The questions of ethics in collaborative research

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In Australian universities, research involving human participants must gain clearance from the institution's ethics committee or review board before data collection begins. The granting of ethics approval suggests that the planned research activities are ethical and that they will be conducted in an ethical manner. However, the operations of ethics committees tend to be based on the assumption that the research participants will be strangers to the researchers. Whilst ethics guidelines generally focus on procedural and situational issues, they do not usually address the important issue of relational ethics (Ellis, 2007). This dimension of ethics becomes crucially important in research projects that are conducted in teams. What ethical principles might apply to researchers collaborating on a research project, not only in terms of relationships with the participants, but in terms of relationships amongst the researchers themselves? Reflecting on the authors' experiences of team research and the types of questions that presented, this chapter investigates the importance of relational ethics as it applies to collaborative research in education.

Introduction

University researchers are aware of the need for ethical clearance for research involving human participants. As highlighted by the Australian *National statement on ethical conduct in human research* (National Health and Medical Research Council, Australian Research Council, & Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee, 2007), all interactions between people have ethical dimensions and research can "give rise to important and sometimes difficult ethical questions about research participation" (p. 3). Indeed, researchers have written about their experiences of ethical dilemmas, which often seem to cluster around issues relating to anonymity of participants, representation of data and researcher responsibility to multiple audiences (Henderson, 2008).

Whilst questions of ethical behaviour and decision-making have to be embedded into every stage of research involving human participants, it is apparent that ethics guidelines are based on an assumption that research participants will be strangers to the researchers. In fact, the *National statement on ethical conduct in human research* (National Health and Medical Research Council et al., 2007) emphasises situations when participants "enter into a relationship with researchers whom they may not know but need to trust" (p. 3). However, when research is conducted in teams, particularly if the team is focusing on team collaborations and relationships, another ethical dimension becomes important. In these cases, the usual divide between researcher and participant can narrow, thereby suggesting that a rethinking of ethical procedures may be necessary.

Relational ethics, therefore, would seem to be integral to the mix of issues that a research team must address, including existing relationships between researchers and participants as well as amongst team members. As researchers now working as part of a team, we have come to realise the significance of relational ethics to the team's operations. This chapter, then, addresses relational ethics. It begins by investigating current literature, then reflects on our experiences as members of a research team to tease out the issues and the importance of relational ethics to collaborative research.

Background

The *National statement on ethical conduct in human research* (National Health and Medical Research Council et al., 2007) outlines the ethical frameworks in Australia that guide research dealing with human beings. The preamble to the statement notes that some human research can involve significant risks, either due to error or insensitivity, or through rarer instances of "deliberate and appalling violation of human beings" (p. 7). On two occasions, the preamble refers to the notorious medical experiments conducted in detention and concentration camps during the Second World War as one of the catalysts and justifications for the development of broad-ranging and legally binding ethical frameworks.

Building upon the premise that wartime atrocities should be avoided – and taking into consideration other research scandals such as the notorious Tuskegee syphilis study in the United States – the tone for legislation related to research ethics tends to position participants or subjects as potential victims who need protecting (Rhodes, 2005). The problems that have arisen from this approach are well documented. Ever-increasingly elaborate review procedures, which seek to protect victims and avoid legal liability, have developed into an ethics review system in the United States that Gunsalus (2004) claims has "created an unreasonable regulatory burden, undermined respect for important ethical oversight, and diverted resources from more pressing ethical matters" (p. 381). Frustration over these procedures has led to some investigators deceiving ethics review boards (Keith-Spiegel & Koocher, 2005). Indeed, one national survey of social and behavioural researchers in the United States indicated that 48 per cent of respondents conducted research without appropriate approval (Ashcraft & Krause, 2007). Similar review procedures in the United Kingdom have also been criticised on a number of other grounds, including over-emphasis on abstract ethical principles and failure to demonstrate the capacity to enforce ethical behaviour (Hammersley, 2009).

Important as these challenges are, in this chapter we focus on another problem that we believe arises from research ethics standards that are framed around the primacy of protecting research participants from harm; namely, that these frameworks fail to acknowledge or address instances where the research participants are known to the researchers. In this chapter we refer to this tendency as *implied stranger status*. We argue that this is a significant limitation for qualitative research in the social sciences. The taken-for-granted stranger status in this kind of research can be seen in the following excerpts from the Australian *National statement on ethical conduct in human research* (National Health and Medical Research Council et al., 2007):

> A range of relationships between participants and researchers may develop as a result of the duration and nature of the interaction. (p. 27)
>
> Qualitative research may involve methods of data collection that require the development of personal relationships with participants. (p. 28)

Whilst these statements do not preclude conducting research with people who are not strangers, it seems clear to us that the statements are based on the assumption that the participants will not be known to the researchers prior to undertaking the research.

Similarly, in the *Publication manual of the American Psychological Association* (American Psychological Association, 2010) – the guidelines used by our Faculty to inform aspects of doctoral, postgraduate and undergraduate study – the information on ethical standards in publishing focuses on "the rights and welfare of research participants" as one of the three "basic ethical and legal principles" that must be followed (p. 11). Whilst the other two principles are focused on the protection of researchers with regard to intellectual property and ways of ensuring the accuracy of what is reported, this relational issue seems to assume a power differential and a relational distance between researchers and research participants. Maintaining confidentiality, ensuring the rights of participants and removing any potential for

the exploitation of participants are highlighted. As in the Australian *National statement on ethical conduct in human research* (National Health and Medical Research Council et al., 2007), these guidelines imply stranger status.

In the remainder of this chapter, we discuss some of the philosophical concerns that arise from this implied stranger status, before discussing some of the practical implications that we have identified within our own collaborative research team. The Australian *National statement on ethical conduct in human research* (National Health and Medical Research Council et al., 2007) acknowledges that it

> does not exhaust the ethical discussion of human research. Even a single research field covers a multitude of different situations about which the National Statement will not always offer specific guidance, or to which its application may be uncertain. (p. 6)

What follows in this chapter is our attempt to raise some of the questions that are not discussed explicitly in the *National statement on ethical conduct in human research*, with particular reference to collaborative research.

Relational ethics

Gaining the approval of an institution's ethics review board or committee suggests that the proposed research activity is ethical. However, review boards and committees operate on principles that assume that research participants are strangers to the researchers. Therefore, whilst giving guidance for procedural and situation ethics, the guidelines do not address the important issue of relational ethics (Ellis, 2007). This causes us to question: How does our research affect our relationship with those who are involved in our research? And how does this relationship affect our research?

An example of the kind of issue that relational ethics seeks to address is offered by Medford (2006) when she expressed her sense of feeling "diminished, silenced, erased" (p. 855) when her personal relationship with another academic was not acknowledged in an autoethnographic paper written by that former partner. This experience is a good example of the blurred boundaries between personal and professional relationships. Procedurally, there was no concern with the way in which the research for that paper was conducted, because it was unlikely that any other person would have been able to identify the fact that the writer's relationship with Medford had been excluded from the paper. However, it mattered to her. Ignoring the relational dimension of ethics in this situation caused personal anguish. This is perhaps an unusual situation, because in most cases participants are not likely to come across a paper written about them in an academic journal (Jones, 2007). Just because participants will not read what has been written about them, though, does not resolve the issue. Medford (2006) suggested that the primary ethical standard for academic writing should be to "write as if our subjects are/will be in our audience" (p. 862).

Ellis (2007) took a different approach when dealing with similar complex issues. She wrote an autoethnographic paper on caring for her elderly mother, and chose to omit some of the details when she read the paper aloud to her ailing mother. For Ellis, the deception was justified, because she felt that it was more important to protect her relationship with her mother than to tell everything that she had written. This, she admitted, is one of the "grey areas between revealing and concealing" (p. 19).

Another dimension of research ethics that affects our relationships is whether or not our conceptualisation of research is ethical and in what ways it is ethical. The dominant research paradigms of Western academia may "limit the unthought spaces that [particular groups of people] could potentially inhabit as human beings" (Lincoln & Cannella, 2009, p. 280). Questions then arise: Are we, in the very act of doing research, positioning people in ways in which they would rather not be positioned? How might this affect our relationships with these people, and how might these relationships affect the way in which we research them? Our

research into the work of a collaborative research team (of which we are both members) has heightened our awareness of the complexity and importance of philosophical questions like these.

A context for ethical considerations

In the Faculty where we work, an initiative to enhance research performance saw the creation of a small number of research teams. Because the initiative provided some funding to each team and the longevity of the initiative depended on research outcomes, there was pressure on all teams to perform. As two of the seven members of a newly-formed team, we found ourselves involved in discussions about team dynamics and the potential for a team project. Because the formation of the team had brought together researchers who had worked previously in a range of small group combinations but not as a full team, initial discussions focused on how team members could work together in a productive way.

As the team developed a plan of action, which involved an examination of collaborative research and research collaborations, considerable discussion focused inwards on the team, its members, group dynamics and team research. Ethical considerations were integral to these discussions, particularly when the team decided that the preparation of a book would be the first team project. Whilst some might argue that the idea of writing a book about the team was an indulgent or hedonistic move, we believed that it was a sure way of making our deliberations about team research count as research outputs. However, the more we talked about the project, the more we realised that ethical considerations, particularly with regards to relationships, were complex and essential components of what we were trying to do. From the myriad of questions that were raised, we focus here on a small selection that warrants serious discussion by any group attempting to set up a research team.

A question of ethics

Some of our questions focused on the pragmatics of co-authoring a book and its chapters within, and on making decisions about authorship. We considered questions such as: Who would be the book's editors? Could a book have seven editors? If so, in what order would the editors' names be presented? Empirical studies on the inclusion or exclusion of contributing authors have indicated that factors such as a sense of loyalty and power relationships can influence decisions about who is listed as an author (see Geelhoed, Phillips, Fischer, Shpungin, & Gong, 2007), pointing to the important role that personal relationships can have in decisions on authorship. Our team was faced with the added challenge that arose from a desire to deliberately position the team as a collective of strengths. Not only did we need to consider who should be listed as authors and editors, but we needed to address the complex issue of authorship order.

The APA publication guide indicates that authorship order should "accurately reflect the relative contributions of persons involved" (American Psychological Association, 2010, p. 19), and policy frameworks in line with this recommendation have also been developed (see Washburn, 2008). However, establishing a hierarchical order of significance in terms of contribution seemed to us to be counter to the practices that the team was trying to establish. Following the conventions of order of authorship meant that our research could be read as a declaration of the power relations that the team was trying to avoid. Interestingly, the American Psychological Association does not indicate a solution beyond noting "equal roles" in an authors' note (p. 19).

An additional complication for our team was that team members were simultaneously researchers and participants. This spawned quite complex discussions about what constitutes research and the implications and ethical consequences of researchers researching themselves. As discussed earlier, the implied stranger status evident in the current Australian

National statement on ethical conduct in human research (National Health and Medical Research Council et al., 2007) left us feeling unsure about where we stood in relation to ethical clearance procedures. The statement does address "pre-existing relationships between participants and researchers," but that section focuses on relationships in which "one party has or has had a position of influence or authority over the other" (p. 59).

In our team's situation, the overlapping roles of participants and researchers and the fact that all team members were work colleagues – along with the team's deliberate move to avoid hierarchical relationships – seemed to us to be beyond the scope of the framework outlined in the *National statement on ethical conduct in human research* (National Health and Medical Research Council et al., 2007). Whilst we recognise that a position of greater caution is better than not enough caution – and the team engaged in lengthy discussions about the ethical issues and sought advice – we were reminded of the extent to which ethics permeates our work and the ongoing necessity to engage in thoughtful discussion on the many complex dimensions of ethics in collaborative research.

Whilst the researcher-participant issue was a major one for the team to consider, other ethical questions were also raised. As work colleagues and members of a research team, we had to consider other relational issues as well, such as how far to self-disclose, how to manage our professional and personal relationships, how to deal with disagreements, and whether consensus or majority decision-making should inform our practice. We addressed these questions in team meetings. Nevertheless, some important ethical questions have not yet been discussed as a team. For example, we have not broached the subject of how the team should respond if a team member were thought to be operating unethically.

There were also issues of importance that addressed relational issues beyond the team. Questions included: What would the team do if other work colleagues asked to join the team? What if a team member decided to leave the team? How might team membership impact on relationships with other research teams within the Faculty? And how might team membership impact on relationships with staff whose applications for team status and associated funding had not been successful? In other words, relational ethics was part and parcel of operating as a research team. Even though some of these questions did not impact on formal ethical clearance procedures as such, they were part of the considerations that informed our practices as ethical researchers.

Conclusion

Ethical considerations have played a major role in the thinking of our research team since its formation a little over six months prior to the writing of this chapter. In reflecting on the discussions that our team has had and in thinking about the issues in light of the *National statement on ethical conduct in human research* (National Health and Medical Research Council et al., 2007), we have come to the conclusion that relational ethics are integral to the operations of research teams.

We are very aware that our chapter has raised a lot of questions about ethical practices in a team situation and that it has not offered a great deal in terms of answers. This has been deliberate. We know that ethical practices are situated in the context/s within which the research occurs. As Piper and Simons (2005) explain, "ethical decisions are the result of a weighing up of a myriad of factors in the specific complex social and political situations within which we conduct research" (p. 56). As a result, ethical guidelines and statements have to be seen as "abstract rules of intent" and therefore "cannot be followed simply as rules" (p. 58).

As our reflections have demonstrated, our research as a team raised many ethical issues, some of which were specific to the situation where researchers and participants are the same people. In particular, consideration of the implied stranger status that seems to underpin the

National statement on ethical conduct in human research (National Health and Medical Research Council et al., 2007) has made us think deeply about what we are doing as a team and about how we should address the questions we have asked.

It is important to point out that the decision for two of the seven team members to author this chapter was based on particular interests of team members, rather than any specific position of authority or expertise. The chapter represents our reflections as two members of the team. We have not included any empirical data as such. Our considerations do not necessarily represent a team perspective, although they are based on discussions that we have had as a team, and form a chapter that will contribute to a publication that will be edited by the whole team. Again, we are faced with considering relational ethics. Whilst we have reported only our reflections, has our conduct been ethical? Have we given credit where credit is due? Have we appropriated knowledge or ideas that originated with other team members, without making that acknowledgement explicit? Have we silenced the voices of some team members? Have we misrepresented the views of the team as a group, or of some individual team members?

We hope that some of the answers to these questions will become clear as we share this chapter with the other team members in the lead-up to the book's publication. We are also mindful that three team members are writing a chapter entitled *Towards some answers to the questions of ethics in collaborative research*, which will address a similar issue in a different way. And, for that chapter also, many of the same questions will apply. As we move towards the final stages of our team's book project, we acknowledge that questions of ethics will continue to be a significant focal point of discussion for the duration of our team's existence.

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Strategies for sustaining synergies

- Brainstorm the ethical issues that might be important for your team or for a team that you plan to establish. Consider the unique relational dimensions of your research context.
- How are the issues similar to or different from issues discussed in this chapter?
- If the team already exists, open up discussion about these issues with the team. How might the issues be resolved? Consider developing explicit guidelines around issues such as authorship, resolving conflicts and joining or leaving the team.

Further reading

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