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SPECIAL ISSUE TITLE

Grasping the nettle: arts-informed responses to prickly ethics issues in participatory research with children, young people and families

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INTRODUCING 'GRASPING THE NETTLE'

This special issue features a blend of papers and thought pieces that offer spaces to pause and reflect on some of the prickly ethical quandaries we encounter when involved in participatory research with children, young people and families. The title 'Grasping the nettle' arose in the conversation during a 1-day research symposium on ethics in research held at Manchester Metropolitan University in December 2022. The expression captured something of the boldness and bravery that researchers often need to muster when faced with the complexity and impossibility of ethics choices 'in the field'. It is resonant of the lingering sting that can keep you awake at night until you have either grown used to an uncomfortable prickling (ethical) feeling or you have found some kind of resolution to assuage the (ethical) discomfort. It had not been our intention to publish from the symposium, but simply to create a supportive, interactive space where experienced and new researchers could share their experiences of what sometimes felt like ethical minefields, particularly when conducting arts-based and/or exploratory creative and participatory research which will inevitably veer off any previously well-beaten research track.

The symposium led to very rich and fruitful exchanges, where we found comfort in each other's ethical dilemmas. Mindful of how academic research ethics governance has increasingly tended to focus its gaze on protection from institutional litigation and loss of prestige rather than on children's and young people's perspectives of how and why they

would like to be involved in research (or not), and also mindful of the quandaries this disjuncture can place on researchers, we decided to collate the contributions with a view to offering alternative conceptualisations of ethics as collaborative, iterative and co-constituted endeavour that emerges through attentive, responsive and adaptive research practices.

Drawing on research informed by children's geographies, education, performing arts, psychology and social work, the papers in this special issue report on child and youth centred ethics processes that are fluid and co-produced. Here, we bring together diverse research experiences to trouble deep rooted assumptions about plays of power between 'researcher' and 'researched'. We collectively re-orient our lens towards the challenges and joys of navigating a new sense of a-count-ability in the interplay between responsiveness and response-ability (Barad, 2010) when working with participants considered 'vulnerable', including children and their families.

The studies featured in this special issue all recognise and adhere to the constraints of institutional performance and requirements that prescribe research ethics processes. Resisting institutional ethics proscription, the authors ask what happens when we move towards "performative alternatives to representationalism" (Barad, 2003, p802), shifting the focus to matters of participatory and co-produced research practices, doings and actions that deeply respect children's and young people's preferred ways of researching their own lives, but might well not conform to university ethics committees' expectations.

For example, the authors ask difficult questions about how we might respectfully and in just ways navigate and reconcile concerns around making images with children, whilst making images for unknown public audiences (Shaw and Ray). How do we as researchers balance the to-ing and fro-ing involved in the uncertainties of university ethical approval processes and our felt need for participants of all ages to be enabled to make voluntary informed decisions about their own involvement in research (Dickson)? Where are the respectful and positive research accounts of the children, we encounter who do not conform to conventional expectations and who do not like to read for pleasure, or the children who don't like being outside and do not care about the environment (Hackett, Hall, Pahl and Kraftl)?

In short, this special issue focuses on how the operation of, and conditions necessary for agentic, co-produced and participatory research complicate easy distinction between adult/child and researcher/researched roles and can lead to myriad ethical dilemmas that can only be resolved by mutual agreement, in the moment, by all those present in the research at that particular time and place. The studies reported in this special issue reach across disciplines, with many involving inter-disciplinary research teams where ethics expectations differed at the outset but found resolutions through the day-to-day unfoldings of iterative research with young members of society. Our aim is to re-turn and tunnel through the dilemmas and provocations, opening up the issues and breathing new life into debates about ethics in qualitative research, by problematising the notion of boundaries between professional academic researchers and the children and young people who join us in research choices when the focus is on their own lives.

Regardless of qualitative researchers' discipline, experience or habituated ethics approaches, our aim in this special issue is to provoke reflection on how alternative ethics processes are entangled in divergent methods of knowledge production and relations of obligation. All the papers in this issue report on ethics approaches that are attentive and adaptive to the preferences of people involved in the research process whilst also respectful of institutional requirements.

It seems appropriate to open this special issue with 'Awaiting further consideration', a slam poem by Jane Dickson reflecting on her experiences of negotiating potentially exclusionary practices when seeking ethical approval for her doctoral study. Throughout her teaching career, Dickson worked with many vulnerable young people with special educational needs (SEN) who had been or were most likely about to be excluded from mainstream classrooms. During her doctoral studies, Dickson encountered similarly exclusionary practices under a different guise, when challenging ethical questions were raised about the capacity of students labelled as 'SEN' to provide voluntary informed consent. Revisiting the uncertainties and emotionality of her protracted wait(s) for ethical approval, Dickson shares her poetry slam to reflect on the need to challenge deficit perceptions of the vulnerable in order to fight for their rights to be included equitably in all aspects of society, including in research.

Assumptions and judgments made about children are also central to this issue's second paper 'Giving up the Good Research Child' by Abi Hackett, Mel Hall, Kate Pahl and Peter Kraftl. Here, the authors argue that conceptualisations of the 'Good Research Child' are tangled up with ideas of schooled goodness, where children are expected to be compliant, to perform well, to enjoy reading and telling stories, planting trees and eating healthily. The authors contend that such children are often portrayed enthusiastically by well-meaning researchers who value each child's uniqueness. But they question if such portrayals of the Good Research Child are accurate or a product of researchers' configured worlds where particular kinds of (child)hood are affirmed. The authors ask why we rarely see published work that acknowledges those children who do not cohere with researchers' core values. Where are the respectful and positive accounts of the children who never like to read for pleasure, or the children who don't like being outside and don't care about the environment, and how do class and race intersect with these children's voices? This paper points to ways in which researchers might listen more generously to a wider range of perspectives, of ways of being and doing, and it considers how university funding, governance and ethics regimes might undergird more inclusive approaches that can bend to the complexities of diverse childhoods.

These questions resonate with the paper co-written by James Duggan, Stuart Dunne and Daniel O'Donnell, 'Participating in the impasse?' which centres on the 'cruel optimism of the youth participatory democratic project (YPDP) fantasy'. Situated in the harsh realities of systematic disinvestment in youth and mental health services, the authors recount their involvement in a YPDP, writing together as researchers and youth participants. Drawing on the established tradition of theatre as utopian practice, and on Berlant's ideas of fantasy, cruel optimism and the impasse, the authors document how the young people with lived experience of mental health services used legislative theatre to rehearse personal accounts of their painful past and present experiences within the mental health system, and performed these to mental health policy makers, service providers and leaders, with a view to improving mental health systems so others would not experience the kinds of dehumanising practices that they had. While the young people described numerous benefits from participating, such as improving their acting, learning more about mental health and working with interesting people, they found the subsequent lack of systems change 'deflating', and were profoundly disappointed, 'angry'. Wrestling with the enduringly painful ethical dilemmas of this impasse, the authors reflect on youth experiences of deflation in a creative, arts-based participatory project, where, they argue, YPDP with marginalised young people can serve as a professionalising, institutionalising fantasy that ultimately proscribes the transgressive activism and infrastructural practices of care and solidarity that are needed to bring about sorely-needed change.

Turning to a very different site of legislative theatre, experienced social worker and doctoral researcher Sarah Dennis reports on the process of seeking ethical approval for an

ethnographic study of child protection court cases (care proceedings) in the family court in England. In her paper 'Making Consent Meaningful', Dennis reflects on how the formality of the courtroom environment is alienating and confusing for families, particularly in the highly emotive space of the family courtroom, where life-changing decisions are made about families' future lives and relationships. In such unpredictable and pressurised conditions, how can the researcher ensure that voluntary informed participant consent is negotiated in ways that remain ethical, meaningful and responsive? A core problematic is how participants can be encouraged to say 'no' to research when they are highly likely to be feeling vulnerable and disempowered by family court processes and structures, and whether this might be achievable by shifting the focus towards the situated, contextual nature of relationships to support ethical practice. The author's thoughts in response to these questions are set against a video recording of a contemporary dance performance, where the two dancers, one male and one female, capture some of the tensions and synergies that co-exist in researcher-researched relationships through skilfully choreographed themes of rejection, submission and domination enacted through the sometimes combative and sometimes cooperative movements between the dancers, where the two are testing the boundaries of each other's cooperation in a dance where the whole is neither easy nor comfortable.

The ethical negotiation of boundaries is central to Thekla Anastasiou's paper 'Becoming my daughter's mother: Attuning relationally', which brings together the life events of mothering and caring for a toddler whilst being influenced as a researcher by a body of work around a feminist ethics of care. This paper revisits ethical quandaries about how a research-active mother who is influenced by academic readings can support her child's independence and remain sensitive to her needs while setting some boundaries to keep her safe and attempt to prepare her for the rules and regulations she will inevitably encounter in the world beyond home. To achieve this, Anastasiou draws on feminist New Materialist and posthuman non-anthropocentric ethics, where the assumptions of boundaries are challenged between autonomy and dependence, ethics and politics, agency and the social self. These perspectives are entangled with the author's cultural values and beliefs, as well as her personal and professional identities along with the practicalities and challenges of the lived experience of raising her daughter in a complex research assemblage. Ultimately, the aim is to attend to her child's needs more care-fully through the principles of a feminist ethics of care, with a view to providing her child freedom within skilfully crafted, responsive boundaries that do not restrict the child's potential, creativeness and imagination.

Reporting on research about participant homes, but turning to issues of power, ethics and care around language use during research interviews, Ester Ehiyazaryan-White discusses how research ethics should attend carefully to ensuring provision is made for migrant families' heritage languages to be used during research interviews. In her paper 'Creating translanguaging affirmative space through artifactual literacies: towards addressing power imbalance with multilingual parents', Ehiyazaryan-White explores how approaching research conversations in a co-productive way and through the mediating use of artefacts (Pahl and Roswell, 2010) can address ethical issues of power imbalance, debriefing and the principle of avoiding harm. Reporting on the ethical complexity of researching with migrant and multilingual parents about their literacy practices with their children, the author posits that translanguaging theory and the related concept of translanguaging space offer rich opportunities to think about dialogue with multilingual parents differently and to value participants' multilingual literacy practices in the interview space. Drawing on data from an artifactual literacies study with multilingual parents, this paper discusses how the research interviews were reframed as translanguaging affirmative spaces by valuing artefacts the parents shared during interview as they related their lived experiences, by making semantic

maps as a form of shared multilingual writing, and by using multilingual transcription to create written records of the audio-recorded interviews. The multilingual transcribing necessarily positioned the participant as knowledgeable which helped to flatten the power imbalance between researcher and participant. Ehiyazaryan-White argues that through these three devices, the study enabled the participants and the researcher to co-produce the interview as an ethical translanguaging affirmative space, which could be co-produced even when the researcher and participant do not share the same home language.

Moving from the home environment and into the world of school, in their paper 'Say Cheese: exploring consent, choice and performance in the shutter moment of School Photo Day', artists and researchers Becky Shaw and Jo Ray recount episodes from a study which found itself operating under the constraints of the Covid-19 pandemic. 'School Photo Day' formed part of a wider transdisciplinary project exploring children's experiences at school about feeling 'odd' (see Holmes et al, 2018-2020). In 'School Photo Day', the artist researchers used art intervention as a research method and invited junior school children to collaborate in making photographic portraits of themselves, in a process that mirrored the annual tradition in most UK schools of having a school photograph taken which can be taken home for children's families, carers and loved ones. A 'stage' was set up in the school hall for the collaborative performance of alternative school photographs, where the children were invited to pose for a photograph as they chose, 'making themselves' in a school space that was infused by complex time-space, school power relations and entangled with peer relationships, as well as with the children's wider communities of family and popular culture. In this paper, the authors reflect on how the art intervention method brought new attunement and sensitivity to the ways in which school life constructs children and how they feel at school. They discuss how, whilst all standard ethical and consent processes were followed scrupulously, the identity and purpose of the work generated an excess of experience that seeped through the written protective 'basket' of an ethical protocol. The level of potential exposure in the images made the artist-researchers uncomfortable about their use in further work, leading them to dwell on the double-edged ethical sword of making images with children, while making images for other audiences and the implications for the 'informed' nature of consent.

The final paper in this special issue similarly reports on research conducted during the Covid-19 pandemic. In their paper 'Researching children's Covid-19 friendship experiences online: methodological and ethical opportunities and challenges', Ruth Barley and Caron Cater recall the research restrictions that were put in place during unprecedented periods of local and global lockdowns due to public fears about the spread of the pandemic, which severely curtailed research practice with children and required researchers to respond reflexively to the interplay between responsiveness and responsibility to ensure that ethical processes continued to be fluid and co-produced. With a keen focus on the ethical dilemmas experienced during their research with 7- to 11-year-old children about how they maintained their friendships during the pandemic, this paper revisits the complexities and idiosyncrasies of the enforced online research experience with children. The authors' reflections are illustrated by data examples generated through creative participatory research methods and online unstructured interviews at a time when face-to-face research was prohibited due to Covid restrictions. The authors reflect on the challenges of developing rapport with children online and managing ethics in situ, including the presence of safeguarding adults and the complexity of facilitating informed consent online in the absence of body language and social cues. The paper concludes by drawing together fresh insights into ethical and methodological issues related to online data collection with children.

To sum up, the prickly ethics issues that readers encounter in this special issue are brought to life through examples from a range of participatory and arts-informed, creative qualitative

research approaches, which tell of the pitfalls and pleasures encountered by the authors as they sought to resolve seemingly intractable and oftentimes enduringly painful ethical dilemmas. We hope that this special issue will make a provocative contribution to thorny ethics issues experienced by a wide community of researchers from different academic fields and disciplines who use qualitative methods as a means to make sense of the world. We can offer no soothing balm for all such ethics quandaries other than the knowledge that sharing ethical experiences amongst colleagues in a supportive research environment can be highly generative.

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