



Formality and Friendship: Research Ethics Review and Participatory Action Research

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Abstract

While Participatory Action Research (PAR) is gaining a foothold in geographical research practice, universities and major funding bodies are imposing ethics review procedures that are inherently contradictory to doing PAR. This paper examines these paradoxes paying particular attention to the way that research participants and researchers are constructed differently in PAR and ethics review. The implications of these differences are then examined in the context of an ongoing research project and some modifications to ethics review processes are suggested.

Introduction

Over the past 20 years two important trends have influenced the ways that researchers “do research”. On the one hand there has been a widening understanding of what counts as research. On the other hand in both North America and in Europe, partially as a result of widely publicised and extremely costly ethical failures, there has been a formalisation of ethics in the research process that

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assumes a Hobbesian ontology and a rationalist epistemology (Benhabib 1990). The divergence in these trends has important implications for the everyday doing of research. This divergence is specifically problematic for Participatory Action Research (PAR), which often seeks to embrace a locally specified problematic and prioritises local knowledge developed in a relational setting.

This paper draws from a current research project to examine shortcomings in the ways that the ethics review is conceptualised. Specifically, this paper focuses on the identity of the academic researcher, the non-academic participants, and the relationships between these groups and individuals. The next section outlines what is broadly meant by PAR, emphasising its relationality. This is followed by a brief discussion of the institution of ethics review. Specifically the section will argue that ethical review is a formal process that seeks to regulate the ways that relationship between researcher and research participants is conceived (Domosh, 2003; Eikeland, 2006). The paper then highlights some dilemmas I faced when trying to bring together a PAR approach and the formalities of ethics review. The paper concludes by offering some modest proposals for a modified ethics procedure.

PAR and the research relationship

Geographers such as Fuller (1999), Kitchin and Hubbard (1999), more recently Pain (2003; Pain and Francis, 2003) and others (see for example Eikeland, 2006; Elden and Chisholm, 1993; Small, 1995) argue that participatory approaches aim to challenge injustice and to interrogate phenomena of interest to the practice of everyday life. While the literature does not propose a specific ontological perspective and more traditional policy oriented research may be conducted within a participatory framework (for a discussion see Pain 2003), in more radical forms of PAR it is expected that the researcher engages with the community to mutually identify a problematic, uncover its sources, and then negotiate contextualised solutions. It is this more radical form of PAR that I shall refer to in the remainder of this paper.

Significantly, PAR diverges from the scientific tradition through the subjectivity of the researcher and the relationships that form between the researcher and the researched. The work of doing PAR involves regular interaction and participation in the activities of the community with which the researcher is doing work. By working with community members in collaboration, PAR researchers engage with a subject position that identifies them as simultaneously researcher and community member. Feminist theorists (eg, Scott, 1992; Smith, 2005) and others (eg, Crang, 1992) have argued that to know, researchers must embrace lived interactions and embodied knowledge. Others argue the key to reciprocal work is the acceptance of the researcher into the community in order to get the most out of research for all concerned (eg, Gibson-Graham, 1994; Monk et al., 2003). This

involves not only encouraging researcher reflexivity, but facilitating the researcher's personal engagement with the study, including a recognition that the researcher and her or his social milieu impacts on the other participants and findings and is, in itself worthy of being researched. In contrast, the scientific traditional emphasises objectivity through social distance between researcher and research subjects.

PAR also diverges from the scientific method through the ways that the research problematic becomes defined. Through participation, PAR researchers not only engage with problems as they arise out of the field, but they also shift the source of the research problematic from individual identity categories (e.g., gender, ethnicity, class) to social relations and institutions. It would not be useful, for example, to inform a Roma woman that she faces barriers to health care because she is a Roma woman. Instead, the PAR researcher would work with the women and health care practitioners to consider what is preventing Roma women from seeking medical care. The PAR researcher would then work with this community to create a system that more adequately meets the needs of the women themselves. Importantly, the problematic is also sensitive to context, because it relates to a moment of historical existence which lies at the juncture of relationships, in terms of what is said and what is done as well as what is not said or done (Storey, 1993).

Research Ethics as an institution

Universities, research institutes and funding bodies increasingly have ethics review processes that are codified such that ethics review has become largely standardised across these organisations and as such is a social institution. Institutions are not defined here as specific organisations such as universities or hospitals. Institutions are the constellation of rules, norms and regular practices associated with a particular way of doing and which are sanctioned (Jessop, 2001; Smith, 2005). Institutions arise because they work efficiently in a particular set of circumstances, and subsequently become part of the everyday fabric of particular doings such that they become habitual. Importantly, institutions are based on assumptions. Efficiency arises from particular kinds of social relations, which often carry with them social inequalities (de Certeau, 1984). As a result, institutions work more effectively for some but not others, and they are contextual (Blake, 2006).

The ethics review process has an important role to play in ensuring that all kinds of research, especially for those projects working with humans, is conducted in such a way as to minimise harm or suffering to participants. The ethics committee polices issues of data ownership, and it makes some of the rules of research engagement clear from the start. Furthermore, the ethics review provides a framework for negotiating complex relationships. The ethics review also plays an important role in ensuring ethical standards are maintained across all research projects.

There are several problems, however, with this institutionalised ethics review process that has implications for what constitutes “ethical” research relationships. The research participant is considered an object upon which research is done; participants are constructed in a way that is under-socialised; individuals are not fully reflexive beings with desires, ambitions, agendas and so forth (Katz, 1994). Moreover, the researched are positioned simply as vessels that empty themselves into research indiscriminately (Domosh, 2003). Once emptied, participants have no further need of the data produced (Monk et al., 2003). This construction makes research participants needful of protection because they lack discrimination. Standard ethics review practices start from the position that participants are always, already exploited by the researcher and harmed by the research. For example, ethics review at my university is fairly typical because it bases its ethics policy on the Council of Europe’s Convention for the protection of Human Rights and Dignity of the Human Being with regard to the Application of Biology and Medicine: Convention on Human Rights and Biomedicine². The ethics policy states that “any research that involves people as participants produces potential risks in terms of infringement or invasion of their dignity, rights, safety or well being (The University of Sheffield, 2005)”.

There are three important implications of this view of the participant that require elaboration. Firstly, because the objectified participant is constructed as powerless, she or he is not a suitable partner in the ethics review process. Thus, when ethical review is granted for a research project there has usually been no consultation with participants, and in most cases there is no representation of the non-academic public on the University Research Ethics Committee (UREC) or Institutional Review Board (IRB)³. Secondly, there is no possibility for participants to negotiate ownership of their own words if anonymity/confidentiality is assumed to be the only form of protection. For example Sheffield’s policy states:

Researchers must assure participants that any personal information collected, that could identify them, will remain strictly confidential and, depending on the research, access to the information will be restricted to the lead researcher or to researchers directly involved in the research at all times, before, during and after the research activities. In certain types of research, where necessary and practical, personal information on participants, that could identify them, will

² For more information see (www.conventions.coe.int/Treaty/en/Treaties/html/164.htm).

³ In the UK ethics committees are referred to as UREC’s while in the US they are identified as IRB’s.

remain anonymous at all times, even to the researchers themselves (The University of Sheffield, 2005:12-13).

In this way, participants are effectively written out of the research by the UREC. Thirdly, and ironically, because of the “disinterested” nature of UREC’s, if a participant does feel threatened or harmed, the UREC is not where the participant goes to complain. By signing an informed consent form, they sign away their opportunity for a non-antagonistic resolution.

Researchers are similarly constructed in an under-socialised way. A scientific ontology situates the researcher above and beyond the research, doing what Haraway (1991) refers to as the “god’s eye trick”. This positionality separates the researcher from participants involved in the project. There is no room for a pre-existing social obligation to the researched by the researcher. Instead the researcher is simply the vessel into which the subject pours their essence, and is conceptualised as having no connection with the data produced.

The outcome of this perspective is a construction of the researcher as an atomised, objective Hobbesian researcher who is not part of a set of social relationships and therefore is not subject to a generalised morality to which an ordinary member of a social group would comply. Granovetter (1985) argues that in Hobbes’ world the absence of social relationships leads to malfeasance. Here malfeasance is more likely in situations where parties are unknown to each other and where the individuals are not likely to meet again or their behaviour is not likely to be reported. Thus the atomised research subject requires protection from the researcher, who is amoral. Institutional arrangements therefore are needed to prevent malfeasance. However, as Granovetter goes on to argue, institutional arrangements do not facilitate trust. Instead, they act as a surrogate, and the surrogate is only useful or helpful if there is no social relationship. The requirement of formal signed consent and a priori anonymity in effect creates the absence of a social relationship rather than overcoming it.

The researcher is above the research doing the “god’s eye trick” but also below the research. Objectivity suspends social life for the researcher such that she or he is no longer worthy of being researched. Likewise, everyone in that researcher’s social network becomes unworthy by association. Most researchers have heard cautionary tales against “going native”, or witnessed the research of others being dismissed as anecdotal, partisan or amateurish because the subjects of the research were already known prior to starting the project (for example see Seidman, 1991). But considering that trust arises from within relationships at a personal level, “going native” is perhaps a better way to create an honest, trustworthy and ‘safe’ research environment.

Difficulties arise for those who are trying to negotiate the assumptions and subsequent requirements of ethical review process within a PAR research

framework that does not adopt the same understanding of the researched, the researcher, and the relationships between these two identity groups. The remainder of the paper illustrates these themes and considers some alternative approaches to ethics review by drawing on an ongoing research project I am currently involved in with the Ilkley (West Yorkshire, UK) and Szeged (Hungary) clubs of Soroptimist International⁴. This research forms part of the ‘Changing Families, Changing Food’ research programme funded by the Leverhulme Trust, and is a comparative project that analyses food practices, habits and preferences of middle class families based in two towns in the UK and Hungary. The research has involved in-depth interviews, life histories and food diaries, where people have reflected on food consumption during one week.

Dilemmas

In 1995 the Soroptimist International Club of Ilkley began a project to record the life histories of members. When I joined the club in 2000, I saw this project as an opportunity for me to use my capacities as a researcher to benefit my club. The idea was to move beyond the rather brief self-written descriptions of their lives to in-depth interviews with the members which captured their spoken voices.

The benefits of attaching community led research to an academic endeavour are many. For example there are a greater number of resources upon which to draw, the project’s legitimacy is enhanced, there is greater recognition for the organisation or group, there are opportunities to expand the project, the university is involved with local projects and so forth. However, conducting the life histories of fifty or more women takes time. Because I am an embodied researcher who must balance work, home and community responsibilities within a tightly constrained set of time/space trajectories, the best way to proceed was to integrate the project into a funded endeavour. One consequence of “going legitimate”, getting the research grant, and hiring research assistants is that the project is also subject to the ethics review process and has come up against the assumptions described earlier in the paper.

Where the life histories project originally emerged in a rather organic way, the ethics review process required a formalising of the processes of doing the research. Formalising had implications for determining who could and could not be involved, the roles that they played, who “owned” the data, and the circumstances under which participants could engage. For example, one of the valued outcomes in

⁴ Soroptimist International is a worldwide organisation for women in management and the professions. By working through service projects the organisation aims to promote human rights and raise the status of women. It is the largest professional woman’s organisation in the world with over 3,000 clubs located in 125 countries. For more information see <http://www.soroptimistinternational.org/>.

PAR is the way that capacities are built within the group (Monk et al., 2003). One method of data gathering that we are using involves group members interviewing each other to develop listening skills and deepen community knowledge. Yet, ethics review has meant that this relationship must be formalised around issues of anonymity and data ownership. When the project was informal, life histories information was collected for the clubs themselves. Consent and copyright have effectively written the clubs out of the picture, as ownership of words either belongs to the individual or the researcher. As a result, the original aim of the project has been undermined. We have addressed this issue by creating an additional consent form that establishes the clubs as holders of the archives.

I am also very much a part of this project and am working alongside my friends, neighbours and community members with whom I often interact. Yet, the ethics review process stretched these relationships in unnatural ways. For example, I was required to get a CRB certificate⁵ before I could research the food practices of my children and their friends, and had to have my friends sign confidentiality and copyright agreements as I served them a cup of tea and a biscuit in my home. If I followed strictly the guidelines on anonymity, I would also be required to ignore the details that I know about my friends as individuals when I analyse their accounts. As others have indicated in relation to ethnographic research, these dilemmas raise important questions about the when the research stops and everyday life begins.

In the act of formally carrying out research I became a representative from Hobbes' world. In keeping with ethics review processes, we have had to formalise access to the information. The guidance on research ethics suggests researchers should secure a signature from the participant indicating that they give informed consent to the research process. Formalising the process before they have said a word and without giving them an opportunity to think about what they are signing away, see what the process will be like, and then negotiate how they want their words used with me turns a pleasant cup of tea into an intimidating business relationship. The easy camaraderie born of friendship and underpinned by trust is undermined by an implicit assumption that the research may lead to harm, exploitation or suffering for those involved.

⁵ A Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) certificate indicates that the holder has had their records checked for criminal activity and there is nothing in the record that would indicate that the holder is unsuitable for the work being undertaken. Anyone in the UK who wishes to work unsupervised with children (under 18 years of age) or other vulnerable groups must obtain one (see <http://www.crb.gov.uk/> for more information).

Some suggestions for an alternative ethics review

Above, I explored both the advantages of engaging with ethics committees and the disadvantages of the standard ethics review process in the context of a research project utilising PAR. The ethical process would be more fruitful if a more linked conceptualisation of the connections between the researcher, the participants, and the UREC were established from the start.

The challenge for copyright and informed consent involves retaining the easiness of friendship, clarity over ownership, and understanding. Howett and Stevens (2005) suggest ‘negotiated authorisation’⁶ to replace a priori signatures and automatic anonymity. This is implemented by a verbal explanation of the research accompanied by a short written description. At the interview, which is recorded with permission, the participant’s right to withdraw is discussed. Only after all interviews are finished are participants asked to sign the consent forms. This includes discussing their preferences regarding anonymity and use of their voice recordings. The advantage to this post-participation discussion is that at this stage people know what they have said and have a better idea of the process involved. Thus, they can make informed decisions about how their words are used. The disadvantage is that the participant may withhold consent, but this is already an option for research subjects in current ethics procedures. In fact, the likelihood of withdrawal is reduced if participants are more fully informed than when consent is given prior to participation.

Negotiated consent opens up the possibility that the researcher will use the data prior to gaining consent as might be the case when interim reports or conference papers are written part way through the research process. Although probably not intended as such, this would constitute an abuse of the research relationship and researchers must be diligent in gaining consent prior to using data. Additionally, and particularly relevant to PAR, the community group or partner organisation could act as a steering committee for the research project and as part of their remit oversee ethics procedures.

Finally, the current system does not grant the review board further involvement with the research after approval of the ethics procedures. The role of the UREC could be changed such that the committee could act as mediator if participants have questions or problems with the ethics practices in a particular

⁶ I am aware that in practice, many ethics committees serve under the agreement that although certain procedures exist, a ‘negotiation of ethics’ may be most appropriate. However, when these practices are done ‘off the books’, as an exception, the current principles in ethics committees remain unchallenged.

project. This approach would offer a less drastic course of action than settling problems in the courts (see also Cutcliffe and Ramcharan, 2002). This would alter the role of the UREC from that of policing agent to participant advocate. Moreover, the inclusion of laypeople in ethics committees who undertake an advocacy role would enable wider participation in the ethics process. To close the circle, researchers could also submit interim and final reports on ethics practices.

Conclusion

In this short paper I have sought to explore some of the drawbacks of current ethics review committees, especially as regards relational methodologies such as PAR. In suggesting a few possible changes to ethical frameworks, it is possible to envisage how ethics committees and researchers may be able to work together effectively to conduct innovative and participatory research whilst ensuring that research subjects are treated honestly and with respect. Though the particular examples of ethics review discussed here are mainly drawn from my university's ethics review process, the discussion has resonances beyond the boundaries of this organisation.

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