

The ethics and politics of research

Sophie Gilliat-Ray, Cardiff University

Exploring issues of ethics and politics in relation to research raises a wide range of questions and debates. To make my job a little easier and perhaps a bit more interesting, I have decided to look at the ethics and politics of research through the distinctive lens of power. It seems to me that power is the overarching theme that determines who gets to do research, when, and how. The ethics and politics of social research essentially boil down to power dynamics within and outside the academy. Seen in this way, research can be seen as a socially constructed process, where individuals, professional networks, or religious organisations, negotiate about who does what (or not), and what conditions or processes of regulation will either constrain or empower the researcher. This process of negotiation might be covered up in the bureaucracy of impersonal documentation processes, especially through funding applications or ethical approval forms, but it is negotiation nonetheless where different agents and constituencies use their varying levels of power, to shape the process and the outcome.

In this paper, I want to map out the ways in which power shapes the ethics and politics of research, and to do this, I am going to think about 'ethics' with a lower and upper case 'e', and then about 'politics' with an upper and lower case 'p'. Somehow, the change of case brings a new dimension to the way in which power influences the research process.

Ethics – upper case 'E'

I want to start off by thinking about Ethics – with an upper case 'E', since this is usually somewhere near the beginning of the research process. The capitalisation here refers to the formal ethical procedures that now govern most social scientific research. However, these have only become routine in qualitative research recently. Most of the studies that I did early in my career, either at doctoral or post-doctoral level in the early and mid-1990s, were not placed before the scrutiny of an ethics committee. Funding application forms

rarely provided space for applicants to state how they would address the ethical issues that their research might entail. Up to the early 2000s it was usually sufficient to say that one's research would be undertaken in conformity to the statements of ethical and professional practice that were being promoted by major academic associations, such as the BSA. But there was nothing binding about these statements, and there was no process of professional accountability at any point.

However, from the early 2000s and subsequently, things have begun to change. It is now routine and necessary for all academic research involving human participants, whether undertaken by an undergraduate or an established professor, to receive formal ethical approval. However, these procedures and expectations have not emerged from a vacuum. Rather they have been shaped by the norms that govern the involvement of human participants in medical research, especially research that involves the trial of new drugs. Thus, the first major research project of mine to require ethical approval was in 2003, for a qualitative study of genetic disorders among British Muslims of Bangladeshi origin. I had to complete a very detailed NHS ethical approval application form, which was largely concerned with establishing whether I would be using laser beams, how any human tissue was going to be collected and stored, what dosage of drugs or X-rays I might be going to administer, which pharmaceutical company was involved in my study, what epidemiological analysis would take place, and what the statistical power of the study would be. As you can imagine, my ethnographic, qualitative research, just didn't fit the boxes and categories, and I saw then how bureaucratic procedures can push and pull us in particular, and sometimes very uncomfortable directions, as we seek to make our work valid in a scientifically-dominated world. Even in 2003, the NHS in Britain did not have a methods-sensitive ethical approval process in place that could recognise the "nuances of difference between 'intrusive' research of the clinical/biomedical sort and of the ethnographic sort" (Angrosino, 2007: 86). Having submitted my application form with the shorthand N/A (not applicable) throughout most of the document, I then had a formal interview before the eleven-member NHS ethics committee, comprising senior healthcare professionals of various kinds, ethicists, NHS managers, lay members, and so on. It was one of the scariest interviews of my career, because it was very clear to me that they had the collective power to approve or reject my application there and then, irrespective of the fact that I had secured a research grant worth

about £130,000. But as I watched the process unfold, it was clear that individuals on the committee were clearly exercising their own power to shape the collective will of panel, and this is therefore a good example of how power runs through ethics, with a capital E, in terms of who is allowed to do research, or not. At the end of the day, the principles underpinning ethical practice are interpreted by individuals in a particular socio-political context, and so even formal ethical approval processes are ultimately socially-constructed, negotiated processes.

More recently, my research has required nothing more than internal university research ethics approval, and because the management of this has largely rested within my own academic discipline, the process has often been quite useful, and certainly much faster than NHS approval processes. But here too, power is wielded. Having briefly had some involvement in a research ethics committee in Cardiff, I have seen how, sometimes, the remit of the committee extends beyond simply advising on ethics. As Helen Piper and Helen Simons note, “such committees also act as the guardians of what is to count as research methodology” (Piper and Simons, 2005: 57). Since ethics panels are usually comprised of relatively senior members of academic staff, usually of professorial status, they can use their seniority to make judgements about the work of younger scholars. These judgements may not always be enabling, especially if doctoral or other applicants are wanting to employ innovative methods in usual subject areas, or are perceived as stepping beyond supposed methodological boundaries in some way. The point I wish to emphasise then, is that formal ethical approval processes are saturated by the exercise of power, and the way these processes operate are often highly opaque.

Many of the questions on both NHS and University ethics paperwork relate to the protection of individual research participants, and to the procedures for ensuring data security, confidentiality, or anonymity. Important though these are of course, there are often serious issues that these protocols and requirements fail to address. For example, if we accept that as researchers we are also participants in research, then it becomes clear that there are significant silences in formal ethical approval processes about the rights of researchers, and the ways in which they will be protected during the research process. A realisation of this came to my attention in 2003, when I designed an undergraduate course in Cardiff that required students to do small-scale independent fieldwork projects. I began

to recognise the duty of care that institutions have to their staff and students, and especially those who are working off-campus as 'lone researchers'. As a consequence of this, I designed a fieldwork safety policy for the course and for my department which was almost entirely framed around the issue of researcher safety. But even here, I only considered personal safety and security of the largely physical kind, and were I to re-write the fieldwork safety policy today, I would want to add some emotional and personal health warnings as well! On reflection therefore, I sometimes think that formal university ethics committees are concerned less about real ethical practice and more about the prevention of litigation by powerful external organisations. Consequently, they have largely failed to consider the physical and emotional risks and dangers that researchers might themselves suffer.

Furthermore, there are problems about assuming that all research participants will want to be anonymous or to have their identity protected, in the way that ethical review committees tend to assume. Katja Guenther considers this very issue in her recent paper in the journal *Qualitative Research*, where she considers the politics of naming people, organisations, or places in the accounts of qualitative research (Guenther, 2009). In a rather similar critical vein, what counts as 'privacy' or 'risk', or indeed 'harm' or 'consent', might differ between people from different communities or cultural backgrounds. Seen in this way, Ethics with an upper-case E, leaves much unsaid, and some of its core principles are very largely taken-for-granted and assumed to have the same meaning for most people or groups. In my experience, this is not the case.

Ethics – lower case 'e'

So at this point, I want to start thinking about ethics with a lower case 'e'. I am concerned not only about the structural and moral limitations of ethical processes that focus only on individuals, but also on the real-life ethical issues that often occur when one is in the field where the relative power of researcher and researched may present particular moral questions. Sometimes things unfold out there which require both immediate and longer-term *moral* judgement if one is to uphold professional standards of ethical conduct. Rather than talk about this in the abstract, I would like to give you a recent example of what I mean.

One of the projects being funded by the AHRC/ESRC 'Religion and Society' programme is about Muslim chaplaincy in Britain, and for which I am the Principal Investigator. The project received formal ethical approval without any difficulties, and so, over the last year or so, members of my research team and I have been out in the field conducting interviews and 'shadowing' chaplains in their workplaces around the UK. We started the process of 'shadowing' chaplains about 6 months ago, but almost immediately, we became aware of the fact that our project information sheet and the associated consent form make some enormous assumptions that participants will know precisely what shadowing will involve. Our form states:

"Members of the research team will periodically observe/shadow Muslim chaplains at work in their respective institutions. We will make written notes regarding our observations and experiences of shadowing".

However, whilst this might have satisfied the University research ethics committee, on one occasion when I went to shadow a chaplain, I became aware of the limitations of our documentation. I want to briefly describe for you an incident that makes the point. At one of the hospitals I went to, the process of shadowing meant sharing a car journey with a chaplain. Being in the car provided a context for this particular chaplain to recall a professional crisis which was essentially a story about the way in which his senior manager, a Christian, had undermined him. What he told me was important, but it was the physical and verbal embellishments to the narration which really conveyed to me the seriousness of what he had suffered, and highlighted the fact I was hearing and to some extent seeing, some really important data. As he told his story, he banged his fist on the car dashboard, at the same time as coming out with the rather colourful exclamation "bugger it!". In other words, I saw how the otherwise carefully managed performance of being 'the chaplain' was being fractured by normal human tendencies and weaknesses. "Travel", as the sociologist John Urry notes, "can involve entering an unbounded 'out-of-time' zone" (Urry, 2002: 271) that allows for a breakdown in the "expressive coherence" of socialised 'performing' selves, and with this can come a revelation of our all-too-human selves (Goffman, 1959: 63). This incident is a very good example of exactly that.

I have subsequently struggled to know whether or how to incorporate this story, the incident I have just recounted, into some of the papers I have written recently about the methodological and ethical aspects of the chaplaincy project research. Have I broken an ethical or moral code of conduct by revealing a moment of human weakness...or are there some good reasons for sharing what took place? The fact I have told you what happened should be indicative that the incident has become important for me and valuable to recount because in some senses it's a barometer of the way in which I, as a white, middle-class, woman have been able to create the conditions where research participants, most of whom are South Asian, male, and from often conservative religious backgrounds, are able to tell me how they really feel. To any critic of my research, who might suggest that chaplains have probably just given me the 'party line' or offered a 'front-stage' performance of their work, I can point to this, or indeed other examples, as direct evidence to the contrary. I feel I have had insights into how Muslim chaplains really are, as fellow human beings, within and beyond their job titles. Achieving the level of trust and confidence where this chaplain felt able to swear and hit the dashboard was, for me, an important indicator that I am collecting data about how things really are.

Having said that, this incident was a catalyst for reflecting on the fact that participants in our research might not have been fully aware of the risks of self-exposure, in the way that I have just described, and here the micro-politics of particular research processes and methods themselves become apparent. Participants may think, for example, that my observations and note-taking are just occurring in the hospital or prison, as they interact with patients or prisoners, but I don't define the research field in such a narrow way. Every place chaplains have taken me constitutes a fieldwork site, and when I am with them, I am never off duty. Everything is logged via mental fieldnotes made during the day, and then formally written up each evening. So, whilst the privacy and identity of particular individuals is of course protected by guarantees of confidentiality, anonymity, codes of ethics, and reassurances about the storage of research data on fully encrypted disks, at times I have wondered about whether and how to use data which might appear to compromise the integrity of Muslim chaplains and their profession overall (Maier and Monahan, 2010). Reflecting on her own quandaries about the collective rights of those who take part in research, based on her study of clergy wives in the 1980s, Janet Finch reflected:

the dilemmas which I have encountered therefore raise the possibility of betrayal of the trust which women have placed in me when I interviewed them. I do not mean betrayal in the individual sense...I mean, rather, 'betrayal' in an indirect and collective sense, that is, undermining the interests of women in general....in such a situation, I find sanitized intellectual discussions about 'ethics' fairly irrelevant (Finch, 1993: 177).

Rather like Finch therefore, I have taken the view that where chaplains have been willing to share individual insecurities and paranoias, and perhaps behave in ways that contravene the norms of their religious training and profession, this is perhaps an important indicator of the insecurities surrounding the development of professional Muslim chaplaincy more generally. Their individual stories and struggles, and the very real emotions and frustrations that surrounded them are important to document, where these provide powerful commentaries on their structural position relative to their Christian colleagues, for example.

But as I just said, this particular incident that I have just shared with you did provide an important catalyst for reflection within the research team about the ethical dimensions of our study. As a consequence, we took the initiative of drawing up a detailed set of shadowing 'protocols' (as a supplement to our information sheet) that makes very much more explicit what chaplains might be letting themselves in for, when they allow us to shadow them. I am therefore of the opinion that appropriate ethical conduct in the field is an on-going process, and that we should not dismiss ethical issues, as soon as we receive the letter from the Chair of the ethics committee to say that our projects have been approved. I like the idea proposed by Piper and Simons, of "rolling informed consent" (2003: 56) by which they mean the process of transparent and honest dialogue with research participants about ethical issues, as the actual consequences and real implications of their informed consent in our projects becomes more apparent. Michael Angrosino explains that "things that happen in the course of participant observation cannot always be clearly anticipated" (Angrosino, 2007: 87). This calls for critical self-reflection as our research proceeds, and a willingness to re-think if necessary, how we are going to exercise an appropriate duty of care to our research participants. As far as I am concerned, sound ethics and sound methodology go hand in hand, and we need to be thinking reflexively about both.

The dilemmas that I have faced are perhaps best considered as moral questions, but they are also distinctly political as well. They raise the whole “whose side we are on” question (Finch, 1993: 177) in a way that for me has particular poignancy in contemporary Britain, where Muslims often find themselves at the sharp end of political and media suspicion and hostility. So at this point, I want to think about the politics of research, starting with Politics of the upper case ‘P’ variety.

Politics – upper-case ‘P’

The conduct of research usually costs money, and decisions about who gets funding are Political. Academic research councils, charities, or other sponsors will make decisions about if and how much money is to be spent on a particular research programme or project, based upon the interests of government, or policy-makers, or trustees, as well as the academic community. This decision-making will reflect current assumptions about what should or should not be researched or funded. Although the terms of reference for major initiatives are usually framed in consultation with senior academics, there are occasions when policy considerations have had undue influence, much to the consternation of academics. A good example of this is a programme of research initiated by the ESRC that was explicitly concerned with “New Security Challenges” and Islamic radicalisation in particular. The anthropologist Pnina Werbner has written about the politics of this funding programme in her article in the latest issue of the journal, *Current Anthropology* (Werbner, 2010). She notes the way that in this instance, the academic community, through its professional networks, was able to critique some of the assumptions and dangers of the entire programme and thus re-shape some of its aspects. So the academic community isn’t entirely without collective power. However, as you progress in your academic careers, you should be aware that sometimes extremely interesting or academically important work in the humanities and social sciences might not get funded, simply because it does not meet the policy trends and priorities of the day. An awareness of this might not be very consoling when your first post-doctoral funding application goes down, but this is at the same time a warning of the need for you to be aware of new funding priorities and the importance of shaping your proposals, perhaps at the post-doctoral phase of your careers, in such a way that you meet the latest funding criteria.

In recent years, researchers with a track-record of research and writing about Islam and Muslims in Britain (in particular) have often been asked to participate in government-funded initiatives, such as consultative groups, research projects, or evaluation surveys. Much of the funding has been channelled through Communities and Local Government, with a particular emphasis on meeting 'Preventing Violent Extremism' policy objectives. These programmes have sometimes placed academics in complex Political (and ethical) territory. The decision about whether to become involved in these initiatives has often meant balancing the merits of engagement (an opportunity to bring informed academic perspectives and high ethical research standards, or the opportunity to gather new data) with the dangers of engagement (association with a project or report that *doesn't* meet high ethical standards - where one's advice has not been taken, thereby risking future 'access' to, or relations with, British Muslim organisations). There is no easy guidance as to how or when to participate in politically-charged or controversial government-funded projects, and each will need to be evaluated on a 'case-by-case' basis. However, maintaining professional and ethical integrity is imperative, and concerns about either are probably good indicators as to how one should proceed (or not). I have had no hesitation in rejecting funding for research projects where my own academic aims and objectives were clearly diametrically opposed to those of the funder.

Research that doesn't get funded – for whatever reason - is just one obstacle in an academic career. But sometimes the lack of funding or the frustrations of academic research projects reflect politics with a small 'p', and especially the micro-politics of inter-personal relations, institutions and organisations. So that this point, I want to move on to think about the politics of research with a lower-case 'p', and to consider the ways in which these can shape our work.

Politics – lower-case 'p'

At the outset, I want to suggest that it's just as important for academics and researchers to write about work they haven't been able to do, alongside the work they have been able to conduct. Documenting the blind-alleys, the denials of access to fieldwork sites, or indeed any other obstacles, might help future researchers to anticipate the kind of problems and

issues they might encounter which might be bound up with political issues. By not hearing accounts of failed research (which, of course, are not usually reported!) we are denied a sense of the field as a whole, and the way in which it might be 'skewed' by reliance upon studies which have been undertaken and which have not presented insurmountable difficulties.

Methods textbooks tend to give rather idealised impressions of research fieldwork as a neat, tidy, and generally unproblematic linear process. Having now worked on multiple research projects as a research assistant and as a principal investigator, I have found that there have always been issues and problems to contend with along the way. I think doctoral and professional researchers should be more honest about these challenges, not least because they can and do present us with data about our projects, ourselves, or those with whom we are trying to conduct research.

As far as I am concerned, the politics of research with a small 'p' is essentially about the processes of getting in, getting on, and getting out of the field, and each of these stages is shaped by power dynamics. Writing about the personal or structural factors that have been enabling or constraining along the way is important, and as an external examiner, I am certainly keen to hear reflexive self-awareness as to how doctoral researchers have negotiated these in their fieldwork. I'd like to read a quotation from Maurice Punch which makes the point:

This view gains particular strength in light of the fact that in other styles of research the writer is obliged to parade his data for all to see, and she or he can be criticized on the collection, presentation, and interpretation of the data. In field research, in contrast, we are heavily reliant on the integrity of the researcher in terms of detailing the nature and quantity of observations and interviews, the process of interpreting the data, and the selections made in the report. Normally the field notes are not visible, the interviews are not available at length, and the reasons for selecting quotes or specifying particular incidents are not articulated (Van Maanen 1984). This places a heavy responsibility on the academic integrity of the researcher, and he should come clean not only on the nature of his data — how and where it was collected, how reliable and valid he thinks it is, and what successive interpretations he had placed on it — but also on the nature of his relationship with the field setting and with the “subjects” of the inquiry.

One of the reasons I find Alan Peshkin’s (1984) article on the ethics and politics of his ethnography of a Christian school, is that he so vividly and honestly describes the process of getting in and getting on in a religious fieldwork setting, along with some of the challenges one might encounter on the way. By alluding to the micro-politics of fieldwork relations within a complex institution, as he does in his account of Bethany Baptist Academy, he highlights, for example, the fact that there are often multiple and conflicting interests and power dynamics surrounding a research project that have to be negotiated. Thus, one of your challenges is to try to discern the various interests and power dynamics that surround your project. Who has a stake in what you are trying to do, and how might you handle competing interests ethically and sensitively? How are international, national, and local politics bound up with your work, and how do these intersect with your own biography and personal characteristics in ways that might empower or constrain you? These are questions to ponder another time, but if you can think about them now, in the early phases of your research and fieldwork practice, you might be able to navigate the complexities of the field with more self-awareness, efficiency, and integrity.

The Muslim chaplains that I have been studying for the last few years are walking a tightrope between the expectations, priorities, and politics of their religious communities, and the institutions that ultimately employ and pay them. The sense of being 'between two often mutually exclusive irreconcilable worlds' is a common theme in chaplaincy studies. Chaplains from all faith communities have often described the tension of having to serve God, on the one hand, and the demands of secular institutions, on the other. I think there are some interesting parallels in the situation of the chaplain and the empirical researcher, because each are managing a situation of 'between-ness' that is usually made more complex by the micro-politics of very different institutions.

As Peshkin's article implies, empirical researchers are rarely complete insiders, nor complete outsiders, but usually somewhere in-between, as they seek to gather good data without 'going native', whilst also having a level of critical distance and reflexive self-awareness about the impact that research processes are having on them, and on their research participants. Walking this tightrope of between-ness seems to involve the ability to continually manage one's human self, and one's 'researcher self' with integrity, honesty, and professionalism. It is not easy, and I am sorry to say that new challenges and issues will arise with each project that you are involved with. However, compared to the early 1990s when I was doing my doctoral research, you now have access to a growing body of social scientific writing which is going well beyond the 'cookbook' approach that is typical of many fieldwork methods textbooks. There is now a growing body of important new writing which is documenting and critically reflecting upon the ethical and political dimensions of being a fieldwork researcher. Undertaking such broader reflection remains an on-going responsibility for us, offering the potential for new insights into the context and process of our work, as well as opportunities to re-committing ourselves to what we value in it.

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