

Ethical considerations and dilemmas for the researcher and for families in home-based research: A case for situated ethics

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Abstract

When researching with or about families in home-based research, there are numerous unexpected ethical issues that can emerge, particularly in qualitative research. This paper is based on reflective accounts of four home-based research projects, two in the UK and two Australia, which examined ethical dilemmas identified when engaged in home-based research with young children. Using a synergy of ecocultural theory and Foucauldian ideas of Heterotopia as theoretical conceptualisations, the authors employed reflective lenses to guide their approach, and examine dilemmas and complexities when conducting research in the home. We argue that, to address ethical dilemmas, researchers need to problematise and reflect upon the nature of respectful approaches and the ethical implications of their behaviours. We conclude that, although ethical codes are valuable when researching families at home, researchers should plan for and forefront their methodological approaches in ways that are family-centred, whilst also framed by practices that are ethical, respectful and reflective to the situated contexts of family's ecologies and heterotopias.

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Keywords

Ethics, research with/about families, ecocultural theory, heterotopia, physical emotional and social spaces, identities

Introduction

During home-based research, researchers enter family lives and environments with the goal of investigating phenomena related to family practices, behaviours, perspectives, and/or the lived experiences of the adults and children. The data collection takes place in the physical environments (mainly the homes) of these families, using a range of mainly qualitative methods, such as interviews, observations, or diaries. Entering this privileged space may appear deceptively simple as it is an environment with which most of us are familiar. For the researcher, however, it often comes with unforeseen or unanticipated ethical dilemmas, even when there is ethical clearance, compliance with institutional codes and consent from families. This paper presents a meta-reflective analysis of notes from four qualitative home-based research projects as recorded in reflective journals. The four studies were conducted in two different countries: two projects took place in England and two projects took place in Australia. The paper aims to examine the emergent ethical challenges and dilemmas when researching families at home using qualitative methods, and how they might be addressed in a sensitive and respectful manner.

Building upon our previous work about the ethical dilemmas that arise when engaged in home-based research (Brown, 2019; Palaiologou 2012, 2014, 2019), we employed reflective lenses to examine some of the dilemmas and complexities that we faced. Using a synergy of ecocultural theory and Foucauldian ideas of heterotopia as theoretical conceptualisations, we developed reflective lenses to guide our approach to analysing the notes in field reflective journals that we kept during the four research projects.

The two research projects in England involved families and their young children, with observations and open-ended interviews being the main data collection methods. The purpose of these two projects was to investigate the use of technologies at home with children and families. In the English studies there were 12 families with children from infancy to 6 years of age. The findings from these research projects have been published (Arnott et al., 2019; Kewalramani, 2020a, 2020b, 2021a, 2021b; Palaiologou et al., 2021).

The other two projects were conducted in Queensland, Australia with parents of young children, where the main methods employed were photo-documentation and semi-structured interviews. The first project, with 55 parents and family support service staff, explored understandings of and ability to support bonding, attachment, and active play opportunities with young children (referred

to as *connecting with kids* by participants of this study). The second project, an intensive multi-case study, explored ways in which parents supported active play with their child/children within the home environment, and focused upon parents with young children from 3 months to 3 years of age. Findings from these studies were also published (Brown, 2013; Brown 2012, 2019; Brown and Danaher, 2012).

As all four projects were home based, it was important for us to keep reflective journals of the dilemmas and challenges presented during the research. These were different from the field notes for each project; reflective journals focused upon incidences and decision-making concerning the ethics of our interactions with the families. For example, where there was a need to observe children in their rooms, discussions with the families, or being present and engaging in an interview with a mother whilst she was breast feeding. Such instances were not anticipated or negotiated in the early stages of research. Based on our analysis of these diaries, we present problematising ethical dilemmas that we faced to help further ethical family-centred research.

A rationale for reflecting on ethical considerations and dilemmas

There are significant works that problematise home-based research in terms of the engagement and relationships (e.g. Tisdall, 2011), positionality of the researcher and families (Bermúdez et al., 2016; England, 1994; Milner, 2007), and ways of interpreting and representing families. Some frame research with families with the term *intersectionality* (e.g. Few-Demo, 2014), as the study of ‘the relationships among multiple dimensions and modalities of social relationships and subject formations’ (McCall, 2005: 1771).

Undertaking research with families, especially in qualitative traditions, has highlighted important issues around emotional and ethical issues that emerge, and complexities that are not always covered by ethical institutional guidelines (Miller et al., 2012). The messy practical realities of researching the lives of families are not always reflected in research publications that, instead, offer a more sterile or homogenised account (Jamieson et al., 2011a). Unfortunately, where the emotional and ethical issues that have emerged within a study are not salient, due the anxiety of research losing credibility and legitimacy, these issues are not reported.

It is our belief that there is a need to engage in reflection to examine the relationships between the researcher and the family, and the potential dilemmas that emerge when engaging in inquiry related to home-based research. There is a lack of clarity around how this type of research can be ethical, respectful, and participatory. Currently, most existing discourse is focused either on institutional ethics, or ethics codes of professional bodies and associations. Meanwhile, the relevant literature

draws attention to the emotional and ethical realities of such research, with resulting tensions between institutional and ethics codes of professional bodies and associations (Brown, 2019; Gabb, 2010; Yee and Andrews, 2006). This includes formalised ethical codes where the intent is to guide researchers and safeguard participants, for instance, the British Psychological Society (BPS, 2018), the European Early Childhood Research Association (EECERA, 2015), the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2018), the Australian Association for Research in Education (Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct Research, 2018), and the Australian Council for Educational Research.

It appears that formalised codes place great emphasis on the wellbeing of and *doing no harm* to the participant, as well as issues such as informed consent, ongoing consent, and assent. These matters raise procedural issues related to confidentiality and anonymity, for example, which undoubtedly help to safeguard the participants and legitimise the research. However, there is scepticism around the extent to which codes might offer ‘an illusion of ethical protection’ (Mason, 2018) and impact upon or limit the aims of the research (Tierney and Blumberg Corwin, 2007). Additionally, there are concerns about the potential risks associated with ignoring emergent ethical dilemmas (Gabb, 2009; Gabbard et al., 2008; Miller et al., 2012).

Such discourse is important because it challenges the practical applicability of formal ethics codes, and also brings into focus those ethical issues that can potentially extend beyond formalised requirements. While researchers should not ‘cast aside ethical procedures and ride roughshod over those whose lives are shared with us’ (Gabb, 2010: 475), we are supportive of Gabb’s position and a bridging of the formalised requirements to ‘what participants reasonably expect’ (p. 475).

We acknowledge the importance and value of ethics codes, but we have also realised the importance of approaching codes with a degree of caution. This is in the knowledge that some requirements are based upon futuristic predictions and reasoning of *what might happen* during the research process (i.e. guessing/predicting the unknown). Ethics codes can hide the ‘ethical schism’ between what the researcher faces and what has been approved by ethical committees (Gabb, 2010: 466). In that sense a *schism* is forged when ethics requirements force researchers to address the operational aspects of the research ethics, such as participant consent and anonymity, but overlook the more emergent ethical issues that occur in the field.

Yee and Andrews (2006) explore the tensions that exist between institutional codes and the ethical challenges and realities faced. They developed the notion of a *good guest*, a term that describes their role as the polite visitor who respects the social etiquette and protocols that are required and expected when attending someone’s home. When a researcher enters the home of a family there are tensions that unfold between the researcher who is acting as a professional and is bound by

institutional codes and protocols, and any other roles they may adopt, such as being a good guest (Brown, 2019). Home-based researchers can be faced with dilemmas where they are left to their own devices in terms of how to navigate these situations. These efforts often require a different skill set, such as the interpersonal skills necessary for building trust and rapport with research participants (Brown and Danaher, 2017).

Families are evolving units that occupy temporal physical and social spaces over time. Consequently, researching with or about them requires ongoing ethical reflection. Building on the ideas of ‘multiple dimensions and modalities of social relationships and subject formations’ (McCall, 2005: 1771), we argue that reflection should be multilayered to respond to the complexities of the families.

Gerson and Horowitz (2002) alert us, that ‘to enter a world in which one is not naturally a part, a researcher needs to present an identity that permits relationships to develop’ (p. 212). The researcher needs to develop an understanding of the lived experiences, as well as family meanings and positionality (Brown, 2019; Paris and Winn, 2014). Moreover, we need to acknowledge that even within the same community, identities are not isomorphic, and that even within individuals there are multidimensional identities (e.g. researcher can be a partner and/or parent whilst a member of the family can be a father/ mother and at the same time, a professional). These multidimensional identities orient our self and our responses towards others and impact on the formation of relationships, as well as the building of trust and rapport.

When home-based researchers work with formalised codes of ethics, they should recognise the breadth and complexity of such research (Palaiologou, 2014). Since there is limited guidance in terms of anticipating and negotiating the dilemmas that one might encounter when undertaking research in the spaces and places in which families reside (Brown, 2019), researchers should reflect upon what it takes to engage ethically and respectfully within the ‘troubling bonds and partnerships that are formed in the research process’ (Jamieson et al., 2011b: 71).

Back in 1988, Brannen addressed the intrusive nature of such research on a family’s private life and the concern that ethical decisions are not always covered by institutional rules (Brannen, 1988). In this paper, we extend this discussion and propose that these ethical moments should result in *unease* about the research process at multiple levels. First, the practical issue of considering the physical spaces/rooms of the home that the researcher can be present and engage in with the family. Secondly, to consider axiological and ontological issues, such as how to balance and negotiate the values and realities of the family that may be in direct conflict or opposition to those of the researcher; these issues can impact upon how we observe and communicate with families as well as present or re-present data.

Theoretical lenses

As noted above, we view families as complex and dynamic systems where multi-layer relationships are evident, and identities are complex and multidimensional. Brown (2019), building on the ideas of Bermúdez et al. (2016), suggests that families are strongly connected to ‘their ancestors and ancestral history, and their roots of both the past and present cultures’ (p. 198). She suggests that families’ identities should be seen as ‘integrally woven into the fabric of intergenerational tradition, history, relationships, and beliefs’ (p. 46).

When seeking theoretical lenses for our reflection, it was important that the lens we used encompassed and accounted for the complexities of what a family unit stands for, as well as the researcher’s identity. Consequently, we adopted multiple lenses to orient the reflective axes of our research. The reflective accounts we developed were based on ecocultural theory and the concept of heterotopia.

Ecocultural theory (Bernheimer et al., 1990) is concerned with the distal family’s values, belief, habits (cultural ecology) and how the family constructs the ‘meaning’ of their circumstances. ‘[In] ecocultural theory a critical unit of analysis is daily routines (or actively settings) that are created and sustained by ecocultural focus’ (p. 221). We used this theory as a conceptual lens for reflection, as it provides a ‘framework that enables us to understand why some parents think, feel and act in certain ways, while others think feel and act entirely different’ (Burden and Thomas, 1986: 40). In other words, we cannot homogenise families’ values and ways of doing things, and we should strive to understand each family’s norms. Such an approach suggests that the family’s system does not depend only upon *material* conditions (such as physical space and income), but also family *meanings* of values and beliefs (the ecological culture of family) (Bermúdez et al., 2016). Ecocultural theory also led us as researchers to investigate ourselves and our research, as our feelings, actions and cognitive biases could not be ignored in terms of our perceptions of the phenomena under investigation.

Seeking to describe the complexities of the ecologies of the families (physical, emotional and social spaces, multidimensional identities), the Foucauldian idea of *heterotopia* (=ετεροτοπία - space of the other) was considered appropriate. Foucault (1984) uses this term to indicate that spaces have multilayered meanings, or relationships to other places. The term acknowledges that physical spaces, as well as social spaces (e.g. cultural, institutional, discursive) are, and will always be *other* (=hetero) from spaces (=topias) that one occupies, as well as intense and incompatible. Heterotopia has a function that takes place between two opposite poles (the real and the illusory) and Foucault offers the example of the mirror in efforts to explain this. He suggests that the mirror, as a place, is an unreal space when one sees the reflection (illusionary); at the same time, it is a real place that exists, and represents and engages with the place that one is occupying in reality. In that sense, the relationships that are formed within these spaces (in our case ‘the

families’) are complex and have different functions that are governed by the values within the family and the society they live in. Consequently, the dynamics of a family within the spaces they occupy in society can be intense, disturbing, incompatible, and contradictory (Foucault, 1984, 2008, 2010).

For Foucault (1984), the heterotopia offers a more accurate description of the physical and social spaces we occupy, as well as how we position ourselves in the space we inhabit as physical beings. Finally, it is linked with ‘slices of time’ (Foucault, 1984: 6), and means our physical and social spaces are temporal, influenced by experiences we accumulate through time. For example, Foucault offers the example of a museum that, although it occupies a physical space, this changes over time in terms of the exhibits it has accumulated; what visitors experience is influenced by their world views which, in turn are dependent upon culture, values, beliefs and so on.

From our ecocultural lens, we argue that a family should be regarded as a heterotopia, as a system which evolves over time in physical, emotional, and social spaces. For example, the spaces that a family moves and resides within evolve when raising children at home, when children start going to school, and so on. During these times, however, they remain a family unit, although the physical and social spaces change as the roles and identities of the relationships change. As such, in our work we view families as the:

The space in which we live, which draws us out of ourselves, in which the erosion of our lives, our time and our history occurs, the space that claws and gnaws at us, is also, in itself, a heterogeneous space. In other words, we do not live in a kind of void, inside of which we could place individuals and things. We do not live inside a void that could be colored with diverse shades of light, we live inside a set of relations that delineates sites which are irreducible to one another and absolutely not superimposable on one another (Foucault, 1984: 3).

Families are complex systems made up of interdependent individuals. We believe that a family not only occupies a space (home), with social relationships among the members of the family and the wider community but is also shaped by the cultural context. Thus, we propose that studying families at home requires an appreciation and respectful understanding of the synergy between an ecocultural approach and heterotopia, the combination of which offers a rich lens to guide reflection upon the ethical challenges that researchers might face.

Analytical protocol

As mentioned earlier, in all four projects we kept reflective journals alongside the data collected for the aims of each project. Here we discuss the analytical process employed when we collectively revisited the field reflective journals. In discussions about how we would reflect on these journals it was important to examine what lenses we would apply.

We position reflection as methodology that involves a ‘turning back onto a self’ (Steier, 1995: 163). This is a complex meta-cognitive process (Dahlberg et al., 2002; Redmond et al., 2022) that requires interpretation of one’s own actions ‘where the inquirer is at once an observed and an active observer’ (Mortari, 2015: 1). Our main aim was not only to discuss the ethical dilemmas and challenges of researching families, but also to gain *autognosia* (=turning back onto oneself to gain awareness/knowledge of actions), and of the ethical stances of such research. In doing so, this methodology would allow us, as others have shown (e.g. Guillemin and Gillam, 2004), to identify critical ethical situations to ‘place [ourselves as researchers] and [our] practices under scrutiny, acknowledging the ethical dilemmas that permeate the research process’ (McGraw et al., 2000: 68). Reflection is needed in the research process to enable us to learn from our past research experiences, to re-evaluate, to reframe, and to reconsider.

[The]. . . ethics of research is not merely regulatory activity, which implies only to apply rules and codes, but it requires the researcher shapes oneself as an ethical instrument, then reflective practice is the first and main ethical imperative, because an ethical self-forming activity implies reflectivity (Mortari, 2015: 2).

From the time a researcher enters a family ecology (and so the family’s heterotopia), there is a need to understand this, and to reflect upon and resolve dilemmas that might occur in action through ethical reasoning. Researchers need to recognise the multiplicity of these ethical dilemmas and that they require multi-faceted responses. These include sensitivity, judgement, awareness of the complexity of the dynamics of the family, and reflective lenses to navigate the ethical challenges that might arise. Thus, our reflective thinking (in line with our theoretical lenses) was oriented by Rest’s (1984) model of ethical decision-making. Rest (1984) based his model on the psychological dimensions of moral awareness, judgement, intention and action. For our work these have been translated as:

- Awareness: the ability to understand the temporal, physical, emotional and social spaces of the families
- Judgement: the ability to make ethical decisions
- Intentions: the ability to act ethically
- Actions: the ability to implement these actions ethically

Our reflective lenses evolved around these four components:

First, for *awareness* one needs *ethical sensitivity*, that involves conscious consideration of ethical issues faced by the researcher, such as those experienced upon entering the family context and engaging in the physical space, as well as issues related to social relationships. Researcher positionality impacts upon all aspects of data collection and analysis.

Secondly, for *judgement* there is a need for *ethical reasoning*. This encapsulated how researchers and families form decisions about the relationships. These included considerations related to creating professional and transparent ways for reasoning actions that were carried out through the research process. Examples included considerations around boundaries between private and professional spheres, and how this shaped the ability to articulate competing cognitive biases that might prevent us from making informed and ethically sound decisions.

The third component, *ethical motivation/intention* relates to considerations about whether intentions and motivations are ethical. These included, for example, the motivation behind choosing (or not choosing) to engage in family activities such as to dine with them or whether to be present during breast-feeding.

The final component, *ethical implementation/actions* related to actions researchers chose to employ or put in place to avoid issues in pursuit of research goals. These included considerations such as intrusion, disempowerment of the families and 'silent' judgements.

Findings from our reflective accounts

Collective analysis of the reflective journals revealed that once the researcher entered the ecologies and heterotopias of the families, ethical dilemmas emerged at many levels: physical, emotional, and social.

Physical space

Home-based research can be intrusive as the researcher enters the very private space of the family home. Reflecting on our projects, we found that there were concerns prior to entering the domestic space, related to whether, or to what extent, we, as researchers, might intimidate or pervade the spaces families occupy. In the Australian projects it was critical, on entering the home, for the researcher to quickly build rapport with the family and encourage them to indicate where they felt most comfortable engaging in discussion and the interview. Most times this process moved naturally into the kitchen space, with parents quickly offering a 'cuppa', to break the ice and to set both the researcher and participant at ease.

However, in many instances, due to young children being present and excited about the presence of a visitor, the hands of the researcher were tugged by the child, with the conversation/interview with the parent and child then moving into a child's bedroom or play space (indoor/outdoor). In this situation it was evident the researcher needed to prioritise the early building of rapport with the families in a manner that was ethically sensitive. This involved ethical reasoning and renegotiation about which spaces she could access within the homes of participants.

Similarly, the researcher also had several examples where, due to the nature of her research involving very young children (birth to four), mothers would need to breast-feed their child during the interview. This would involve negotiations around whether both the mother and the researcher were comfortable progressing the interview at this time, and being in the same space, or whether the interview should resume after feeding. However, in most cases, due to early rapport building and both the parent and researcher feeling at ease, the interview continued whilst the infant was feeding. In this instance the heterotopia the parent was occupying was personal, intimate and the presence of the researcher as 'other' could potentially be seen as intrusive and disturbing.

While the focus of the English projects was different, observing children at home when they were interacting with technologies, similar challenges within the physical space occurred. Children were moving from the living room to the kitchen or their parents' bedroom to interact with technologies. Initially, it was agreed that the researcher would not follow children to more private spaces (e.g. bedrooms) unless it was the child's bedroom. However, during the field work, it became evident that this was very limiting because children used technology in many different rooms, including those it was agreed that the researcher would not enter. Consequently, the movement of the researcher was renegotiated. Nevertheless, entering the more *private 'spaces* constitutes an intrusion, where ethical decision-making and sensitivity need to be applied.

Secondly, in both English projects, families expressed concerns about the state of their homes (e.g. the house being messy), and how this can impact upon levels of comfort during the research. People can feel as if they are *being judged* impacting upon feelings of uneasiness the families' responses. For example, in one English project, a mother expressed how stressed she was when she knew that the researcher was coming. She said that as she was working full-time, the weekends were the only times she could tidy the house; during weekdays her house was messy, and the children's toys were all over the place. She confessed that sometimes she was waking up at least 2 hours earlier to make the place tidy. In cases like this, particularly when parents are exhausted from lack of sleep with young children, we see that families view the researcher as *a guest* or perhaps even *a judge*, and hence the perceived need to present the *best 'house*. This raises the need for researchers to be attuned to these perceptions and concerns, and to negotiate the physical space in ways that put participants at ease, an approach that requires sensitivity to ensure roles are not blurred.

Emotional and social space

In navigating social spaces for research purposes, the typical role adopted is one of *researcher*. However, in home-based research, our role, and the ways in which

we navigate the social space shifts. This often requires conscious and intuitive *on the spot* ethical reasoning and decision-making with a shifting of roles between researcher and others such as one of *friend*, *confidant* and, in some cases, one of *expert*. For example, in the English projects, one father expressed his anxiety when the researcher was observing how he was playing with his son with a digital tablet. Whilst the researcher was observing, he turned and looked at the researcher, at the same time stopping his play with his son, commenting:

In this instance, it was evident that this father saw the researcher as educationally *superior* to them. Consequently, his social space (as being a non-expert, as well as his perception of himself *not being as clever*) and his perception of the researcher's social space as '*expert*', clashed with the social space of the researcher. The researcher's perception of her social space was one of a *curious investigator*, keen to explore how parents and children interact when they use technology together. In this case she wanted to find out from them (and considered they were the experts in that instance), hence viewed herself as non-expert/non-superior. In practical terms, in this instance, the researcher stopped the observation and tried to explain to the parent that actually, she did not have the answers. Instead, she stated she was curious about what was occurring within the home environment as part of the research project. In instances like this we found that it was appropriate to pause the data collections process for a period of time to discuss our role as researchers with the participants and explain that all participants in the study were valued.

There were examples from both the Australian and English contexts where families asked for advice from the researchers on certain issues related to the topic under investigation. For example, in the English projects, parents questioned the recommended time for their children to use digital devices, or whether they were over-reacting in relation to *child-safety* during children's engagement with technology play. In the Australian projects, parents asked about other ways that they could support their child/children with active play at home, particularly during inclement weather. This raises issues around ways in which the researcher creates conducive opportunities and space in the social relationship that affords or opens meaningful opportunities for families to ask questions, as well as moments where researchers are comfortable sharing insights. Again, this type of experience can shift roles, moving beyond the typical research/participant role and crossing the boundaries to a more friendly/relaxed one. Such situations require the application of ethical lenses, where consideration is given to whether such boundary shifts are ethically motivated/intended.

Another example of this within the English project occurred when parents asked the researcher for a professional opinion (in her role as a child psychologist) about parenting concerns, such as advice on responding to child tantrums, improving sleep patterns, and even in some instances diagnosis or an assessment of whether their child had a special need or disability. These types of examples move beyond

the research aims and scope in relation to roles and provide further examples of clashes of social spaces for the researcher (researching vs professional expertise). In such instances, the response of the researcher was guided by an intention to help, whilst maintaining integrity in her role, which meant direction to the relevant professional services or organisations.

On some occasions, both in the Australia and English projects, families viewed the researcher as *a friend* and expressed how *being tired* as a parent felt to them (for instance, feelings of helplessness, self-doubt of being a good parent, or not spending enough time with their young child). This type of confidential emotion-sharing went beyond the identified aims of the associated study. *Friendship*, at times, in the Australian studies included being invited to stay for lunch or for a barbeque after the interview. This raises ethical dilemmas for the researcher that require *on the spot* decision-making as well as a respectful and sensitive response; it extends the typical social space of *researcher* (meaning not participating in family life out of the scope of the research), to a social space of being a *guest* (meaning the researcher being polite and accepting the invitation as to do otherwise would be perceived as impolite).

In one English study, the researcher did not accept the invitation from the family to stay for dinner, explaining that due to ethical reasons they could not. However, she still was troubled afterwards, questioning whether this was the best decision. Since these families open their houses to the researcher, and give their time to the project, is there is an obligation for the researcher, if invited to stay, to share a social space, or occasion, as a friend?

An important discourse that emerged from the analysis was that of the identity and the roles adopted by the researcher and participants. In this discourse we found that there were tensions in terms of emotional responses from family-participants when constructing meaningful relationships (e.g. what is the role of the researcher when families want them to become confidant, friend, adviser?). It also showed that families felt enjoyment and proud of their children being part of the research, whilst at the same time worrying whether their child was performing as should be expected. Some of the families were seeking emotional support from the researcher and tried to say things that they felt they were 'unsayable' in other circumstances. For example, they tried to share with the researchers their worries about their child's nursery teacher, or their anger towards their partners or another member of the family. In these instances, they perceived the researcher as someone with whom they could trust their personal concerns, as a confidant.

Finally, we maintain that to confront, but also to positively respond to ethical dilemmas, we should recognise the role of the emotional elements of ethical decision-making and recommend that this is acknowledged in institutional codes. For example, in the English projects, after the researcher had spent nearly a year visiting a family, on the last visit they gave her a present as a thank you for valuing and

honouring their child being part of the project. In instances like this the feelings of the families and the researcher cannot be ignored and need to be valued, as well as noted as part of the ethical conduct of research in this environment. This point has been debated in the literature, especially in ethnographic studies, as leaving the field needs both academic and ethical attention (Delamont and Atkinson, 2021). This point also raises the question as to what extent ‘saying goodbye is a real goodbye’ and the emotional implications that this has (van den Scott, 2018).

Sometimes the ethical codes offer an illusion of motionless, static, fixed, and clinical steps in the research process; researchers of home-based activity need to pay attention not only to the cognitive ethical negotiations between them and the families (e.g. for consent and assent), but also to the emotional negotiations that occur.

Conclusions

Home-based research is valuable as it captures and offers insights to lived experiences: the heterotopias and ecologies of the families. Yet to achieve insights from this type of research, one needs to approach these domestic spaces respectfully and ethically. The researcher needs to respect, understand, and embrace the families’ ecologies and heterotopias, whilst also empowering them and recognising their capacity. Such an approach requires ethical sensitivity, reasoning, decision-making, and thoughtful actions.

Our analysis revealed that, due to the nature of home-based research, it is necessary to adopt reflective lenses to increase sensitivity to ethical dilemmas and to consider ways in which to navigate potentially troubling terrains. Emergent ethical issues that researchers of families can be confronted with may include:

- maintaining appropriate personal versus friendly approaches with families, as well as professional boundaries
- not moving beyond associated knowledge and skills when families ask questions and wish to discuss issues outside of the remits of the research parameters
- other issues such as competing values, beliefs and cognitive biases (e.g. researcher holding own bias about the use technologies where the family holds a different view).

All social research with humans is oriented by, and required to adhere to, formalised ethics requirements. These requirements are important and intended to safeguard participants, researchers, and their representative institutions. Yet, while ethics codes and guidelines are to be welcomed, nevertheless they come with a degree of ambiguity, particularly relating to the diversity of interactions and methods used in qualitative research. Moreover, while researchers may make every effort to foreground and

account for ethical considerations when planning a project to achieve ethical clearance, when it comes to home-based research, there are often unanticipated ethical dilemmas that emerge as one embarks, moves through, and engages in research, much of which cannot be predicted or anticipated beforehand. In these cases, the researcher needs to respond by making appropriate ethical decisions and acting accordingly.

In our previous work we argued that researching families should be underpinned by ethical practices (Brown, 2019; Palaiologou, 2014), which should be embedded in the whole research process. Based on our findings, and through further reflection on our projects, we have extended this view and concur with Hallowell et al. (2005) that in research we cannot ignore the importance of situated ethics:

... what makes research "ethical" is not independent scrutiny by an ethics committee, following a set of abstract principles, or the researcher having "good" intentions, it is what we actually do in the field that counts (10).

Moreover, Riessman (2005), reflecting on her research, proposes that 'ethics-in-context' be grounded in the exigencies of these contexts and provide space for ethical particularities that unfold during fieldwork. We propose that core to home-based research should be what Riessman (2005) posed as 'Knowledge for whom? Knowledge for what?'. We argue that reflexivity should underpin every step towards ethical and respectful research with families and suggest that understanding family ecologies and heterotopias will support the production of knowledge in an ethical and respectful way. Thus, we conclude that although ethical codes are valuable when researching families at home, researchers should plan for and forefront their methodological approaches in ways that are family-centred, whilst also framed by practices that are ethical, respectful and reflective to the situated contexts of family's ecologies and heterotopias.

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