

**Exploring young people's voices in
ethnographic research: Remarks on the
ethical implications of ethnographic
interviews with marginalised young people**

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Abstract

This paper frames a general theoretical discussion on the use of children's and young people's voices in social research. Through examples drawn from the ethnographic interview methodology used in the project: Marginalisation and Co-created Education (MaCE), the paper explores the research ethical implications when conducting ethnographic interviews with possibly vulnerable and marginalised young people. I argue that the methodological reflections on research ethics come down to a discussion on navigating through dilemmas regarding children's and young people's right to an actual voice in research. Through the term ethical situationism, I argue that researchers must undertake ethical judgements and deal with ethical considerations as they go – and in that sense act ethically according to context while interviewing. Not everything can be planned for and must be dealt with on the go.

Keywords

Ethnographic methods, research ethics, marginalised youth, young people's voices.

Introduction

This paper frames a general discussion on advocating the consideration of children's and young people's voices in social research. Furthermore, this paper presents a general discussion on selected theoretical notions related to discussing specific research ethical implications related to the ethnographic interview methodology used in the project: *Marginalisation and Co-created Education* (MaCE). Through this, the paper aims to explore research ethics when conducting ethnographic interviews with possibly vulnerable and marginalised young people, through the *indirect approach* (Moshuus & Eide, 2016) and similar ethnographic methods.

The project Marginalisation and Co-created Education is rooted in an Erasmus+ funded international research collaboration between University of South East Norway, University of Cumbria (UK) and VIA University College (DK). Through action-based research, the project ideally explores the idea of achieving an equitable educational system for all.

The main methodological approach used for data collecting in MaCE; *The Indirect Approach* draws on an ethnographic biographical framework that might evoke notions of similar methodological approaches like the unstructured interview (Tanggaard & Brinkman, 2010), life story narratives (Goodson & Adair, 2007) and narratives as a pedagogical tool (Jørgensen, Rothuizen & Togsverd, 2019). Ideally, the research situation should take the form of storytelling with the participant as the storyteller, making whatever he or she chooses to emphasise guide the conversation. The following empirical excerpt occurred halfway into my colleague's interview with Amanda – a 17-year old girl:

Amanda: "It is possible that I might fuck things up a little. It is quite hard with the kind of questions that you ask, because I am not prepared for any of it."

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Interviewer: "Well actually it is completely up to you, what you want to share... and again – you are the expert, so you can't say anything wrong. You might just – well if you think that you have a great story, that tells something about who you, the person you are... you could tell that story... What has made you who you are? How is your current life? Did something happen that helped shape you?"

In reflecting upon Amanda's slight confusion that met my colleague during the interview, I found that an ongoing negotiation of the agenda with the interview and the methodology used, were sometimes needed throughout our short time interviewing the young people. The key elements in that process turned out to be demystification along with an open-minded approach toward the informants, as we see my colleague try her hand at. Through my colleague, I later learned that Amada had thought that she was being interviewed for some kind of feature article in a glossy magazine. That was what she thought an interview was. The confusion, we learned, was also caused by the fact that Amanda could not quite understand why she was interesting enough to be interviewed for a feature article. And why was the interviewer not asking real questions? Even though we collectively and thoroughly (or so we think) informed our interviewees about our research project and the aim and scope of the interviews and the articles that we were going to write, we might just have left out a few key elements – what is a research article and how do the interview methodology work in this particular project? This left me wondering if our interviewees did indeed fully understand what they were participating in and what would become of their contributions. Did Amanda really give her full consent?

Through thorough readings of the methodological theory on the field ethnographic research, the following explores the research ethical implications on consent, the use of underage, and in more than a few cases, vulnerable, marginalised and disadvantaged young informants.

On research ethics in general

In their exemplary exposition on the main topics regarding ethics guidelines on social research, Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) emphasise a main concern regarding the goal of the research process, and to which extend the production of knowledge should be pursued, based on the costs of the informants involved (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007: 209). In this light, the ethical considerations regarding the research process play a pivotal role in determining the completion of the research and weighing the pros and cons of the people involved. Accordingly, one cannot reduce the position as a social researcher to the ability to observe or interview, because the process establishes and depends on relations based on mutual sympathy and understanding – which, like in the case with Amanda mentioned above might raise several ethical dilemmas.

Contemporary reflections on research ethics can be rooted in the post-war years with the outlining of the Nuremberg Code in 1947. Initially the code covered the ethics of medical research, which was drafted after the indeed questionable medical experiments undertaken by the Nazi regime during the Second World War. Fast forwarding to our present time and a modern take on the research ethics of the social sciences, the code of social sciences requires researchers to reflect upon the necessity of the research process and weighing it against any possible invasiveness into the informants' privacy. This, of course opens a wider range of readings and understandings concerning the individual informant's rights, the pursuit of the whatever the greater good of the research might be considered to be, and the extent of the researcher's general responsibility of protecting his or her informants (van Amstel, 2013: 21). Even though social researchers have been discussing the ethical guidelines of the various common research methodologies of the social sciences for well over 100 years, they are, to this day, still subject to a wide range of interpretations, and no consensus regarding a standardization of the ethics of ethnographic fieldwork, observations, interviews and the like, is yet to be reached. And maybe this is the way it should be, in that this opens for on-going critical theoretical reflexions

and methodological revisions and refinements towards how social researchers approach, ground and justify their methodological choices ethically. What I found to be a key strength in the international collaborations within the MaCE-project, was how new insights on how to undertake ethical justifiable research differed between a British, Norwegian and Danish perspective, respectively. At times this newfound knowledge made me reconsider and rework some of my own methodological choices along the way. Some of that work found its way into this paper and helped shape some of the research ethical implications hinted at here.

Young people's voices in research

A pertinent issue regarding the research ethics on social research is whether the use of children's and young people's voices in research should be considered and treated as a specific and independent ethical issue. Morrow (2008) points out that the overall methodological and ethical questions concerning most work in the field of social research revolves around the same main topics, whether children are involved or not. It basically comes down to finding an honest way of collecting and disseminating findings as well as protecting informants in the most considerate way possible. However, from a cultural and societal point of view the reflections on research design call for a widened view on some ethical considerations regarding research on those under age. On an overall note, considerations on children's and young people's perceptions of age, gender, identity, ethnicity and cultural background, must be carefully taken, given that these perceptions may differ from an adult point of view. In addition, the issue of power concerning the interaction between the adult researcher and the underage informants must be handled in a sensible way, knowing that children and young people can be vulnerable to exploitation interacting with adults (Morrow, 2008: 52-53). A rather profound argument concerning this topic can be found in the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989):

“When they are applied in a research context, children's own consent must always be asked, and in many cases it should be sufficient. Children should have an opportunity to participate in all matters of their lives, including research (Bell, 2008 as quoted in Tani, 2014, p. 365).

The passage found on the sufficiency of children's (in this case deemed as those under age) own consent could function as a rather solid justification of weeding out the involvement of any external factors – like asking parents' permission. The following passage on the opportunity for children participating in research, following that their own personal consent has been given, is consistent with our general aim at providing the young people a voice and an opportunity to speak for themselves. Besides - Morrow and Richards (1996), Alderson and Morrow (2011) highlight that the concept of chronological age should not determine children's competence making a wise choice of participating in research in his or her own interests. This notion assumes that competent children are those, who achieve a full understanding of what is proposed, when asked to participate in research – something that the introductory empirical excerpt with Amanda, underlines the importance of. On a similar matter, it is made clear that if, the knowledge sought after, simply cannot be pursued, due to parental involvement, children may be deemed competent committing themselves to research (Morrow & Richards, 1996; Alderson & Morrow, 2011).

With the majority of the underage informants, that I interviewed personally, being 17-years old¹, I consider the young people fully capable of reflecting on their potential involvement in the study. Considering consent, we had a few informants that initially agreed take part in the project, for later to opt out via a simple text message or by calling in sick. We never heard from them again. No external

¹ People of legal age, are 18 years and above in Denmark.

pressure forced them to attend to anything, so we chose to leave it at that. Such decisions must be accepted at all times, when coming directly from the informants themselves.

Regarding the ethical issues on researching young people through an ethnographic interview method like the indirect approach (see Moshuus & Eide, 2016), as the study behind this paper does, one of the main issues revolve around the fact that the interview is done once, with the researcher and the young person never meeting again. Does the fact that the young people attend some kind of public youth education program, automatically justify us approaching them? And how is consent obtained in a fairly temporary interview setting? And should it be continuously renegotiated? Tani (2014) argues that in youth studies in general and when studying young people in public settings, a firm set of regulations of research is impossible to define. Tani suggests that a more context-specific approach towards improving the research ethics should be considered (Tani, 2014: 362). I argue that the methodological reflections on research ethics in this paper come down to a discussion on navigating through dilemmas regarding children's and young people's right to an actual voice in research. With that said, looking for straight answers on the topic of research ethics concerning the studies on young people in this present paper will be in vain.

On the depiction of young people in writing and publishing research

Throughout MaCE, we sought for relatively uncharted territory and met with informants previously unaffiliated by social research. Morrow and Richards (1996) and later Alderson and Morrow (2011) advice social researchers to carefully reflect upon the standpoint from which children are studied. Primarily, this means to fully respect young people's integrities and competencies, thus overcoming, in their words, a 'natural' tendency to take children and young people for granted and ascribing their voices a secondary status in the research (Morrow & Richards, 1996; Alderson & Morrow, 2011). Following this advice, my colleagues and I must be considerate about the light in which the young people in this present study are portrayed, doing our utmost to take into consideration how the young people's narratives are given a primary place in the our current and future analysis, and to which extend the young people are given voice throughout the research findings. Following the tune of the standpoint from which children and young people are studied, I take inspiration from Johansen's (2015) Foucault-inspired discourse analysis on the idiomatic differences between 'children' and 'young people'. Johansen finds that when 'children' are often referred to as innocent and cheerful, 'young people' are discursively fixed in a much more negative light – a so-called deficit discourse referring to such characteristics as being irresponsible, rootless, violent, dysfunctional and unaccountable (Johansen, 2015: 19). Following Johansen, I am reluctant to contribute to any reproduction of any dominant discourse and strive not to contribute to shedding any negative light over the young people represented in this study. Following the advice of Morrow and Richards, Alderson and Morrow, I strive to let the young people speak for themselves throughout my affiliations in this project and in other work.

Hammersley and Atkinson argue that, in general, one of the informants' main concerns related to statements or narratives in published research would be a practical interest in being presented in a somewhat favourable light (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007: 51). Albeit that this, according to Hammersley and Atkinson, is a general concern expressed by informants, no such concerns were articulated by the young people that I met in this study. Whether this attributes to the informants being young people or whether it has something to do with me, unintentionally, leaving out information about our work should be left out in the open. What can be said though, is that ensuring that the young people would be granted full anonymity in the further analysis, led to a more open dialogue among me and the informants.

Gaining access and negotiating consent

Needing 'a way in' - an access point to the young people and their stories, we initially contacted both adult education centres, production schools and other youth education programmes. We gained access to two educations that introduced us to a handful of the young people attending programmes there.

In the process of gaining the trust of the informants, and thereby formal access to their narratives obtaining informed consent should be part of any thorough ethical consideration. Hammersley and Atkinson emphasise that people being drawn into research praxis must consent on a basis of comprehensive information on most aspects encompassed in the research. To that comes an implicit possibility to withdraw at any time during the research process (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007: 210) As much as the mentioned strategy should be considered the one to strive towards, the reality of ethnographic fieldwork can come off much different. The primary strategy in gaining these informants' trust, and thereby access, seemed to be demystification. Openness and demystification with the informants before, sometimes during and certainly after the interview with the young people, seemingly led to the desired consent. In that sense, we constructed a research position through and on behalf of the construction of a relationship with our informants. A general open attitude and a genuine interest toward the young people, might just have made me come off as someone unaffiliated with any kind of formal authority, unlike the role of their teachers. The mentioned strategies, planned or made up along the way, were all part of being allowed at their schools, talking with the young people.

In the pursuit of obtaining informed consent, a possible strategy could be what Bell (1977) (as quoted in Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007) refers to as: "some sociological equivalent of the familiar police caution like "Anything you say or do may be taken down and used as data." (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007: 210). Certainly, this would be considered both disruptive for the overall research process and at best ungraceful. Hammersley and Atkinson continue explicating that the pursuit of free consent is not by any means straightforward. Social researchers might often try to give informants a way out of participating in the research. Again, this is not always possible, without interrupting the flow of the research process, often rendering it impossible (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007: 211), or at best rendering the research process somewhat rigid. If anything, such considerations show that research methods and research ethics interconnect and interrelate during the process of social research (Morrow, 2008).

Initially weeding out Bell's sociological equivalent of the almost cliché-like police caution in the light of ethical considerations on obtaining informed consent in a public setting, one still must consider defining a line between what is public, and what is private. For social researchers in public settings this seems to be somewhat complicated. At first, following Hammersley and Atkinson, the mere concept of privacy is difficult to define exactly. What is public and what is private is rarely obvious (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007: 212). As much as working according to fixed sets of ethical guidelines may seem ideal, I found that relying on an immanent gut feeling, while undertaking the interviews, was equally important, taking into consideration what Hammersley and Atkinson call ethical situationism (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007: 219), meaning navigating according to context, distinguishing between right or wrong along the way could be a justification of many researchers' actual ethical approaches in social studies.

Concluding remarks and considerations

Following the notion of ethical situationism, I conclude, that as surely as ethical considerations are undoubtedly important, they cannot, in fact, be boiled down to rigid schemes or absolute rules. Researchers must undertake ethical judgements, confront, and deal with ethical considerations as

they go – and in that sense act ethically according to context (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007: 219-228).

As stated, I found that seeking relations with the selected informants through openness and demystification led to the desired access to, and eventually consent from, the informants I interviewed. As indicated in the title of this paper the majority of informants interviewed for MaCE were vulnerable, disadvantaged or marginalised young people all involved in some kind of youth educational program. Knowing this, other considerations on the research ethics in this present study should revolve around questions like, 'should it be considered a form of neglect, when the researchers, after completing their data collection, leave interview situation and the young people, who shared personal stories, experiences and trust?' Children, and in general under-aged in marginalised positions are in fact a powerless group in society and are seldom able to challenge the ways in which research findings depict them. Leaving the young people behind in order to begin the analysis-process, could be, in some way, seen as abusing the informants' trustful attitude.

On a similar note, ethical consideration on our obligations to intervene when confronted with knowledge of serious, critical or criminal matters concerning the young people's actions and everyday lives, should be expanded upon in later works. Given the fact that matters like these indeed complicate the ethical responsibilities of the role as a researcher versus the ethical responsibilities of an ordinary citizen, this also comes down to putting the young people's trust on the line. Essentially, considerations like these, question our loyalty. Risks of adding fuel to a fire, that the young people did not even consider being lit, thus drawing attention to a problem that were not there in the first place, should be carefully considered from an ethical point of view. For a thorough interpretation on the ethical implication regarding researching vulnerable children, see, e.g., Morrow and Richards (1996) and Alderson and Morrow (2011). Upon touching the dilemma of when, or if, we are obliged to intervene, another example revolves around, at what cost the researcher should act in a field of narratives containing questionable parental decisions, possible neglect and even abuse. Hammersley and Atkinson questions whether a researcher should be considered behaving unethically if he or she witnesses acts of for example racism or sexism, without challenging it or acting upon it. Again, in cases like these, ethical situationism must be advised (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007: 213, 219).

Morrow and Richards (1996), Alderson and Morrow (2011) show that adults (and by that, social researchers), tend to set themselves up as interpreters and translators of children's and young peoples' behaviour (and in our case life narratives). Advocating that this should be avoided, they advise that children's and young peoples' competencies should rather be deemed somewhat 'different' rather than lesser, thus making the question on whether the young people should be trusted redundant. Following this advice children and young people are given a voice in their own sense (Morrow & Richards, 1996; Alderson & Morrow, 2011).

Considering what could be deemed an epistemological challenge, conceptualising children and young people in their own right, is also acknowledging them in being experts in their field of competence – and ultimately in their own lives. The young people in the present study have an important knowledge on, and valuable insight into, their own life world (Featherstone, 1992). This knowledge should not be taken for granted. Recognizing this, we found a valuable insight into a world of complex coping strategies, necessary for navigating in the field of education – a world often disguised from external agents.

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