Echoes

Ethics and Issues of Voice in Education Research

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Echoes: Ethics and Issues of Voice in Education breaks new ground in the field of education research ethics, by examining different perspectives on the role, influence and importance of voice.

Drawing on a variety of philosophical and paradigmatic approaches, Echoes: Ethics and Issues of Voice in Education examines how and the different ways in which researchers conceptualise voice in the context of broader theoretical and methodological issues relating to research ethics.

Written by authors working across the globe in a variety of academic contexts, it asks:

• How might voice in education be reconceptualised?
• What factors influence whether or not, and in what ways, voices are heard and/or (re)presented in education research?
• What implications do (re)conceptualisations of voice have with respect to the ethics of education research?
• What methods can be used to explore the role, importance and influence of voice in education research from an ethics perspective?
• How might voices be appropriately acknowledged and represented in education research?

Echoes: Ethics and Issues of Voice in Education invites the reader to join the conversation, as it prompts reflection and discussion about the challenges and concerns inherent in the representation of voice in education research.

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*Ethics and Issues of Voice in Education Research*

*Edited by*

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FOREWORD

Composed between 1914 and 1918 by the Hungarian composer and pianist Béla Bartók (1881–1945), Fifteen Hungarian Peasant Songs is a collection of folk melodies. Bartók travelled around Hungary and Romania to record, notate and collect these melodies – a bit like an anthropologist who was trying to save the memories of a soon-to-be extinct tribe. Bartók’s obsession with preserving these voices was sparked by his overhearing Transylvanian folk songs during his teenage years. He was ‘saving’ these songs for the future, for other people to enjoy. In a similar vein, closer to our times, the Chinese composer Tan Dun (谭盾, 1957–), better known for his score for the film Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon, embarked in 2002 on a journey in Southwest China where he filmed a series of field recordings of three Chinese ethnic groups’ music. The result is a piece called The Map (Concerto for cello, video and orchestra), during which e.g. a cellist engages with a video-taped Miao/Hmong singer in a Feige (a “flying song”). Unlike Bartók, who never played his music for those who inspired him, Tan Dun insisted on ‘giving back’ to the people who had contributed to his 55-minute piece by bringing a full-size orchestra to the historical site of Fenghuang Ancient Town in Xiangxi Prefecture in 2003, where he performed for the indigenous villagers who had shared their music with him.

I see many similarities between these two different forms of relations between the composer and his sources of inspiration and the theme of this fascinating book on voices in education. Bartók symbolises in a sense the way we used to do research many decades ago, while Tan Dun’s approach is closer to what this volume puts forward as ‘good practice’ for treating voices in research today.

In his famous poem September 1, 1939, W. H. Auden wrote: “All I have is a voice”. I believe that this could be the motto of all education researchers around the world. As such, voice is the tool of their trade. Just like the human voice that needs many different organs to operate (the lungs, the larynx, the vocal cords, etc.) and to create talking, crying, singing, etc., researchers have to deal with voice by means of multifaceted perspectives and many and varied tools in our postmodern times.

While before the only obvious voice that interested researchers was that of the participants (a bit like Bartók), today the voice in research is considered ‘liquid’ (to borrow Z. Bauman’s metaphor for post-modernity) and more complex. The voices we work with (but also the accompanying silences) are often ‘given back’ to their owners, when for instance we ask our participants to examine the transcriptions of the voices we have recorded for their approval. The old principle of ethics guides this ‘new’ treatment of voices.
Research has changed immensely over the last four decades and paradigms such as constructivism, post-structuralism and post-modernism have led researchers to question the voices that they hear and construct in research. Many researchers now want to avoid mere “ventriloquiation” (Valsiner, 2002) – or repeating in uncritical ways what participations have co-constructed with them – and to consider instead the contradictory or conflicting voices of their participants (contradictions, ‘lies’, power-led discourses, etc.) to make research results more balanced, honest and realistic. Research participants (and ourselves) are members of many different social groups and thus “the individual will internalize the voices of many different, even conflicting, communities.” (Gillespie et al., 2008: 38). Dealing with voices in research means considering this ensemble of voices rather than the sole voice of the participant.

In his book on the saturated self of postmodern individuals, Kenneth Gergen (1991: 16) asserts rightly: “as we absorb multiple voices, we find that each “truth” is relativised by our simultaneous consciousness of compelling alternatives.” Relativising voices should thus be part of the researcher’s job... The following questions can help to do that: Who is really talking and making a statement? from what position(s) is an individual speaking? On whose behalf? Whose voice cannot be heard? In what language(s) are people ‘doing’ voice1 and what impacts does it have on what they say and their interlocutors? These questions can help us to move away from “surface voices” to deeper grounds.

Finally, the following question is becoming central in research: How much are the voices that we analyse influenced by our presence, the context of interaction, the intertextuality we share with our participants? Researchers’ voices need to be taken into account: their inner voices through reflexive accounts but also the voices through which they construct discourses with their research participants (Byrd Clark & Dervin, 2014). This is far from being accepted by all: I received recently a review of one of my articles which claimed that the fact that I was using “I” and reflecting “too much” on my influence on the data was a-scientific and thus made the article unpublishable...

The reader will be amazed and stimulated by the chapters that compose this book as they problematise and provide many answers to the aforementioned questions. Its multivoicedness will undoubtedly accompany and influence many future discussions around education.

Professor Fred Dervin
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NOTE

1 When I see the word ‘voice’, I cannot but think of the Vienna-Oxford International Corpus of English, which is abbreviated as VOICE. Through this corpus researchers from around the world
are able to examine the use of English as a Lingua Franca in many different contexts and to reflect on the impact this multifaceted form of English has on those who communicate through this medium.

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1. THE ECHOES OF VOICE IN EDUCATION RESEARCH ETHICS

INTRODUCTION

Education research ethics, as a subsection of social science research ethics, is a relatively new field of investigation, beginning to take shape around the middle of the 20th century (Kitchener & Kitchener, 2009). Since that time, a number of publications have sought to grapple with the complex issues surrounding the ethics of education research. This chapter, and those that follow in this book, seek to add to that growing body of literature by focusing on one dimension of education research ethics that is, in our opinion, underexplored in the literature; namely, the concept of voice as it relates to education research ethics. At the time of writing, this was the first and only collected book discussing this important concept. As such, this and the following chapters are to a certain extent exploratory. The authors of this chapter, along with the other contributors to this volume, explore the extant literature on ethics and voice, highlight significant gaps in the literature and then draw on a variety of data sources to begin what we hope will be a full, engaging and fruitful discussion of these important issues into the future.

SOME KEY IDEAS FROM THE LITERATURE

The literature on ethics with respect to human research in education is extensive. In this section, we review some of the key literature around themes relating to voice. These themes are: ethical concerns about excluding voices, ethical challenges in representing voices and challenges in voicing ethical concerns. Each of the sections highlights some of the gaps in the literature, and these are explored in more detail later in the chapter.

Ethical Concerns about Excluding Voices

In designing and conducting research, the researcher is required to maintain the principle of “Do no harm”. Three key concepts within that principle that are discussed in the literature are autonomy, beneficence and justice. This sub-section explores these three aspects of doing no harm with respect to the ethical concerns about excluding voice/s from research.
The principle of autonomy is utilised to discuss the process of informed decision-making. To be informed is to be fully briefed regarding potentially deleterious outcomes which may arise from being a participant in a research study. Traditionally the focus of autonomy has been on the research participant, with institutional review boards (IRBs) and ethics committees requiring informed participants and their completed consent forms (Orb, Eisenhauer, & Wynaden, 2000). A voice not generally considered here is the one of the researcher. Scientific positivist research demands a researcher who is distant, separate and uninfluential in relation to the research undertaken. Qualitative research however is another beast, one that is often highly influenced by the experiences of the researcher (Karnieli-Miller, Strier, & Pessach, 2009). Where it is contextually appropriate, to ignore the voice of the researcher (within qualitative research) is to exclude the researcher’s ethical right of autonomy.

The notion of beneficence is a risk/benefit comparison where the researcher attempts to minimise risk whilst augmenting, where possible, any benefits for the research participant (Orb, Eisenhauer, & Wynaden, 2000). To consider only the voice of the participant and not the researcher potentially deprives the study of rich and textured experiences. To exclude the right of researcher beneficence could then in turn be considered an exclusion of voice and the potential loss of many rich, varied and layered experiences (Murphy, 1993; US Department of Health & Human Services, 1979).

The principle of justice is an ethical premise which insists on a non-discriminatory selection of research participants (US Department of Health & Human Services, 1979). To exclude actively the researchers’ own experiences is to deny them the ethical right of justice. This then deprives them of any of the responsibility or conversely the profits that may arise as an outcome of the research (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004).

The norm in ethical human research is to apply the ethical principles of autonomy, beneficence and justice to ensure the care and safety of research participants. To deny these principles automatically without consideration of the context is to exclude potentially important voices from the mix.

**Ethical Challenges in Representing Voices**

The representation of participant voices in research is a challenging conundrum. Can the voices of research participants be represented with completeness? As researchers contemplate this ideal and the degree to which it can be achieved, they should consider three important ethical challenges that may diminish the representation of participant voices in research. These challenges include: (1) developing an awareness of how research designs can constrain the representation of voices; (2) understanding how the protectionist ideology of ethical guidelines can depreciate the focus on participant voices; and (3) being cognisant of how
external demands to achieve desired results may lead to confirmation bias in research.

Considering the diverse ontological and epistemological perspectives that underpin different research traditions, the research design selected by some investigators may constrain the representation of participant voices. For example, when describing ethnomethodological studies, Flick (2009) commented that “the focus is not the subjective meaning for the participants of an interaction and its content, but how this interaction is organized” (p. 60). While the objective of ethnomethodological studies is to investigate the ordinary actions used to produce social order (Hester & Francis, 2008), this approach may constrain the voices of research participants. It is therefore essential that researchers consider the different theoretical perspectives underlying research approaches, and how potential research designs may position participants and represent their voices.

Guidelines for human research ethics (National Health and Medical Research Council, 2007; Sieber, 2000; Steneck, 2007) have been developed to foster a culture of respect for and protection of research participants. The protectionist ideology encourages researchers to consider important principles such as justice, beneficence and respect when designing and implementing research activities. While these principles must form the foundation of research endeavours, the emphasis on the “Do no harm” discourse may supersede consideration of how research can also give voice to participants. As researchers deliberate the ethics of their research, consideration of how research activities can empower participants may improve the representations of their voices.

In a research climate that is becoming increasingly competitive, researchers may find themselves under growing pressure to produce research findings that are statistically significant, or consistent with the outcomes desired by an external funding agency. Pressure to produce desirable outcomes may lead to confirmation bias, which Onwuegbuzie and Leech (2007) described as the “tendency for interpretations and conclusions on new data to be overly congruent with a priori hypotheses” (p. 236). Confirmation bias may therefore influence a researcher unknowingly or willfully to misrepresent the voices of participants in research.

In addition to considering possible challenges to the representations of participant voices in research, the notion of “who” decides whether the representation of voices is complete should also be examined. Member checking is a common strategy used “to determine the accuracy of the qualitative findings through taking the final report or specific descriptions or themes back to participants and determining whether these participants feel that they are accurate” (Creswell, 2003, p. 196). This critical technique for establishing the credibility of research findings (Guba & Lincoln, 2005) also provides participants with the opportunity to decide about the representations of their voices.

Ethical challenges to the representations of participant voices in education research are derived from different sources, and include the research design, the focus on protectionist guidelines and confirmation bias. While other plausible
causes of challenges may exist, researchers who are mindful of participant voices and the ethical challenges to the representations of those voices will be more likely to produce research that accurately represents the voices of participants.

**Challenges in Voicing Ethical Concerns**

Another important conceptual area relating to ethics and the issue of voice surrounds the notion of whether and to what extent researchers can and should give voice to ethical concerns that arise in the course of research. This third theme is not discussed as explicitly in the literature as the previous two. The most obvious place to begin searching for discussions of this topic is in research that explores unethical behaviour. Questions around cheating in academic institutions, for example, have been extensively explored (McCabe, Trevino, & Butterfield, 2001). However, these studies are generally designed in such a way that the researcher does not gain access to knowledge about specific offenders (see, e.g., Farnese, Tramontano, Fida, & Paciello, 2011; Jensen, Arnett, Feldman, & Cauffman, 2011), and therefore the issue of whether or not to disclose information about unethical behaviour is moot.

Research into criminal behaviour provides a slightly clearer perspective, as there are legislative requirements about disclosure of certain activities. Within Australia, for example, there are legal requirements for some professionals to disclose some information, even if the information is given confidentially. For example, the Family Law Act (1975) of Australia mandates that a family counsellor must notify a prescribed child welfare authority if he or she has reasonable grounds for suspecting a child has been or is at risk of being abused (Family Law Act, 1975, 67ZA). In such an instance, the confidentiality of the counsellor-counsellee relationship is overridden by the legislative requirement for mandatory notification. Writing about biomedical research ethics, Beauchamp and Childress (2001) noted that there are certain circumstances in which researchers should consider disclosing information received under an assurance of confidentiality to some parties. Witnessing criminal activity is one of those circumstances (Sharma, 2009). It is reasonable to assume that information relating to criminal activity, particularly with respect to child welfare, might arise in the context of education research, and the researcher would have a legal obligation to voice the concern.

However, studies into unethical behaviour are not the only contexts in which researchers may be confronted with the issue of whether and to what extent to voice ethical concerns that arise in the course of research. Research into secrets (Rappert, 2010), for example, highlights the problem researchers face in trying to voice that which cannot be told because it “should not be stated” (p. 571). When that which should not be stated revolves around something that is an ethical issue for the researcher involved, then the decision to keep or reveal secrets becomes highly problematic (see also Midgley, this volume).

Another situation to consider with respect to voicing ethical concerns is when a researcher becomes aware of unethical behaviour by another researcher, or
whistleblowing. Studies into this phenomenon (e.g. Wenger, Korenman, Berk, & Liu, 1999) indicate that whistleblowing is rare, and that unethical behaviour is more likely to be handled within a research team than reported to administrators or supervisors. This may, in part, be due to the negative consequences reported by academic whistleblowers (see, e.g., Sprague, 1993). This brief review of relevant literature indicates that voicing ethical concerns that arise in research is a complex theme, and further investigation into this would be valuable.

REFLECTIONS ON OUR COMBINED RESEARCH EXPERIENCE

Warren

As a postgraduate supervisor, I have worked with research students on the development of applications for ethics approval from institutional ethics review boards. In Australia, these review boards are established under the guidelines of the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (National Health and Medical Research Council, 2007). The purpose of the National Statement is clearly articulated as follows:

The purpose of this National Statement is to promote ethically good human research. Fulfilment of this purpose requires that participants be accorded the respect and protection that is due to them. It also involves the fostering of research that is of benefit to the community. (Section 1)

The Statement clearly seeks to protect participants, and to promote the good of the community. However, it does not make any reference to respecting and protecting researchers. The following example from my personal experience as a supervisor highlights how this may be a concern.

A student was required by his employer to complete a Masters level degree within a certain period of time to continue in employment at a tertiary institution abroad. The student enrolled in a Masters level program at our institution and I was the appointed supervisor for his final thesis. The student was engaging in data collection that in Australia would be considered low-risk, but because the data were being collected abroad, it was treated as a high-risk case, and sent to a full review panel. The review panel did not meet for several months (for various reasons) and, when it did meet to consider this case, it was not approved, but rather returned to the student requiring further information. None of the information was, in my professional opinion, required to demonstrate that the student’s research would meet the National Standards. The feedback included such instructions as copying the information from one section into another section of the form (so that the same information was included in two places), and correcting punctuation errors.

Concerned that the delays caused by this process could result in significant personal hardship (the student losing his job), I contacted the research office to ask
for the decision to be reconsidered. I was told that nobody had authority over the review panel, and that the student would have to respond to the feedback and wait for the review panel to reconvene. As it turns out, I was able to make an appointment with the chair of the panel, discuss my concerns with that individual in person and negotiate an expedited processing of the application. Happily, the student did graduate and keep his job. The experience, however, highlights the fact that, as ethics review panels focus entirely upon ensuring that researchers do no harm to participants, the panels can, in fact, do great harm to people for whom research represents a livelihood.

Concerns around the processes of institutional ethics review boards are well documented in the literature (see Jacobson, Gewurtz, & Haydon, 2007), and clearly the issues are extremely complex. The specific point of application I wish to make here is that, in the process of ethical review, the voice of the researcher does not appear to be acknowledged. The rationale for institutional ethics reviews draws on the discourse of horrendous atrocities committed in the name of research (Halse & Honey, 2007). This, then, positions researchers as somehow sub-human threats that need to be controlled, rather than as individual human beings with the same human rights as the other human beings involved in the research; namely the participants. In this way, the voices of researchers can be silenced, to the significant detriment of the researchers. It is incumbent upon the human research enterprise to explore ways in which all voices, including those of researchers, can be accorded similar kinds of respect and protection.

Andy

I have chosen my PhD journey to be about a passion rather than an extension of my employment. This passion relates to yoga and the spiritual nature of being. As a long-term yoga and meditation practitioner and teacher, I have extensively explored both my internal world and the art of being a teacher. Yoga and meditation require a practice of internal exploration and understanding. The art of teaching these practices requires personal awareness and centredness; both of these states of being evolve from the very practices themselves. These beliefs organically grew into my doctoral dissertation, which explores how yoga teacher trainers incorporate the notion of spirituality within their yoga teacher training programmes.

Finding an appropriate and acceptable way to voice the internal experiences of these practices has been a challenge for me. After much deliberation, I decided to adopt a Mindful Inquiry (Bentz & Shapiro, 1998) approach, as this draws upon four knowledge traditions, one Eastern – the Buddhist practice of Mindfulness – and three Western – critical social theory, hermeneutics and phenomenology. My hope is that a blended methodological approach will help to facilitate the challenging of voicing internal experiences which are usually not expressed in words. At the time of writing, my dissertation had not yet been examined. As I
complete the final stages of writing my dissertation, I wonder how these attempts to voice the internal experiences of a non-Western tradition will be accepted by a Western academic examination panel.

Mark

As a postgraduate student included in a team comprised of experienced researchers, I had the opportunity to work at the elbows of experts and learn firsthand about the research process. One research study involved a large-scale study across multiple states, which was funded by the federal government. Competition for multi-million dollar grants was fierce, so the burden to produce positive results was ever present. A mixed methodological approach was selected as the strongest research design for the project, which included collecting information through interviewing participants, and observing their actions in context. A semi-structured protocol was used to interview the participants, and their comments were audio-recorded.

A research question of interest was intended to investigate the participants’ attitudes towards an intervention, and to ascertain their perceptions about the strengths and flaws of the intervention (which was designed by the principal investigator). There were several concerns about this research project with respect to the representation of participants’ voices. The first was the design of the interview protocol, which included questions that were framed to generate positive responses about the intervention. The second concern was the negligible use of quotations from the participants in the research report, and the final concern was the absence of any description of participants’ criticisms of the intervention. Having worked on the project, I was aware that participants held some reservations about the intervention. In addition to problems with the research design and the analysis of the data, there was no verification of the results with the participants.

While the intervention certainly was a positive innovation with promising results (as indicated by the quantitative data), there were limitations of the design and data collection regarding the attitudes of the participants. These shortcomings not only minimised the representation of the participants’ voices, but also suggested that confirmation bias may have influenced the results of the investigation. The final report consequently provided a glowing analysis of the intervention verses the control condition.

Patrick

Particular ethical concerns attend the representations of the voices of members of so-called marginalised communities in contemporary education research projects (Danaher, Cook, Danaher, Coombes, & Danaher, 2013). Groups such as asylum seekers and refugees, Indigenous communities, retirees and students with disabilities have often had their voices silenced and their bodies rendered invisible.
because they lack the multiple forms of capital (Bourdieu, 1986) required to be heard and seen.

Co-authorship between education researchers and members of particular marginalised communities or with professionals who work with those communities is one strategy for maximising the voices of community members (see for example Currie & Danaher, 2001; Danaher, Coombes, & Kiddle, 2007; Fullerton, Danaher, Moriarty, & Danaher, 2004; Fullerton, Moriarty, Danaher, & Danaher, 2005). Yet community members and supporters generally do not have the same stake as researchers in academic publishing, and might find the process of collaborative writing burdensome rather than beneficial (van der Meulen, 2011).

As we noted above, the research designs of education research projects can enable and/or constrain the articulation and representation of participants’ voices. Participatory action research is one method that is commonly associated with working closely with community members to identify and investigate research questions collaboratively. For instance, an Australian College of Technical and Further Education promoted a research project involving Indigenous Australian women with disabilities and their support officer sharing their interest in art and design to progress towards establishing their own printmaking business (Danaher, Cook, Danaher, Coombes, & Danaher, 2013). The students and the educator/researcher shared their perspectives and stories and listened to one another’s voices, which were also being heard through the students’ innovative artistic designs.

As we also noted above, while human ethics processes are predicated on the “do no harm” discourse, they can be too readily co-opted by a protectionist ideology when applied to education research with marginalised communities that can restrict community members’ voices being heard. This was demonstrated starkly by the response of a research team when they were asked by the Showmen’s Guild of Australasia with whom they had conducted research to attend a meeting between an education authority and Guild members and to assist the Guild to lobby for the establishment of their own school (Danaher & Danaher, 2008). Eventually one team member joined the Guild for the meeting and shared international research that favoured separate schools for occupationally mobile communities (see also Danaher, Coombes, & Kiddle, 2007). Yet potentially too close an adoption of the protectionist ideology had generated initial concern among team members about the ethical appropriateness of enacting the role of lobbyists. In the end, the team decided that articulating their own voices in support of the Australian show people was an obligatory repayment of the show people’s willingness to share their voices with the researchers. Whether the team representative’s voice had any influence on the education authority’s decision-making is uncertain, but the authority did establish the Queensland School for Travelling Show Children (Fullerton, Danaher, Moriarty, & Danaher, 2004; Fullerton, Moriarty, Danaher, & Danaher, 2005). The school was discontinued at the end of 2012, with the protesting voices of parents and students being overridden.
IMPLICATIONS: REVERBERATING ECHOES

To this point in the chapter, we have elaborated several concerns and challenges related to excluding and representing voices and voicing ethical concerns in contemporary education research projects, illustrated by reference to our respective research projects and supervisory experiences. We turn now to articulate some key implications of the discussion so far, encapsulated in the analogy of reverberating echoes.

One theme that has emerged in this chapter is the significance of methodology in questions of voice. Mark’s concern about limitations in the design and data collection in one study points to the problem of possibly misrepresenting participants’ voices. Patrick’s experience in exploring co-authorship between researchers and participants is one possible solution to this. However, as Patrick explained, this solution has problems of its own, in terms of potentially being more of a burden than a benefit to participants. The analogy of an echo, in which the sound waves bounce back and forth, illustrates the reverberating tensions that arise when seeking to resolve such complex issues.

Another challenge that we discussed relates to the ethical concerns and considerations relating to the voice of the researcher. Whilst a great deal of progress has been made in articulating the rights of participants, there is very little research or policy that seeks to identify, articulate and then develop systems to protect the rights of researchers. Drawing on the echo analogy, we suggest that the voice for participants’ rights reverberates so loudly in the literature on education research ethics that the voice for researchers’ rights is virtually drowned out. This is an area of research that appears to warrant a significant amount of further investigation. The experiences of Andy, as a researcher struggling to find an acceptable way to voice the internal, and Warren, as a supervisor seeking to voice advocacy on behalf of his research student, are both examples of ethical issues in which researcher voice can barely be heard.

A third key theme that we have discussed relates to the positions that researchers should or should not take with respect to their research. Warren’s example of a supervisor advocating for his student is one case of struggling to emancipate the silenced researcher’s voice. Warren was comfortable employing his voice in enacting the role of advocate. However, in the example that Patrick described, enacting the role of lobbyist generated concern. Clearly the contexts of these two examples were quite different. This theme of context is one that reverberates through each of the different examples explored. When grappling with issues of voice in education research ethics, it is paramount to consider the context of each situation. What might, in one instance, be emancipatory could, in another instance, be burdensome.
CONCLUSION

With this chapter, the authors have attempted to achieve a number of objectives. Firstly, the chapter has introduced the concept that is the central theme in this volume: namely, ethics and the issues of voice in education research. Drawing on scholarly literature and personal experiences, the authors have noted some of the concerns and considerations that we believe warrant further consideration. A second objective has been to introduce the approach of this volume. Each chapter that follows this has a similar objective, and exhibits a similar pattern of examining literature and empirical data sets to explore different aspects of the central theme of the book. Lastly, but perhaps most importantly of all, we have sought to begin a conversation about a topic that we believe has been neglected in research and scholarly discussion. In that sense, we have endeavoured to use our own scholarly voices to begin engaging with the theme of ethics and the issues of voice in education research.

REFERENCES


MARK E. OLIVER

SECTION ONE

VOICE AND ETHICS: CHALLENGES AND CHALLENGING

“Words mean more than what is set down on paper.
It takes the human voice to infuse them with deeper meaning.”
Maya Angelou, Author

Despite having an awareness of potential problems that may occur during an investigation, researchers may experience unplanned and ethically challenging situations as they engage with research participants. The four chapters included in this section explore examples of ethical challenges that researchers may encounter during their research endeavours, which may emerge before, during or after data collection. The chapters challenge the reader to consider important ethical issues related to participant voice in research, which ideally will inspire researchers to consider how to capture participant voice during their investigations. Such thoughtfulness will contribute to the infusion of human voice in research, producing words with deeper meaning.

In Chapter 2, Midgley explores the ethical challenge of addressing the subsequent request of a participant to delete information collected during research. While information can be deleted and not included in research documentation, Midgley raises the quandary that deleted information remains within the mind of the researcher, and can persist to influence the investigation. To honour the request of participants, Midgley discusses the strategy of using fictionalisation to offer a more complete representation of the research enterprise.

Chapter 3 critically analyses the universal belief that research data should be stripped of identifying information to ensure the confidentiality of participants. Davies challenges this assumption, and questions the automatic application of this belief to research where participants were not considered to be at risk if their identities were revealed. While anonymising data is considered an ethical research practice, Davies contests that this process may steal the voices of participants in reported research.
The challenge of finding ways to acknowledge and account for the existence of limiting attitudes about gender in the research process is explored in Chapter 4. In this chapter Rowan provides a thought-provoking discussion of the proposition that researchers can act as ethical researchers or vampiric consumers as they engage in collecting information from participants. To ensure that the voices of participants who may be at risk of marginalisation or exploitation are recorded and reported ethically, Rowan challenges researchers to reflect critically upon how they engage with research participants. Through such introspection, researchers are more likely to contribute to social and educational transformation.

The final chapter in this section considers contrasting views of knowledge construction, and the degree to which these differing views respectfully represent the voices of participants. Salton explores the cognitivist and discourse analytical perspectives of knowledge construction, and discusses the conception of how participants may be viewed as the object or subject of research investigations. In this chapter Salton highlights the potential risks of not considering the position of participant voice in research.
2. A FAINT ECHO

Using Fictionalisation to Speak the Unspeakable

INTRODUCTION

My Doctor of Philosophy study (Midgley, 2011) was about the experiences of Saudi students at an Australian university. The data for this study were drawn from a series of narrative discussion groups (Midgley, 2013) in which I asked Saudi participants to tell me about their experiences as international students at an Australian university. As there were no pre-determined questions for these narrative discussion groups, the Saudi participants were able to select which experiences they wished to discuss in the context of this research project. Over the course of the study, I came to see and hear about things that the Saudi students had experienced, but which they chose not to discuss in the narrative discussion groups. On several instances, I came to know about these things because the participants themselves told me, as a friend, outside the context of the narrative discussion groups. On one other occasion, I was a witness to the event myself.

From my perspective, the unspoken (in the data collection) experiences I had both seen and been told about would almost certainly have had a significant impact upon the overall experiences of these participants, and thus would have been important factors for my study. However, the formal ethics approval I had been given by my university’s Human Research Ethics Committee did not permit me to use this information as data. This raised for me the difficult ethical question of what to do with things I knew about, but could not write about. This chapter outlines some of the ethical considerations I faced in this study with respect to the complex notion of voice, and outlines the method of fictionalisation which I employed in an attempt to appropriately acknowledge and represent the various voices that I identified in the context of this research.

The Ethical Problem of Voice

Voice is a concept that became prominent in feminist research, in response to post-positivist epistemological understandings of the decontextualised nature of reported truth (e.g. Fine, 1992, hooks, 2000). Scholars working in this critical feminist tradition have sought to give voice to women and other marginalised groups by exploring participants’ multiple, varied and contextualised subjectivities.
However, according to Krumer-Nevo (2009) who has worked within this tradition, the feminist term voice hides more than it reveals. Krumer-Nevo’s work amongst the poor in the Middle East has revealed how often marginalised people say things not because they represent their own subjectivities, but due to the influence of other social pressures. Thus, the voice of the poor can in fact be more truly a representation of the voice of those whom the poor feel they must submit to, consciously or otherwise.

Trying to untangle the different influences on voice, and identify whose voice is speaking at any given time, can be fraught with difficulties. Scholars working within some critical and postmodern frameworks, for example, have followed Lyotard (1979) in seeking to identify metanarratives behind voices in their data (e.g. Yancy, 2002). Some critical pedagogues (e.g. Freire, 1986) have sought to find ways to help students become liberated from such dominant myths, and thus free their voices. These approaches can be criticised – following an argument popularised by Habermas (1981/1984) – for failing to maintain their own premises. In other words, recognising the presence and influence of metanarratives could be seen to be a metanarrative itself, thus cancelling out its own argument. Similarly, critical theorists may attempt to liberate the oppressed, but this attempt at liberation can still be seen to be an act of control by a more powerful other (the critical pedagogue). Clearly, there is no simple answer to the problem of identifying and ethically representing voices.

This complex philosophical network of related issues became a concern for me in my study for a number of reasons. Obviously, I wanted to present the fullest possible picture of the experiences of Saudi students I was researching, and therefore, when some things are left unsaid, then some things are left unreported. The data are incomplete. However, the issue is more complex than that. The things that I learnt about, but which for deontological reasons could not report on, must surely have had some influence on the way in which I conducted the research, particularly with respect to the analysis of the data. If, for example, a participant were to say “I have had no problems in Australia,” but I am aware that the participant has had many problems, I will treat the statement differently than if I were not aware of this. In the first instance, I am alerted to the need to explore what is and is not being said, and possible reasons for that; whereas in the latter case, it may not occur to me to do other than take the statement at face value.

One of my stated strategies at the outset of my study for establishing credibility in my qualitative research approach was to maintain transparency. By this I meant documenting an audit trail (following Lincoln & Guba, 1985) in which I reported everything that I did, and everything that I thought might influence the way in which I selected, analysed and reported on data. This approach proved to be rather naïve, because there were some things that I was aware of about which I could not be transparent. Therefore the reader of my dissertation would have no way of knowing about these influences when evaluating the findings of my research.
The ethical issues were complex. The participants chose not to speak about certain things, and I had assumed an ethical position to respect that choice. However, I also felt I had an ethical responsibility to report fully and honestly on my research. How, then, should I deal with things I know, but am constrained for various reasons from reporting? Within Australia, there are legal requirements for some professionals to disclose some information, even if the information is given confidentially. For example, the Family Law Act (1975) of Australia mandates that a family counsellor must notify a prescribed child welfare authority if he or she has reasonable grounds for suspecting a child has been or is at risk of being abused (Family Law Act, 1975, 67ZA). In such an instance, the confidentiality of the counsellor-counselee relationship is over-ridden by the legislative requirement for mandatory notification. No such legislative requirements exist for information that might be considered important findings in the context of research but cannot, due to procedural ethical constraints, be disclosed. Rather, the researcher in Australia faced with such a dilemma needs to balance out two key concepts in The National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (Australian Government, 2007); namely, research merit and beneficence.

The guidelines for research merit indicate that research must be justifiable by its potential benefit, which could include its contribution to knowledge and understanding (Australian Government, 2007, 1.1.a). However, the guidelines of beneficence note that in qualitative research, care should be taken to ensure that participants are not identifiable by the information that they provide (Australian Government, 2007, 3.1.10). Particularly in the context of my research operating within such a small target population, I considered the risk of deductive disclosure (Kaiser, 2009) to be very high. How then should I contribute to knowledge and understanding and also maintain the principle of beneficence. With no simple solution available to me to resolve this tension, I turned to fictionalisation as one possible solution.

Fictionalising

For research within many paradigms, using fictional stories to communicate research findings would be considered inappropriate. Nevertheless, a number of researchers including Peter Clough (2002), Pranee Liamputtong (2006) and Carolyn Ellis (2007) have developed a theoretical case for the use of stories and other forms of creative expression in order to communicate the findings of sensitive research. One of the important elements of these arguments is an epistemological reframing. The reporting of factual details, in a positivist sense, need not be the only way in which knowledge can be communicated. Extensive research on the use of metaphor in research (see Midgley, Trimmer & Davies, 2013) has shown the value of indirect means of communicating important knowledge. Fictionalisation in this sense can be seen to be another of these indirect
means of knowledge transfer. Indeed, fictionalisation might be viewed as a form of metaphor construction.

As noted above, research on sensitive topics requires special attention to the protection of privacy and maintaining the confidentiality of participants. This can be quite difficult in qualitative research because the textual data used in reporting include a lot of collateral data that, through a process of deductive disclosure, may lead the reader to identify a particular participant as the source. I would argue that fictionalisation can be a useful tool for maintaining confidentiality, as it allows the researcher to remove or alter the collateral data, thereby providing fewer data for deductive disclosure. Clough (2002) has argued that “as a means of educational report, stories can provide a means by which those truths, which cannot be otherwise told, are uncovered” (p. 8). By fictionalising, fragments of data from various real events can be drawn together to communicate important truths about important happenings, whilst at the same time protecting the confidentiality of the research participants. In this way, the researcher can communicate concepts, ideas and experiences that might otherwise be impossible to report on. This draws on a similar principle to the “mindful slippage between Truth and truthfulness” (Medford, 2006, p. 853), in which the difference between what the researcher knows and what the researcher writes is intentional and based on the assessment of what is appropriate and necessary under the circumstances.

The intention of writing the stories that follow was to express my thoughts and feelings towards some of the other things that happened during the process of conducting my PhD research which, in order to comply with procedural ethics requirements, I could not disclose in the dissertation. I struggled for well over a year in trying to decide whether or not to attempt that part of my dissertation, largely because I felt I was taking a large risk without any guarantee of success. My mind was made up late in my candidature by an event which I found personally very disturbing but which, for the very same reasons relating to privacy and confidentiality, I also could not relate in detail. The way in which this event unfolded challenged me to reflect upon the ways in which my silence on issues I considered to be matters of injustice could make me complicit in such acts.

In response to this event, I set about doing whatever I thought I was able to do in order to oppose what I considered to be injustices, without crossing any of the legal, ethical or moral boundaries that have been set in place around me and my research project. Certainly, I could have done that without needing to report on it in the dissertation. However, in order for my work to be complete, I felt that I needed to at least attempt to communicate that there was more to this study than I could write in this dissertation. Thus, for me, it was an ethical imperative to seek to speak the unspeakable.

Fictionalising in the way I have done, raises another important ethical consideration. Jones (2007), in discussing performative social science, notes that participants who give their consent to participate in a study are most likely to believe that the information they give in interviews will be published in traditional
academic writing destined for academic journals, regardless of whether or not this is stated explicitly in the information provided for informed consent. Transforming what the researcher has learnt through the research process into a performative event – or in the case of my research, into fictionalised accounts – raises the question of whether or not participants should be included in consenting and even producing these representations. Jones avoided the problem by focussing on an autoethnographic study. In the final section of my dissertation, I switched analytical lenses to write a fictionalised section that might be described as autoethnographic. What are represented below are not the things that Saudi participants said to me. Rather, they represent my own thoughts, feelings and reactions to things that occurred during the three years in which I conducted the study. Two of the short stories from my dissertation have been selected and reproduced below, to demonstrate the approach I took.

Story one

I was so excited that morning that I was up long before the sun. At last I would get to meet him. At last, my chance.

It must have been ten years since I first started to notice something was wrong. It wasn’t that I’d wandered off the path; it was more like the path had begun to wear away beneath me. Now it was getting desperate. Everything was crumbling away beneath me. No way forward. No way back. No way at all.

I’d come to Asia looking for answers four years ago. The first country I came to was Japan, and that’s where I ran out of money. I got stuck in a job teaching English to high school kids, and my great trek for understanding was over before it even really began. But then I heard about Murayama. Some said he was an old Buddhist priest; some said he was an old mystic healer; others said he was just old. I didn’t really care what he was, as long as he could help. I needed some answers, and I needed them now.

Murayama grunted in response to my greeting as I sat on the cushion the old lady pointed to. He was staring into the oddly-shaped cup in front of him. For a long time he just sat there staring. I wondered if I should say something, but decided it was better to wait whilst he pondered over the truths he would share. Finally he looked up at me.

“Who are you?” he asked.

“Warren.”

“What?”

“Warren,” I replied, as slowly and clearly as I could.

“American?” he asked.

“No I’m Australian,” I answered.
“You’re all as bad as each other. Selfish, proud, arrogant and rude. Get lost, will you?”

Story two

“I have no choice,” he almost whispered. Kenji was only two years younger than me, but as he sat there almost in tears, he suddenly seemed a lot younger, a lot more vulnerable.

“You’ve always got a choice,” I said.

He just shook his head.

“It’s just not right,” I insisted, trying to urge both courage and action upon my friend with the intensity of my voice. “Just tell him, no.”

Kenji shook his head again. He scratched his cheek, but it might have been a tear he was wiping away. I wasn’t sure.

“You have a wife and two little kids,” I continued. “He can’t ask you to go.”

“He’s the boss.”

“But it’s not right,” I repeated.

He shrugged.

“You’re kids won’t even recognise you when you get back.”

He looked down, shook his head, looked up again.

“Kenji,” I began, but he cut me off.

His tears had faded. His years had returned. He stared at me with a look that I couldn’t really interpret. Was he angry? Frustrated? Determined? Resigned?

“No,” he said, with a tone I couldn’t read either. “I know you don’t understand, but that’s just the way it is over here. I have no choice.”

Discussion

These two stories are not allegories, nor are they written in secret code. I have intentionally constructed them in such a way that the reader will find no keys to interpreting the true meaning of the stories, nor be able to reconstruct the events that triggered those emotional responses within me. My hope was that through presenting the stories I was successful in communicating feelings that I experienced quite strongly at various times throughout the course of my study. There remains, of course, a degree of uncertainty. It is possible that these stories invoke in me a different emotional response than they would in other readers. However, it is also possible that the experiences I had in conducting the research could have evoked different responses in different people, so in this sense, I believe the intention of the stories holds true.

The point of this experimental journey into narrative reconstruction was two-fold. Firstly, I wanted to be as transparent as possible in reporting on my research. To deny that there was more to the process than I am ethically permitted to report on seems to me to be a lack of transparency. Indeed, in a dissertation of that length
(almost 90,000 words), to *not* mention something seems to imply that it did not happen. I tried to wriggle my way out from between the proverbial rock and hard place of not being able to say something, and yet not being comfortable about not saying it.

Secondly, without this fictionalisation I feared that my dissertation would leave the reader with the impression that the only issues facing Saudi students in Australia were the ones that Saudi participants chose to discuss in our narrative discussion groups. Some of those things were no doubt important. Nevertheless, some of the other things I heard and saw over the course of this study suggested to me that there may be much more to the story than what I had been told. The fact that these things were not expressed in the context of the formal study, although students shared them with me informally, I believe to be note-worthy. Therefore, the small section on fictionalisation in my dissertation was intended to flag the possibility – indeed likelihood in my opinion – that there may be many more things that might be addressed at some stage in the future.

However, fictionalising also afforded me the opportunity to respect the silences of the participants. There were certain experiences that they did not want to have on record, for whatever reasons. By fictionalising, I was able to express my feelings about the things that had happened, without actually revealing what had happened. This at least provides the readers with some information about possible researcher biases that might have influenced the analysis of the data.

One major drawback to this approach is that the participants themselves were not involved in the decision to fictionalise, nor in the creation of the stories themselves. One response to this is to note that the intention of this particular section of the dissertation was not to represent participant views, but rather, in the spirit of authoethnographic reflection, to present further information on the broader issues investigated in the study. It is my hope that this information would be of use to some readers, although I recognise that for some, this approach might be less highly valorised.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has explained the rationale for employing the approach of fictionalisation which I used in an attempt to overcome the ethical dilemma of trying to transparently report my own response to information that I became aware of that remained unvoiced by the participants in my study. In that sense, fictionalisation represents my voice (expressing what I felt) without infringing upon the participants’ decision to remain unvoiced on the issues I was responding to. Whilst fictionalisation is, by definition, not a true account of events, this chapter has demonstrate one of the ways it might possibly provide a medium through which thoughts, feelings and reactions to experiences can be expressed without detailing the corresponding events. In this sense, it can be seen to be one way of appropriately acknowledging and reporting voice in education research.
REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

1. What other principles might be drawn upon to help balance the tension between research merit and beneficence as discussed in this chapter?
2. What other methodological approaches might the researcher have employed to overcome the problem discussed in this chapter?
3. How important is it to represent researcher voice in research reporting? Is it more important in some methodological approaches than others? To what extent is this a methodological issue, versus an ethical one?

REFERENCES


A Faint Echo: Using Fictionalisation to Speak the Unspeakable

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3. DOES ANONYMISING STEAL THE VOICES OF RESEARCHERS AND RESEARCH SUBJECTS?

INTRODUCTION

The intention of anonymity and by extension confidentiality within human research is to prevent any deleterious repercussions which may result from the participant’s personal disclosure. This is an appropriate ethical position to consider and decision to be made prior to the commencement of any research. The argument put forth here is that not all research warrants participant anonymisation. Further, that the position of automatically assuming anonymity by academics and Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) alike is ethically unsound (Scott, 2008; Walford, 2005) for it potentially steals the voices of those whom are not at risk and may hope to be heard. This is a conceptual paper arguing an ethical position adopted within PhD research. As a result the chapter will touch philosophically and methodologically on the PhD research process undertaken, however, the focus will be on the conceptual argument of whether anonymising data can potentially steal the voices of researchers and research subjects? Recognising the qualitative and interpretative nature of the research which inspired this chapter, it was considered important to allow the voice or at least words of the researcher be heard. To untether this voice from the academic writing, the section entitled ‘PhD Ethical Decisions’ is written in the first person. This chapter will commence with a section reflecting upon potential societal shifts in the importance of anonymity. The chapter will unpack the concepts of anonymity and confidentiality; and discuss the issues and the inextricably linked ethics of anonymity within qualitative research. Finally the implications of anonymising will be discussed.

Setting the Argument

In 2004, the British Educational Research Association (BERA) recognised, when reviewing their guidelines, a Zeitgeist shift, one where a new online generation desired to be heard and accounted for (Walford, 2005; Wiles, Crow, Heath & Charles, 2007). It is nearly a decade later and the social media evolvement has become ubiquitous and a norm in a period which could be now called the social media era (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). What BERA cleverly managed to do was read the anima off the new generation, subsequently introducing an additional guideline, which recognised that ethnically, context is important, and that it could be
appropriate to identify interview candidates within research itself (BERA, 2004; Walford, 2005).

The notion and provision of anonymity is the norm within the arena of social research (Scott, 2005). It is such an expected standard that it stands as a ubiquitous ethical premise within ethics guidelines and research organisations’ codes of practice (Walford, 2005). It is not surprising then that the positions of anonymity (and confidentiality) appear to be the ‘default position’ in universities and academia (Yu, 2008, p. 162). In the ever evolving technologically proficient Facebooking public however these notions are perceived and valued quite differently. There is within academic discourse increased discussion, questioning certain IRBs’ underlying assumptions, that research participants desire anonymity and the issue which surround this (Grinyer, 2002; Wiles et al., 2007). This chapter posits that academics, many research institutions and IRBs’ automatic, assumed baseline and attitude regarding anonymity (and confidentiality), especially within qualitative education research is sub optimal. Scott (2005) highlights that the majority of IRBs advocate actively for anonymity; taking a counter-cultural position it could be postulated that there appears to be an almost ambivalent lack of questioning or perhaps desire to consider the ethical consideration underpinning the proposed study amongst academics guiding early career researchers. This chapter espouses that researchers should indeed be considering the appropriateness of their methodological and ethical decision making in the context of their research and the voices within the research.

PhD Ethical Decisions

The research which inspires this chapter comes from a dissertation entitled “Exploration of the ways in which authentic yoga teachers facilitate spiritual learning and growth in their Yoga teacher training programmes”. An authentic yoga teacher in this context is defined as one who perceives practices and teaches from an assumption that yoga is a spiritual practice and not just a physical practice.

Within this dissertation two research questions were posed:

1. What underlying belief structures, individual qualities and practices characterise authentic Yoga teachers?
2. What teaching practices do authentic Yoga teachers employ in order to facilitate spiritual learning and growth, and realise the teachings of enlightenment?

A leading ethical challenge for me as a researcher and author was to honour the entire research process in a form which conceptually respected and nurtured the personally important questions being posed. As a long term yoga and meditation practitioner and teacher, these notions were important. To achieve this ontological stance I required a holistic strategy to underpin the philosophical processes of the research. At the same time I required a method of analysis delivery which was
respectful of the origins of yoga. Fortunately I came across an approach called Mindful inquiry designed by Bentz and Shapiro (1998). This method drew together four epistemological traditions of phenomenology, hermeneutics, critical social theory and Buddhist practice of mindfulness to reflect upon process and data. The spiralic reflection process of Mindful Inquiry has philosophically underpinned the ongoing creation process of the dissertation. Yoga has traditionally been taught by word of mouth in a narrative style. To honour this method I decided to utilise the qualitative process of narrative analysis as my research method. Participant selection was focused on recruiting experienced Yoga teachers who had a long track record of running yoga teacher trainings, I intentionally chose teachers whom I had either read and whose writings I admired and whose DVDs I utilised and was impressed by, or had been recommended to me by trusted peers.

The importance of ethical contemplation became apparent when I was constructing my ethics application for my university’s IRB. I realised that my research study should consider the ethical notions of privacy, trust and dignity to ultimately create research which could be considered trustworthy (James & Busher, 2007). With this very consideration in mind my supervisors recommended anonymising all my data, thereby keeping confidential my participants’ identity. This challenged my intention for the research, it was never targeted (naively on my behalf) at academic journals; instead yoga schools and classes whose teachers did not read academic journals or writing. My hope was to affect change in a community that learnt from reading biographies, autobiographies and self-help books, not monographs and edited tomes; that attended workshops and watched instructional DVDs. If I was to anonymise the research findings in the dissertation then the journeys traversed, the lessons to be learnt, the anxieties and highs shared would possibly be lost to its target audience (I have since realised that the doctoral dissertation itself, as well the publishing out of it would not actually serve this original, naive intention; the lessons and journeys I want to share need to be shared at a later date, away from academic discourse).

I forged ahead, convincing my supervisors, developing my argument for not anonymising. Once completed and vetted I submitted my ethics application and to my university IRBs credit, this was accepted with the first application. Although my supervisor’s automatic stance was to anonymise, the review board recognised the considerations posited in the ethics application. Scott (2005) identifies that IRBs, quite rightly, are keen advocates of anonymity; my own institution’s IRB considered and weighed up my ethics proposal and decided to err in favour of non-anonymising, thus exemplifying pleasingly case by case determination.

**Dissertation Decisions, Anonymity and Confidentiality**

The understanding of anonymity and confidentiality is of importance if academics are going to make considered informed decisions about the ethical construction of their research. Armed with this knowledge they can carefully nurture early carrier
researchers and doctoral candidates to weigh the ethical concerns of the research subject with potential voice of the research. Through this considered apprenticeship early carrier researchers can make contextually ethically informed decisions.

The intent of anonymity and confidentiality is the prevention of damage or injury to the research subject, resulting from their personal confessions during data collection (Goh, Lee & Salleh, 2010). During the construction of the aforementioned PhD research the researcher weighed the options of utilising anonymity carefully for all the research subjects had public faces and the majority had published both books and DVDs. The recognisability of the research subjects became a key factor which influenced the final decision regarding whether to anonymise or not. In the end the research subjects themselves chose to be interviewed understanding that their names would be utilised in the research. Only one, Donna Farhi, asked to review the actual data utilised in the dissertation, her goal to ensure accuracy of translation and intention.

At its very basic definition, to be anonymous is to be unknown. When one is truly anonymous, it is impossible to identify who they are. In research one can substitute the subjects name for a fictitious one, thus providing anonymity (Grinyer, 2002). One of the yoga research subjects, Donna Farhi, is a well known physical therapist who has published a number of books surrounding the practices of yoga. Currently there are only two are three such therapists publishing textbooks in field of yoga education. During the interview Donna provided many life stories which were both rich in detail and narrative, as well sufficiently detailed so as to allow potential identification by readers. When considering anonymisation, a simple substitution of name could have provided her a level of anonymity. Despite this substitution however existed the possibility that certain readers could piece together Donna’s identity from the stories discussed. To provide her complete anonymity would have required the careful deletion of any references which may have alluded to her identity, and thus diminishing in many cases the richness of content shared by her. This example highlights two reasons why assuring anonymity was problematic to the study, firstly there was a potential that the research could be identified through the data provided; secondly to prevent this accidental disclosure (Wiles et al., 2007) deletion of identity markers could greatly compromise the research. A result of providing complete anonymity would have been a dampening of the voice of the research subject.

Scott (2005) argues the more data recorded by the researcher (whether ethics consent forms, audio or video transcripts, field notes etc.) the easier it is to determine or triangulate who the data source is. Case in point, during the planning phase of the PhD dissertation, it was decided that a transcription service would be utilised to convert both audio and video recordings. By utilising this service the researcher potentially decreased the likelihood of maintaining the research subject’s identity. As the transcriber was visually and orally transcribing, identification was entirely possible. If a researcher was to conduct interviews
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pertaining to sensitive issues it would be recommended that they choose to transcribe their own data (Scott, 2005).

Unlike anonymity, confidentiality assumes that certain parties are privy to some information, what this information is and who may be privy depends on how the study has been structured. “The concept of confidentiality is closely connected with anonymity in that anonymity is one way in which confidentiality is operationalised” (Wiles et al., 2007, p. 417). To keep the identity of a research subject confidential one can choose to anonymise identifiable details. This act of anonymising research information does not eradicate all concerns which may arise around confidentiality for confidentiality can be breached if the researcher discusses details with others (Walford, 2005; Wiles et al., 2007). Within the context of the yoga study, this followed that the researcher could not discuss with their supervisors the content of the yoga interviews without creating what Wiles et al. (2007) call ‘deliberate disclosure’ (p. 419). As the doctoral study functions like an apprenticeship model it was deemed likely that interview content may be disclosed during supervisor PhD candidate discussions. Ethically the researcher did not want to cross this boundary. As with anonymity, confidentiality may also be breached when the research subject can be identified by description (Walford, 2005), with is described as ‘accidental disclosure’ (Wiles et al., 2007, p. 421). Considering some of the yoga interview subjects were well known for their experiences, methods of teaching and publications the difficulty of preventing identification by readers was problematic. For example Eric Schiffman is a popular yoga teacher who actively utilises modern settings to explain complex Hindu traditions and practices. His teachings are readily available on DVD, downloads, podcasts, yoga magazines etc. Removing all identifiable information to assure Eric’s confidentiality would keep him confidential, however it would adversely affect his voice within the research. Not wanting to lose the voice of the subject, nor wanting to be placed in a potentially ethical quandary the researcher chose not to utilise any form of confidentiality.

The ethical issues of anonymity and confidentiality are vital discourses amongst researchers, never more so than within qualitative research and the social sciences. These notions are however often utilised interchangeably (Scott, 2005). This chapter argues that to promise anonymity is different from offering confidentiality. Providing assurance of confidentiality is more problematic than anonymising a name. As a result Wiles et al. (2007) argue that the best researchers can hope for is that the research subjects remain anonymous. As a result of this argument the remainder of the chapter will focus on the issues of anonymity and how this can affect voice within research.
Anonymity: Issues

The following sections on issues and ethics reflect upon anonymity from a general perspective rather than tied specifically to the case study exploring yoga teachers and the teaching of spirituality.

It is an expectation that all researchers strive for ethical practice and conduct. This demands a practice of truthfulness and honesty with regards to all dealings with participants. An ethically reflexive practice requires an aware and inclusive researcher conscious of their own integrity, truly concerned with the participant’s dignity, privacy and safety (Clark, Prosser & Wiles, 2010). Participant dialogue should always be couched in the most effective way to allow the voice to come through in the research.

As described in the previous section, to actually ensure anonymity within education research certain identifiers or details require withholding so that the individual cannot be determined or triangulated (Walford, 2005); one method of ensuring absolute anonymity is by not collecting any identifiers. Many studies alter details of participant’s traits to protect their identities (Wiles et al., 2007), certainly a laudable position; it is important in terms of trustworthiness (James & Busher, 2007) however it is vital that this practice does not misrepresent or alter data, which often proves to be a difficult task. This act, when unnecessary, removes potential valuable content from the study, thus stealing the voice of the researcher.

Rarely if ever do researchers make explicit their methods of anonymising, resulting in a lack of ‘transparency’ impacting on the reader’s assessment of ‘reliability and rigour’. The reader is therefore unknowingly disempowered, for they are unable to determine the integrity of the research for themselves (Wiles et al., 2007, p. 426). Depending on the qualitative methodology chosen and theme which is explored, the ethical decision of anonymity can quickly degrade the rigor of the analysis. All qualitative researchers at some point are faced with the tension of desiring to protect the research participants, all the while attempting to maintain the robustness of the research and providing meaningful outcomes (Bishop, 2005; Scott, 2005).

Though far removed from the theme of yoga teachers and teaching, research with at risk populations and anonymity is a complex mix of ethical issues. Scott (2005) explores ethically challenging situations. Researching of socially delicate topics such as spouse violence or illegal narcotic usage invariably requires an assurance of anonymity to participants for fear of negative outcomes. This field of research, which explores at risk individuals and illegal practices, certainly has the potential of being ordered by the courts to be reviewed – putting the notion of anonymity in a questionable position. The researcher working within these areas has a problematic and unenviable task of attempting to maintain anonymity whilst attempting to publish meaningful research.

There are interesting political and ontological ramifications of anonymisation for the very act of anonymising actually separates context from the events being
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studied; essentially resulting in artificial abstractions. These abstractions are exploring lived experiences, re-contextualised, potentially making the lessons learned meaningless or at a minimum, artificial. It is questionable whether these abstractions are generalisable (Nespor, 2000) for experience tells us context is very important for understanding. Nespor highlighted that the voice the research (and therefore the researcher) is intending to bring to light is potentially relegated to meaninglessness as its contextual details are hidden.

Anonymity: Ethics

Irrespective of the paradigm, ethical imperatives should underpin and be at the forefront of the decision making process of a research project. Researchers require an exacting framework which ethically considers how knowledge is created within the chosen methodology (James & Busher, 2007). Because many variables arise during the research process, the better schooled the researcher is in ethical decision making, the more likely they will function as conscious and considered advocates towards the research and its participants (Wood, 2006).

An ethical or moral approach to research requires both an obeisance and compliance with the axioms of justice, non-malfeasance, beneficence and autonomy (Clark, Prosser & Wiles, 2010). Justice in research refers to equality of participant treatment. Non-malfeasance suggests that no harm must befall the participants within the research, and beneficence in research declares that its outcomes should be beneficial for others. Autonomy stipulates that participants should partake within the study via their own volition (Florida, 1998). When deciding ethically upon the need for anonymity in a research study, the notions of justice, non-malfeasance, beneficence and autonomy need to be paramount in the researcher’s mind.

To investigate qualitatively within education research requires a dance of ethics, trust and trustworthiness. The synergistic relationship which evolves between the researcher and the research candidate allows the growth of ‘trust’, ‘confidence’, ‘integrity’ (James & Busher, 2007, p. 101). Within this relationship the qualitative practice of ‘co-construction’ is often utilised, with verification of research content by research subject, this process improves credibility and trustworthiness, (Walford, 2005, p. 84). With the assumption that the participant does not fall into a risk category and is agreeable to being identified, this chapter advocates that it is ethically appropriate that the co-constructor be given voice somewhere in the research publication.

Anonymity: Implications

In this social media age the chapter recognises that individuals have agency and their own ability to make choices regarding communication. It is also recognises that the individual may not be as fully cognisant of the repercussions of wavering
anonymity or confidentiality although they may be considered part of the Facebook generation. This chapter advocates that it is the role of the researcher to make as explicit as possible the potential deleterious results of publishing certain content with the potential research subjects. To achieve this the researcher should be prepared to sit down for longer periods of time (than they might usually do) to talk through implications of the study with the subject. From consciously addressing this decision making process the researcher may be confident the research subject understands the implications of having their voice heard.

To be a researcher is to be steeped within ethics, and ethical decision making. This paper has repeatedly acknowledged that choices within research bear ethical outcomes. Cognisance of this is vital; however, as literature shows repeatedly, confusion or at least differing perceptions exist surrounding the terms anonymity and confidentiality. As a means of developing individual researcher clarity, this paper advocates that each researcher should go through an ethical methodological consciousness raising process. The goal here is to steep the researcher within ethical research literature and allow an ethical competence to evolve, in the hope that an awareness and form of intellectual consciousness may develop. Researchers must acknowledge and own their own ethical decisions making, understanding that these choices function either as a midwife or as an executioner of the participant’s voice within the research.

CONCLUSION

Although Yoga provides both a context and backdrop for this chapter, the true heart of the argument is that of ethics and ethical decision making. Protection of research subjects is considered above all else the imperative when considering research design. When it is determined that the nature of the research is one where it is completely safe to disclose the research subject’s identity, it is within this context the debate about whether anonymity may steal the voice of the research, the research subject and the research itself is set. This chapter argues that within the study described that if anonymity or confidentiality was chosen as part of the research design then indeed the voice would have been stolen. This chapter challenges all researchers to be explicit about the choices they make and how they are to honour and represent the voices within the research. Added to this it challenges academics to explore the ethical arena explicitly with doctoral candidates and early career researchers. Just as importantly, epistemologically, it challenges them as to where their own voice lies. It is these quandaries they need to ponder and decide upon which allows for their determination of whether to anonymise or not, to promise confidentiality or not. By initially considering the factors or principles which inform ethical research, researchers are honouring the research, the research participant and ourselves as researchers.
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REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

1. Have you as a researcher ever actively considered the notion of whether to anonymise (or make confidential) one of your research studies?
2. If you chose not to anonymise, what would have been the rationale for this decision? We as people and as researchers evolve over time, would you still argue this same rationale now?
3. If you are an academic developing research skills of early career researchers and doctoral students, are there any specific preparations or guidelines that you draw upon to develop their critical thinking skills pertaining to anonymity and confidentiality within their studies? Upon reflection, are these adequate?

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