Chapter 19

Ethical provocations for early childhood research

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Re-evaluating ethics in early childhood research

The steady growth of research into young children's digital lives and the parallel digitalisation of research tools have led to many new research practices, with new digital research sites, digital recording devices, and online databases being employed for data collection, data sharing, and the dissemination of research findings. These interrelated developments call for a re-examination of past ethics practices that linger long in contemporary ethics guidance and governance. As researchers know well, contemporary ethics norms and practices are rooted in biomedical research in response to atrocities committed in the name of research during WWII (Alderson, 2013; Flewitt, 2020; Flewitt & Ang, 2020), and they are underpinned by the assumption that it is feasible for ethical guidelines to act as universal benchmarks for ethical conduct. In the ensuing years, the global move towards research ethics regulation may have helped protect research participants from questionable ethical research practices, but contemporary research ethics governance has been frequently critiqued for serving primarily to protect institutions from litigation and loss of prestige (Cannella & Lincoln, 2007; Hammersley, 2010).

Gaining formal institutional consent to proceed with a study is a prerequisite for academic researchers, yet this process can seem far removed from the real-life ethical issues encountered during the everyday practicalities of research in specific situations with specific participants, all of whom have their own histories and beliefs that cannot be predicted and are unlikely to have been anticipated by universal ethics guidance. Research projects rarely unfold as intended, with unforeseen and unforeseeable ethical issues inevitably arising in the research field. These tensions are exacerbated for the early childhood researcher, as standardised institutional ethics regulation pays little or no heed to child-centred perspectives (Skelton, 2008, p. 23). For example, negotiating institutional requirements for written Participant Information Sheets and signed consent forms can be highly problematic for researchers who are investigating the lives of the very young and who seek young children's consent alongside meeting legal requirements for parental consent.

Furthermore, the processes of ethics regulation and governance have arguably shifted the responsibility for ethics conduct away from the individual researcher,

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creating an illusion of ethical practice through the imposition of particular power structures, behaviours and values on research practice (Cannella & Lincoln, 2007). Standardised ethics procedures as described through familiar phrases such as: 'Informed written consent was obtained from the parents of all participating children' or 'Prior to the commencement of the study, university ethics approval was gained' give the impression that moral concerns, power issues, justice, protecting other human beings (and so on) have been addressed with no further need for concern.

This regulated approach to research ethics has in turn given rise to a thriving knowledge economy on ethics, with publications advocating 'quick fixes' for research ethics, accompanied by tantalisingly reassuring advertising straplines that researchers can 'Ensure research is ethical with this Little Quick Fix, giving you a solid grasp of this tricky subject in an hour's read' (Poth, 2020). Such practices are emblematic of the environment in which academic researchers operate, where human activity is viewed through an economic lens of efficiency, where knowledge is commodified (Lincoln, 1998) and where entrepreneurial profit is often applauded as an important dimension of universities' achievement (Rifkin, 2000).

What are the effects of these trends on the ways in which we work and on what it means to be 'a good scholar'? There is a risk that the agency of the contemporary academic is increasingly conditioned by 'regimes of performance' (Morrissey, 2015, p. 614) that shackle academic freedom. In the neoliberal rush to commodify knowledge and to regulate research ethics governance, ethical considerations risk being diminished to the status of a hurdle to be jumped over rather than as a centripetal force that drives all aspects of research design and practice.

Post-colonial lens on research ethics

The editors identify a core aim in this volume to challenge narrow approaches to the role and meaning of digital technologies in children's communication, learning, and education by focussing on local characteristics and contexts. This sparks questions about the ways in which a post-colonial lens might illuminate how the processes of research ethics governance and subsequent research design operate to smuggle in colonial, Western, masculine, white and other biases 'in the guise of objectivity and good science (Baez & Boyles, 2009, p. 22). In an imperialist frame of reference, it is assumed the researcher has a right to interpret the world, so the claim to hear the voices of Others, including the voices of young and very young children, can all too easily become another 'colonising apparatus' (Cannella & Viruru, 2004, p. 147). The challenge for early childhood researchers is to refuse simplification, embrace contradiction, and recognise that research practices can result in the unconscious Othering of the research participant. As early childhood research moves forward, post-colonial theorisation could help us to see how the distorting lens of imperialist and neoliberal values obfuscates the complexities and intersections of young participants' lives and downplays young children's capacities to express their own views:

> The injustice children face is not that they may lack knowledge in certain domains, as all adults also do, but that they live in a world where epistemic and communicative resources are constructed and enforced by adults by default. They live in an epistemic tyranny of the majority. When they are attributed with being credible knowledge bearers, it is an exception, not the rule.
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> (Baumtrog 2018, p. 299)

In short, a post-colonial lens on early childhood offers a critical framework to challenge the 'epistemic injustice' (Baumtrog, 2018, p. 294) that has all-too-frequently been done to young children in the name of research.

New materialist and more-than-human perspectives

More than three decades of childhood studies (James & Prout, 1990/1997/2015) have helped to shift the mindset of early childhood researchers towards the conceptualisation of children as competent social actors. However, there is still a tendency in research across disciplines for childhood to be viewed from an adult perspective, from a 'looking down' standpoint. This remains the default position of ethics governance and attunes with the legacy of colonialist constructs such as accountability and protection. The chapters in this edited volume suggest that early childhood researchers have reached a significant point in time when we can no longer accept that research and ethics will be narrowed, controlled, and legitimated through imperialist, humanist regulatory practices and discourses. Rather, there is evidence of a growing commitment to research practice that recognises children's knowledge, experience and values and looks afresh at ways to include children as experts in their own lives. Ethics is central to this endeavour. The task ahead is to notice and value the diversity of ways in which children express their views and to recognise that ethical conduct in research is always multivocal and characterised by complexity, diversity, and situated responses to events that happen in the moment, often in unpredictable ways.

As we build pathways for future early childhood research, new materialist thinking offers novel approaches not only to re-conceptualise young children's lives but also to re-explore research ethics as constellations of power relations, where discursive and material forces intra-act. A new materialist lens dislodges the researcher's assumed sole responsibility for ethical action by moving away from the notion of research as individualistic endeavour to embrace research partnerships and collectivist endeavour, where ethical dialogue and negotiation sit at the heart of research practice. In collectivist endeavour, researchers and participants share in decision-making and co-construct an ethical framework through the social and interpersonal process of conducting research. From this perspective, we might constantly scrutinise whose knowledge, experience, values, and context are being represented, and what gets to matter. As Powell, Francisco, and Maher (2003) propose, when video is used in educational research, there has been a tendency to focus on 'viewing the video attentively, describing the data, identifying critical events, transcribing, coding, constructing a storyline, and composing the narrative' (p. 413).

Yet insufficient attention has been paid to how digital video technologies produce 'a phenomenological image of the student/teacher body' (de Freitas, 2016, p. 555), and alternative approaches are possible. For example, in her participatory research with infants in Australian early childhood education and care, Elwick (2015) used two different digital video recording devices to observe the infants' experiences – a 'baby-cam' worn by an 11-month-old infant and a tripod-fixed camera. Juxtaposing digital images produced by these different devices and sharing these with the research team and early childhood educators enabled Elwick to explore how one event filmed through two different camera technologies was perceived or sensed differently. Through her conversations with others, Elwick came to recognise that research is embodied and multi-sensory practice and that human perception is shaped by the materiality and positionality of the recording devices. Elwick proposed that baby-cams 'may provide participatory researchers with a useful heuristic device, in that the generated images can remind researchers of the limits of their own "gaze" and ways of knowing and theorising infants' (Elwick 2015, p. 336).

Moving towards dialogic, reflexive, relational, and responsive ethics

Moving forwards in our thinking about ethics does not mean we turn our backs on familiar ethics practices that are embedded in the mechanisms of research guidance and governance. Rather than accepting the conceptualisation of ethics as inscribed in universalist moral codes, we might each seek to recognise our own unconscious bias and limitations, to problematise how we are rooted in particular bodies, histories, and privileged contexts, and to counter the inclination toward oppressive power within ourselves (Foucault 1986, p. 41).

One way to achieve this, Marmé Thompson (2020) suggests, is to cultivate positions of epistemic modesty, acknowledge our role and subjectivity in the production of knowledge, and recognise that adults, like children, navigate the world with only partial knowledge of many things 'making our way more or less successfully in a world where we never fully comprehend' (p. 98). This suggests the need to revisit our own and more widely held assumptions about children's competences in research and be mindful of our personal role in shaping the particular truths we attribute to data as we 'become-with' young participants as partners in research. As an example of how this approach might be applied in research ethics practice, in their search for ethical dialogue with three- to eight-year-old children about what their participation might involve, Mayne, Howitt, and Rennie (2017) developed an 'interactive nonfiction narrative approach' to discuss the children's rights to consent by sharing a storybook they had designed featuring research-related photographs of real people, places and events as a basis for ongoing dialogue about the research context, purpose and rules of participation. In instances such as this, the relationship between the researcher and research participant forms the basis for ethical decision-making. For this relationship to work, there must be reciprocity and a sense of connectedness, where our bodies and senses as well as our minds are attuned to the many ways in which children

express their understandings. We need to focus on noticing things – the small acts children make and the seemingly small moments in their lives – the remarkable in the unremarkable and the 'difficult differences' (Osgood & Robinson, 2019, p. 29) that come to light when researching young lives that do not conform to universalist and heteronormative models of childhood. As Kind (2020) observes:

> Not being able to speak is not the same as having nothing to say, and not being able to show one's knowing in conventional ways is not an inability to communicate or an absence of knowing.
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> (p. 55)

This work is essential if our aim as early childhood researchers is to ensure that diverse and multiple life positions, locations, and 'voices' of research participants are present in research knowledge – not Othered but Included.

Concluding thoughts

As research into young children's digital lives in the Nordic sociopolitical and cultural context develops over the coming years, it will be important to bear in mind that new practices and new theorisations call for novel ways of conceptualising research ethics. Developing models for reflexive, relational, and responsive research ethics could play a major role in dismantling the stranglehold of colonialist and humanist values that have sedimented in contemporary research ethics guidelines and governance, acting to constrain the very autonomy, agency, and participation of children in society that early childhood research aspires to attain. To achieve this, we must recognise that the knowledge we produce through our research will be dependent on how the research apparatus is set up, and we must remember that 'research methodologies and practices are necessarily political and ethical activities' (Coleman & Osgood, 2019, p. 6).

For individual researchers and research teams, the following far-from-exhaustive provocations might act as a starting point for the development of new ethics approaches that promote rich conditions for young children's autonomy, agency and participation in research (also see Flewitt & Ang, 2020, Ch. 2 *Ethics and Early Childhood Research*):

- What kind of moral and ethical being do I aspire to be and how is this reflected in my research conduct and the conceptualisations of research that I choose?
- What ethical relations do I make possible in my research?
- What opportunities do I create for dialogue with children of all ages (e.g. through creative, arts-based, and productive methods)?
- Does my research recognise the many different ways that children make their contributions to dialogue? How do I engage with silent, quiet children and children who do not (yet) articulate their thoughts and feelings through language? How do I respect inarticulacy?
- Is consent constructed as a dialogic process rather than a single event in my research?

- Is my research designed on, to, with, for or by children, and what are the ethical and ontological implications of this (Bodén, 2021)? If a study aims to be *by* children, does it enable the production of new worlds with children as the main investigators, shaping all parts of the process? Are analytic processes inclusive of children's perspectives?
- What potential do new materialist and post-human approaches offer for research with children to create new world visions that reflect both the messiness and complexity of children's lives (see Schulte, 2020; Murris, 2016; Osgood & Robinson, 2019)?

Beyond individual research projects, as a global community of early childhood scholars, we need to create national and international dialogue about global and local research regulation practices. Together, through collaboration and debate, we might build understanding of how regulation is culturally grounded, consider if research participants are less or more protected than without regulations, and constantly work to ensure that the values we hold dear in terms of children's perspectives, competences, agency and participation become enshrined in our individual and collective research ethics endeavour.

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