

TECH3022-17 Advanced Social Media Production

Workshop Eleven: Ethics Considerations

If an ethnographic study is going to report on the lived experience and expressions of accomplishment of people living in a particular community, then it will rely on the voices and interpretations of a wide set of different informants, so the researcher, as John Creswell notes, “needs to report faithfully these realities” (Creswell 1994 p.6). This is because any ethnographic study, according to Boellstorff *et al* “hinges on engaging others in ethical conversation,” that requires the researcher to prepare “careful, accurate accounts that do not compromise informants” (Boellstorff et al., 2012, p.150). Not only should the researcher use language that is dispassionate and professional when accounting for and framing the study, but it should also be based on “accepted words such as relationship, comparison and within-group” terms. These are “concepts and variables are well defined from accepted definitions” (Creswell 1994 p.6), such as the principle of *care* which suggests that the “asymmetrical power relations and imbalance of benefit between investigator and investigated” (Boellstorff et al., 2012, p.129) needs to be managed carefully. In ethnographic research, for example, “identifying a person potentially identifies their social network” (Boellstorff et al., 2012, p.141), so steps have to be taken to design forms of interaction with participants that “allows for participants’ privacy and reduces impression management concerns” (Johnson, 2005, p. 29), and doesn’t imply a trade-off between the way that we “gain insights in some areas as we lose them in others” (Kozinets, 2010, p. 132). Care, or the mitigation of harm, is therefore at the core of any ethical test for all forms of research. As Boellstorff *et al* attest:

“Care is a core value to be internalised and acted on through the vigilance and commitment of the researcher. Any sets of research ethics guidelines and dicta will be ineffective if researchers do not have embedded into their practice strong values establishing ethical behaviour built on the principle of care” (Boellstorff et al., 2012, p.129).

Thus, as I am undertaking the role of an ethnographic researcher, I have the privilege of being able to move on from any particular project, so it is important to remember that the participants who are not readily able to move on themselves, will “recall our gifts of listening,” and the “deep interest displayed in small details of their lives, and the way we took care to discern and follow the complexities and enigmas of their everyday pursuits and dreams” (Boellstorff et al., 2012, p.150). This puts a responsibility onto researchers to ensure that they take good care of the information that they are using, and to ensure that, and to the “greatest extent possible, that informants gain some reward from participating in research” (Boellstorff et al., 2012, p.129). It isn’t possible to know in advance, however, if harm will occur, because the “determination of harm is ‘an empirical

question” and the level of “acceptability is also ‘unknown,’” and so the extent of what constitutes harm is generally unknown. Therefore, researchers have to be aware of how informed consent can be truly “informed when the nature of the potential harm is not assessed until after the fact” (Boellstorff et al., 2012, p.132). Typically ethnography results in neither psychological or physical distress, so it carries a greater sense of “informational risk” by which “private information could be made public” (Boellstorff et al., 2012, p.133). In these circumstances we are impelled to use our best judgements by “operating from the core principle of care,” and to consider “not only what is public versus private from an etic perspective, but also what the people we study empirically perceive as public or private” (Boellstorff et al., 2012, p.135). These kind of ideas vary from culture to culture and community to community, so a singular and pre-determined approach may prove difficult to impose in advance. The best guide that we can rely on is that by allowing for the privileged position that is taken up by the researcher, the information that is given to us will not contribute to any conflict if it is made known, unless, and as Boellstorff *et al* suggests, “we are certain it will cause no harm” (Boellstorff et al., 2012, p.137). This was a personal and professional commitment I was happy to explore when working in the field, because it meant that I could commit myself to whatever it took to “experience the activities where the data [I] require[d was] generated” (Boellstorff et al., 2012, p.150). However, as Boellstorff *et al* remind us:

“Ethnographers strive to avoid negative outcomes by playing special attention to the potential consequences and risks of what we see and hear, and remembering that not everything is grist for the data mill, no matter how interesting it may be” (Boellstorff et al., 2012, p.137).

A further significant issue for ethical practice in research, then, is when confidentiality and anonymity are the main and appropriate responses which give respondents having greater confidence to share their stories, particularly because they may be socially marginal, on the edge of social acceptability, or otherwise detrimental to the social wellbeing of the individuals and their families, neighbours or other community members who are associated with them. There are many unintended consequences that arise from being able to recognise or surmise the identity of a participant in a study, so as researchers we have to “promote reflectivity on our part when deciding what is important to include in the written work” (Boellstorff et al., 2012, p.138). In some cases, for example with the use of social media, the public life and the private life of the individuals may be reasonably separate, but this *in-itself* can also cause problems if the informants are using these forms of communication deceptively. So while the participants in the study may exhibit behavioural patterns of deception and contradiction, the researcher must never attempt to deceive the

informants that they are working with. As Boellstorff *et al* state, “deceiving informants remains firmly outside the bounds of ethical ethnographic research,” (Boellstorff et al., 2012, p.142) either because the data that is gathered through the process of ethnography would be “compromised, if not destroyed, through deception” (Boellstorff et al., 2012, p.143), or because it is a general principle of social and professional accountability that researchers “never, under any circumstances, engage in identity deception”(Kozinets, 2010, p.

Likewise, it is a foundational principle of ethnography that we maintain a clear sense of “honesty between the researcher and [...] community members”(Kozinets, 2010, p. 147). This means clearly identifying ourselves as researchers working with specific institutions. It is worth keeping in mind that under some circumstances this might have “unexpected implications for individuals and institutions,” so must be “considered carefully in the process of deciding how or if to gain informed consent” (Sanders, 2005, p. 78). Therefore, I took what steps I believed to be reasonable and possible to identify myself and avoid any deception or confusion on the part of the participants. Then I ensured that the descriptions and the accounts of the research that I was undertaking were accurate and gave this description in clear language that suited the general flavour of the participant group. Then I did what I could to provide an accurate and relevant description of the work that I was undertaking. Robert Kozinets notes that:

“It is highly recommended that the [researchers] set up a research web-page providing positive identification as well as a more detailed explanation of the research and its purpose, and perhaps should eventually share the initial, interim, and final research findings with online community members”(Kozinets, 2010, p. 148).¹

Additionally, researchers have an obligation to take good care of the information that they are gathering, and to ensure that it is held securely and safely where it cannot be accessed or manipulated by anyone other than the researcher. At any point the respondents may decide that they wish to leave the research project and withdraw the information that has been given, which the researcher must respect and comply with this wish.

¹ See <http://robwatsonmedia.net/research/>

1.1 Ethics Protocols

Engaging with people in ways that are faithful, accurate and sensitive to their lived experience requires a fundamental appreciation of the ethical boundaries and repertoires that are essential to good research practice. I was able to act in a way that was socially responsible, by being mindful of the social situations and reputations of the people being studied, because I accepted the requirement that I should adhere to recognised standards of behaviour and engagement common in academic research practice. All formal research institutions require their researchers to follow professionally agreed and published guidelines about their conduct, their responsibilities, the impact that their work may have, and how to handle disputes and problems if they arise as a consequence of the research. The primary question that any supervising committee wants to know, therefore, are:

- ‘What is the process that is being followed by the researcher that will ensure the ethical integrity of the informants?’
- In what way will any sensitive issues be managed and maintained?
- What will be the working parameters for the data collection?
- What and who are being studied, and who is being excluded from the study?

De Montfort University ensures that researchers work within recognised international standards and codes of ethical practice that are suited to the form and type of research that is being undertaken.

The De Montfort University ethics research guidelines state that “all research projects conducted by either staff or students involving humans, human data or animals, must undergo an ethics review.”

The guidelines for approval for this review can be found online:

<http://www.dmu.ac.uk/research/ethics-and-governance/research-requiring-ethical-approval.aspx>

In addition, I made reference to the guidelines for:

- Social Research Association (SRA) Ethical Guidelines <http://the-sra.org.uk/research-ethics/ethics-guidelines/>
- Economic & Social Research Council (ESRC) Research Ethics Framework <http://www.esrc.ac.uk/about-esrc/information/framework-for-research-ethics/>
- British Computer Society (BCS) Code of Conduct <http://www.bcs.org/category/6030>

By reviewing and incorporating the ethics practices and expectations of these professional bodies, therefore, it was possible for me to:

- Identify who I am, and what institution I was working on behalf of.

- Identify clearly, and in accessible language, what the research entailed and what its intended use would be.
- Giving respondents and participants clear access to further information and links to any supporting documents.
- Giving respondents clear contact details for myself, and appropriate colleagues who are an independent contact who could act if matters of concern had been raised by the participants.
- Giving respondents clear information about their ability to withdraw from the research if they requested it.
- Linking to any associated research ethics protocols generally applicable as standard practice in the research community.
- Gaining permission from the De Montfort University Research Ethics Committee.
- Confirming appropriate confidentiality agreements with relevant participants.

A pilot study was developed that trailed and assessed the methods for recording, collating and archiving data that I subsequently used during the more extended study period. Emphasis was be given to the contextual environment in which the participants operated, the relationships that they were identified within, and the access that participants had to information about the project and it's aims. A risk-assessment pro-forma was used to identify potential harm for different categories of participants, with a consent form given to each participant with the appropriate information that they might have needed, and which could be accessed later. A list of participants contact details has been retained, so that volunteers and participants can be informed of any changes to the project and the use of the associated data-archive. The initial approach to asking questions consisted of both verbal agreements between the interviewee and the researcher, and a written agreement for more extended discussions. The interviews were recorded using a digital audio recorder and accompanied by a photographic image where possible. On the occasion that an ad-hoc interview was undertaken, in which only verbal consent was given, the participant was given a 'business card' with the contact details of the researcher and a short statement with a link to the researchers website providing more information about the project. This can be found at <http://robwatson.our.dmu.ac.uk/research>

At the start of each interview I read through a check-list/script identifying the duration of the entire interview process, the form of questions to be asked, what the primary and overall purpose of the

research was, and how I could be contacted for further information. I identified the potential use of the information that was being provided, that it might be collated and incorporated into the final research project, and if it could be used for other projects and other forms of distribution. The audio recordings and notes that were taken during the interview were copied from the portable digital device and stored securely on a computer in my De Montfort University office, and at my home, both with secure password protection. Both locations are private and data was securely backed-up and locked. Location information of the secure archive was registered with the Faculty of Technology Research Ethics Committee outlining the data protection and encryption methods that I used to store sensitive material. Interviewees were informed that any data that might specify their identity would be anonymised, and that their name would not be made explicit in the write-up of the research, or at any other point during the collation of the information. The participants were also advised that if there are any significant changes to the way that information is used, archived or shared, that additional consent would be sought from the participant.

Where applicable, file names and participant names have been anonymised using a secure coding system that does not explicitly name or identify the participants who have not given clear permission to be named. The coding system has been kept separately from the working data-archive. Where it was necessary to identify the name of an individual a consent agreement was sought and recorded. I kept an on-going research blog that included reference to comments and observations made by some of the interviewees, and about the organisations and situations that they worked or practiced in. Specific consent was sought from the interviewees immediately prior to publication of this information, and any references to roles and station positions are anonymised where necessary. I was able, therefore, and in accordance with the De Montfort University Research Ethics Guidelines, to provide participants with full details of the objectives of the research; to provide information appropriate for those whose first language was not English; to ensure that all forms of participation was voluntary and based on informed consent; to give a written description of involvement in the project; to inform participants how they might withdraw; to keep appropriate records and store them in a secure location; to collate and sign acknowledgements by participants; and to note the relevant codes of conduct/guidelines.