


Please cite the Published Version

Flewitt, Rosie  (2021) Ethics and Researching Young Children's Digital Lives and Learning (Provocations about ethics in early childhood research). In: Nordic DigiChild Network Workshop 3 (2021), 01 March 2021 - 03 March 2021, Online.

Publisher: Nordic Research Network on Digitalising Childhoods

Version: Other

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Provocations about ethics in early childhood research

The aim of this paper is to reflect on some of the assumptions that are inherent in contemporary research ethics, and open discussion about what post-colonial and post-human approaches offer for development of dialogic and relational ethics.

Why is this an important issue in contemporary research?

Growth in research into young children's digital lives has led to many novel research practices being used with many new research techniques with digital recording devices and research of platforms being employed for data collection, data sharing, and for the dissemination of research findings.

These new developments call for attention to the range of positions and voices that influence how research and research ethics are conceptualised.

1. Research as part of global 'Knowledge economy' and political drive for evidence-based knowledge

- We live & work in a global environment which prioritises human activity as economic where knowledge is commodified (Lincoln, 1998)
- In the world of research, evidence of impact has become a prerequisite of many funding bodies, & certainly in the UK, entrepreneurial profit is applauded as an important dimension of universities' achievement - essential to consider the effects of this trend on the ways that we work and on what it means to be "good scholars"
- Risk is that in rush to commodify knowledge, ethical considerations are seen as an essential step that leads to a greater task rather than as a centripetal force for research
- Political drive for evidence-based knowledge risks reducing the diversity and complexity of human cultural experience in ways that produce normalization – rather than being emancipatory, change based on political interpretations of research evidence can create new forms of normalizing power

2. Technologies of research governance

- Growth of technologies of research ethics governance and surveillance with biomedical research (usually quantitative research) as the starting point for the formulation of ethical principles.
- universal "benchmarks" perceived as an effective way to achieve 'good ethical research' (imposed differently within nations)
- Risk = ethics regulation creates an illusion of ethical practice by imposing particular power structures, behaviours and values on research practice.
- Phrases such as 'getting institutional ethical clearance' = create the illusion that moral concerns, power issues, justice, protecting other human beings (and so on) have been addressed with no further need for concern. Standardized ethics described through sentences like: 'Informed written consent was obtained from the parents of all participating children' and 'Prior to the commencement of the study, university ethics approval was gained'.
- A research ethics knowledge economy is thriving on these practices, with publications advocating 'quick fixes' for research ethics: 'Ensure research is ethical with this Little Quick Fix, giving you a solid grasp of this tricky subject in an hour's read'.
- For ECEC researchers, benchmarks in the main do not emerge from child-centred perspectives (Skelton 2008, p23).
- Regulation requires written consent = problematic for many research populations (e.g. the very young or indigenous



populations, where knowledge is considered a community asset (Lincoln, 2004), or where agreement is understood by a nod or a handshake as a representation of integrity.

- It has been argued that ethics regulation restricts the foundational principle of academic freedom, the “unfettered search for truth”.

3. A post-colonial lens of research ethics governance

- Post-colonial lens show how research ethics governance operates as a colonising apparatus, imposing Western and Global North constructs such as accountability, protection, that privilege certain groups (Loomba, 1998)
- These mechanisms reduce human diversity, including intellectual diversity, into imperialist frames of reference (Baez & Boyles, 2006; Gandhi, 1998), where it is assumed the researcher has a right to interpret the world, so the claim to hear the voices of Others is effectively another “colonizing apparatus” (Cannella & Viruru, 2004, p. 147).
- The challenge for us as researchers is to refuse simplification, embrace contradiction, and recognize that research practices can result in unconsciously Othering of the research participant – to recognise how the distorting lens of imperialist and neoliberal values can deny the complex twists, turns and intersections of participants lives

4. How might we conceptualise ethics as dialogic, relational and more-than-human?

Thirty years have passed since the emergence of childhood studies (James and Prout 1990) and the need to regard children as competent social actors as crucial for research ethics, as well as the need for reflective and situated ethics- what might we learn from a post-human/ new materialist stance?

However, there is still a tendency for work with children to be from a ‘looking down’ standpoint –a continuing tendency to view childhood from an adult perspective which is the default position of ethics regulation¹.

We have reached a point in time when we can either accept that both research and ethics will be narrowed, controlled, and legitimated through humanist regulatory practices and discourses that have historically positioned children as ‘human becomings’ (Lee, 2001, p2).

OR we can commit to ethical practice that recognises children’s knowledge, experience and values, and look afresh at ways to include children are experts in their own lives.

Key = ‘whose knowledge, experience, values, and context get to matter’

Our task as researchers is to NOTICE and VALUE the diversity of ways in which children express their views AND recognize that ethical conduct in research is always multivocal and characterized by complexity, diversity and situated responses to events that happen in-the-moment, often in unpredictable ways.

Suggest that new materialist thinking and diffractive method offer ways to **re-explore research ethics as constellations of particular power relations with entangled intra-activity between discursive and material forces**

¹ *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. (Baumtrog 2018, p299)*

Ethics as reflective and modest

- This does not mean we turn our backs on work to date – Foucault’s conceptualisation of the ethical construction of self remains fundamental = ethics is not inscribed in universalist moral codes, but we each struggle to recognise our own unconscious bias & how we are rooted in a particular history & privileged context = need to counter the inclination toward oppressive power within ourselves (Foucault, 1986, p. 41).
- We must be epistemologically modest: acknowledge our role and subjectivity in the production of knowledge - we all 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’ (Marmé Thompson 2020, p98).
- That is, we should revisit 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’ participants as partners in research.

Ethics as relational and as responsive

- the relationship between the researcher and the research participant forms the basis for ethical decision-making
- this involves reciprocity and a sense of connectedness and belonging
- this also means attending closely to our own conduct and research practice, and consider how researcher presence might be causing a child discomfort
- Need to notice things that have long been missing from research, become attuned to the many ways that children express their understanding and focus on noticing things - the small acts children make and the seemingly small moments in their lives - the remarkable in the unremarkable (Osgood and Robinson 2019: 29)
- As Sylvia Kind suggests in her chapter in Schulte 2020 (p55)
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.
- recognise the ‘difficult differences’ (Osgood and Robinson, 2019: 29) that come to light when researching young lives that do not conform to universalist and heteronormative models of childhood.
- this work is essential to ensure that multiple life positions, locations, and voices of research participants are present in research knowledge – not Othered but Included

Ethics as dialogic

New materialism dislodges the researcher’s assumed sole responsibility for ethical action. Move away from concepts of research as individualistic endeavour and towards collectivist endeavour and research partnerships, where ethical dialogue and negotiation sit at the core of research practice.

In collectivist endeavour, researchers and participants share in decision-making and co-construct an ethical framework through the social process of conducting research.

For example,

- Mayne, Howitt and Rennie (2016) propose an “interactive narrative approach” to early childhood informed consent. Working with small groups of three- to eight-year-old children about what their participation might involve, Mayne and colleagues developed a storybook to present the research context, purpose and rules of participation, with research-related photographs of real people, places and events.

Recognise that the knowledge produced will be radically dependent on how the research apparatus is set up: 'research methodologies and practices are necessarily political and ethical activities' (Coleman and Osgood 2019, 6). Need to ask questions such as:

- What ethical relations do I make possible in my research?
- What opportunities do I create for dialogue with children (e.g. through creative, arts-based and productive methods)?
- Do I recognise the many different ways that children make their contributions to dialogue? How do I engage with children who are reserved/quiet?
- What kind of moral and ethical being do I aspire to be and how is this reflected in my research conduct and the conceptualizations of research that I choose? (Foucault, 1985; Rabinow, 1994).
- Is study designed as research on, to, with, for or by children, and what are the ethical implications of this?² (*by* = describes research where ethics enable the production of new worlds with children are the main investigators, shaping all parts of the process e.g. Studies *by children* often informed by new materialist or post-humanist frameworks (see Schulte 2020; Murris 2016; Osgood and Robinson 2019) & offer nuanced accounts of children's worlds which reflect both the messiness and complexity of their lives)
- Is consent constructed as a dialogic process rather than a single event in my research?
- Are analytic processes inclusive of children's perspectives? Does diffractive analysis (Barad) offer potential for research with children to create new world visions?

Ethics and digital research technologies

Contemporary ethics narratives around the use of digital technologies in research often focus on techno-dystopian views, which are often constructed as a human/machine binary, but humans and technical devices are deeply entangled and generative – a more-than-human lens offers new ways to deconstruct this binaries.

During data collection:

- a surveillance mechanism keeping the participants and the researcher(s) in check, which can create a barrier between the researcher and participant(s)
- power dynamics in terms of who operates and positions the camera

OR accept that observation of a phenomenon disturbs that phenomenon and use recording devices speculatively and curiously

- the ways in which data is generated become part of the phenomenon being investigated through intra-actions between people and the physical matter of digital technologies (see Penn 2020)

Data analysis:

² (see Linnea Bodén (2021): On, to, with, for, by: ethics and children in research, *Children's Geographies*) & consider philosophical assumptions about ethics that underpin these choices (e.g. research to or about children perceived as harbouring problematic power relations between children and researchers, but is not as extreme as when research is done on children; research with children is often deemed preferable; research for children evokes ethical tensions between the goals of the researcher vs. the goals of the participants - Whose interests should be put first: the participating children; children in general; the interests of society; of parents; of the researcher or of the research? Canosa, Graham, and Wilson (2018) describes how discussions on harm often dwell upon the 'here and now' of the research in relation to the participating individual children, while discussions on benefits more often focus on children as a social group and in future gains for society. A future-oriented ethics as fairness, one could argue that research on children is not 'bad' or unethical per se but incompatible with the new paradigm for the study of childhood)

- The video camera as an instrument to record an event, but visual technologies denaturalize the gaze and leaves out the embodied and sensory experience of being in place with people, forcing us to think differently
- a boundary-making mechanism, creating a two-dimensional, rectangular version of a phenomenon, with a given height and width BUT researcher's understanding is imbued with the memory of being in a place, with people

Dissemination:

- clear principles to guide digital research do not yet feature systematically in ethics frameworks. Need cross-sectoral, international debate to develop appreciation of diverse perspectives and experiences, which can be interpreted in local cultures and contexts
- ethical use of online media – are online communities private or public spaces? How can informed consent be gained in online communities? Can online participants' identity, age and vulnerability be verified? How can digital visual images be represented in research? What risks are involved in the use of personal mobile devices in research, given the immediacy with which mobile technologies connect to social media and expose data to unsolicited virtual access
- Researchers need high levels of technical know-how and support.

Suggestion: As a first step, we need to create national and international dialogue (and rigorous research) about:

- international practices of research regulation to provide insight into the ways that regulation is culturally grounded (consider if research subjects/participants are less protected than without regulations), and the extent to which child perspectives and cultural diversity are included/ apparent in research ethics regulation
- research dissemination practices and implications of visual research technologies

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