethical issues means being aware of, sometimes drawing upon and sometimes contesting our own positionalities in terms of our various identities as well as our previous experiences and preferences. These knowledges may need to be reshaped and reworked as new contexts and settings for participatory research are reshaped, negotiated and experienced. This requires a flexible approach that works against traditional methods that lay down rules from above and apply them in any research context (as ethics committees do). Instead, those involved in research could usefully employ a transparent approach that acknowledges the continuing production, management and negotiation of positionalities and knowledges in different contexts.

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