Authority and ethics: A case for estrangement in educational research and research education

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This article focuses attention on an underexamined issue in the literature on educational research ethics: how ethical authority is established in educational research. We address this from a perspective that disrupts naturalised approaches to ethics, arguing that rather than seeking 'rights' or 'wrongs', researchers are always tasked with constructing ethical stances. Attention can then be placed on the array of embodied and objectified resources that might be recruited in establishing these. Through an engagement with published academic accounts of ethical reflection and decision-making, the article explores the ways that educational researchers achieve or sometimes question their ethical security in respect of their research activity. The analysis we present draws out the referential strategies that constitute ethical subjectivity and maps the diversity of anchoring points that might be recruited in this action. We also draw attention to the process of recontextualisation that is inevitable when one activity (or aspect of an activity) regards another, introducing necessary incoherence into ethical practice. The case we present celebrates rather than seeking to conceal or repair such disruption.

Keywords: ethics; recontextualisation; scepticism

Introduction

It has been suggested that the handling of ethical issues has sometimes been ignored in the writing up of educational research. Farrimond (2016, p. 73), for instance, argues that the deployment of routinised patterns of research within educational scholarship has led to the reporting of certain ethical issues (such as consent procedures) being neglected, with attention conventionally placed on projects that are perceived to be higher risk. Yet, as in other areas of social research, the pressure to perform one's ethics and adhere to institutionalised requirements is now keenly felt by educational researchers. This is a relatively recent development and one that has been presented as motivated by institutional expectations for ethical review: Bridges (2016) describes how a 2009 review of the AERA/BERA ethics codes 'came at a time of perhaps heightened awareness of the increasing significance of such codes in shaping the professional work of the educational research community' (p. 310). Today—despite resistance to the bureaucratisation of research ethics within educational

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research as in other fields (see e.g. Tierney & Corwin, 2007, p. 2007)—'knowing about and deploying ethical practices is no longer an option' (Farrimond, 2016, p. 73) and researchers need to be able to demonstrate their 'ethical competence' (Farrimond, 2016, p. 85). Indeed, the research ethics review process has even been made a part of criminal law in Sweden, with transgressors liable to fines or imprisonment (Colnerud, 2015).

At the same time, recent writing on ethics has emphasised the inherent instability of ethical positioning in research. This is reflected in the 2018 BERA guidelines, which state that 'ethical decision-making becomes an actively deliberative, ongoing and itera-tive process of assessing and reassessing the situation and issues as they arise' (BERA, 2018, p. 2). Such recognition of the dynamic, contextual and relational nature of con-stituting ethical stances can be seen to problematise research ethics education. Rather than 'applying' certain rules or 'adhering' to codified principles, researchers are pre-sented as negotiating a much looser assemblage of potential interests and occurrences. Ethical coherence, which is required to some extent when we write up our research, or otherwise account for our actions if we are perhaps to convince others of our compe-tence, becomes undermined by the potential ambiguity of contingency (Whiteman, 2010). With this, comes troubling insecurity in respect of ethical issues.

Against this backdrop, the onus has increasingly been placed on the development and positionality of the individual researcher (Whiteman, 2018). The introduction of conceptual and theoretical resources for guiding ethical reflection (Stuchbury & Fox, 2009; Tangen, 2017; Tolich *et al.*, 2017; Head, 2018), attention to ethical reflexivity (Basit, 2013) and interest in the researcher as ethical subject (Bazzul, 2017) provide recent examples of this shift in attention from bureaucratic proceduralisation to the localised, embodied ethical manoeuvring of educational researchers.

The present article makes a distinctive contribution to current thinking about edu-cational research ethics in this context by drawing attention to what remains an underexamined issue: how ethical authority is established in educational research. We address this from a perspective that disrupts naturalised approaches to ethics, arguing that rather than 'rights' or 'wrongs', researchers are always tasked with *con-structing* ethical stances. Attention can then be placed on the array of embodied and objectified resources that might be recruited in establishing these. Through an engagement with published academic accounts of ethical reflection and decision-making, the article explores the ways that educational researchers achieve security in respect of their research activity. The original scheme we present draws out the refer-ential strategies that constitute ethical subjectivity, which is to say the principles that are deployed by the subject of ethical action—the researcher—and maps the diversity of anchoring points that might be recruited in this hybrid construction.

This is intended to serve as an estranging mechanism in relation to the researcher's faith in respect of *any* ultimate point of ethical authority. Focusing attention on the hybrid formation of ethical subjectivity, the article warns of the dangers of identifying too strongly with our own ethical positions. Moving between the forms in which these positions are realised—as explicit principles or as non-principled feelings, for example —of necessity involves transformative recontextualisation that establishes an incom-patibility between that which is recontextualised and the outcome of the recontextual-isation.

As we have seen from conversations with colleagues, such warnings can be intensely disruptive. In this way, we seek to offer a principled but 'discomforting' (Zembylas & McGlynn, 2012) perspective on ethics that has some potential to transform thinking about educational research practice.

From belief to scepticism in thinking about ethics

To some extent there is no alternative but to adopt an earnest stance in respect of research ethics—a sense that we have faith in what we are doing. If a researcher were to assert a sceptical position in respect of the decisions they have made and their justifications for these—questioning their legitimacy—they would not be persuasive to others. In interactions with research participants and ethics committees, the researcher must convey some sense of possession and oversight, affirming that ethical decisions are being nurtured through reflection and the appropriate seeking of guidance. This form of earnest identification also requires encouragement: those new to research (and even some more experienced practitioners) may have to be convinced of the need to invest in ethical concerns. Indeed, this is perhaps a key requirement of introductory lectures on 'Research Ethics': the ability to persuade research initiates to take possession of the responsibility for thinking seriously about the ethical dimensions of doing research—to identify with the task at hand.

Yet, whilst earnestness is valued in respect of research ethics, we want to argue that being—perhaps becoming—ethical necessarily involves scepticism towards ethical investments. This is important because ethical discussion often draws on naturalised ideas, spontaneous and common-sense notions that are invested in, but must be problematised. We can see evidence of the need for this in the rejection of bureaucratic ethics over the past two decades as the institutionalisation of social research ethics spreads. Critics who have framed regulative ethics as parasitic/patriarchal/colonising, for instance, have encouraged researchers to reorient towards alternative feminist and communitarian principles (Denzin & Giardina, 2007; Denzin, 2009). Such calls suggest that researchers might anchor their ethics in relation to those of the researched rather than to other points of legitimating fixity, such as academic institutions or disciplinary fields. So, do we adhere to predatory regulative ethics and the colonising gaze of institutional review, or to a dialogic ethics that naturally circulates around the notions of justice, love, care and human rights? Our answer: we need to break with both.

Scepticism is also demanded by the need to problematise the application/imposition of *a priori* and particularly, perhaps, philosophical theorising to research ethics issues. The influence of such applications is indicated by Sikes and Piper (2010), where they draw attention to one of the many issues relating to ethical review that have drawn critical attention:

> There is by no means consensus concerning which types of ethics should prevail in any particular case. Thus, ethics reviewers may, variously, look at proposals from a Kantian deontological, a consequentialist, an Aristotelian virtue, a situational or a Buberian relational ethical perspective. Different decisions can hinge on particular viewpoints. (pp. 207–208)

Here, philosophical language fixes the content of the problematic signifier 'ethics', and in so doing may provide the appearance of conceptual security in the 'appropriate' decision. However, philosophy itself might be recognised as constituted by what Bernstein describes as a horizontal knowledge structure, taking the form of a series of specialised languages (Bernstein, 1996, p. 171) (see also Halse & Honey, 2007, p. 339), so that there can be no singular philosophical ethics, problematising rather than affirming ethical decisions.

The complex nature of philosophical knowledge is also recognised by Stutchbury and Fox, who recruit Seedhouse's (1998) ethical grid 'as a tool designed to help the user understand the ethical issues that they are facing' (Stutchbury & Fox, 2009, p. 490). The point being, they claim, that 'In order to act ethically, it could be argued that researchers need to understand the nature of morality and moral reasoning' (Stutchbury & Fox, 2009, p. 490). Indeed, this is precisely what they do argue, combining Seedhouse's grid with the ethical frameworks of another author, Flinders (1992), who asserts 'that moral philosophy should underpin any comprehensive ethical analysis' (Stutchbury & Fox, 2009, p. 493). This is far from an unusual approach. Indeed, a team of philosophers was brought in to one of our (Dowling's) institutions[1] to train members of the institution's first research ethics committee in the early 2000s. The ethical problems presented at this workshop were all fictional. Could this be because, whilst the internal languages (Bernstein, 1996; Dowling, 2009) of philosophy are undoubtedly strong in terms of relational completeness, the discipline lacks external languages that would enable its empirical operationalisation?

The combination of the analyses by Seedhouse and Flinders by Stutchbury and Fox might be interpreted as an attempt to address this. Their scheme produces 24 questions that educational researchers are invited to address in considering the ethics of their projects. The first of these is:

> What are the values, norms and roles in the environment in which I am working and are they likely to be challenged by this research? (Stutchbury & Fox, 2009, p. 495)

Addressing the first part of this question alone might legitimately be constituted as a full-scale ethnographic study. Assuming that such a study is not going to precede the research project proper (or even the second part of the question), the answers that are ultimately offered are unlikely to be well informed (e.g. by participants in the 'environment') or even well thought through; and there are 23 more questions!

Questionnaires of this kind seem to invite superficial attention by both researchers and members of ethics committees. Certainly, in our own experience as former chairs of ethics committees, this is one potential impact of the increasingly lengthy and bureaucratised ethical review forms that researchers (including students) are required to complete *prior* to the collection of any data.[2] Within this regulatory environment there is a need to develop mechanisms that unsettle researchers' instinctive or superficial responses to those they research, disrupt inclinations to reify our imaginings of the other, and force us to question the alliances and oppositions that are formed in the context of research. There is thus value in developing frameworks that provoke a rupturing of our ethical identifications, that move us from faith in any particular model or values to an estrangement that provides critical distance from our actions and investments.

Ethical authority

Our argument, then, is that 'being/becoming ethical' necessarily involves adopting a sceptical position. One way of achieving this—and to move from either/or perspectives such as the choice between communitarian and regulatory ethics—is to acknowledge the diverse and sometimes competing potential points of authority that might be recruited in establishing an ethical position. As we discuss below, the danger of over-identifying with specific authorising points of reference in the formation of subjectivity has been noted by scholars working outside of research education. In the consideration of research ethics, the dangers are all too evident. The trouble is that in moving away from the apparent security of bureaucratic rules and regulations, researchers face the danger of fetishising alternative sources of ethical authority. Whilst it may be that a sense of security comes most easily from identification with one point of reference, we argue that it is the movement across different discourses, between various points of reference, that is important if we want to be/become 'ethical'.

Previous scholars have flagged up the danger of over-identifying with particular authorising points of reference in the negotiation of ethical issues. Koro-Ljungberg *et al.* (2007) have recommended, for instance, that 'researchers should not allow institutional norms or expectations to limit their ethical agency' (p. 1077). They argue, for example, that Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) in the USA 'regulate research projects by forcing all researchers to adhere to a medical model of science that is not universally accepted in the social sciences' (p. 1083).

> Because of the IRBs' preplanned procedures, researchers are often placed in a position that is grounded in a rigid, authoritative research protocol, which has little room for reciprocity, participant voice, or participant negotiation. [...] the strict confines of the interview protocol create pressure and unethical situations when there is a need to address or act on unexpected talk. As a result, qualitative researchers might place more emphasis on their own purposes, views, goals, and desirable messages, limiting the analysis of participants' differing agendas. In addition, [the] rigid IRB research process does not allow for a comprehensive analysis of the participants' viewpoints, further limiting not only researchers' but also participants' power and freedom. (p. 1084)

Canella and Lincoln (2007) assert a similar position, arguing against linking too strongly to institutional domains and for the need to pay attention to a multiplicity of 'voices and positioning' (p. 317).[3] They cite Susan Tilley and Louise Gormley, who

> ... explore the inherent contradictions in attending to regulations promulgated nationally —and applied locally in the university research context for dissertation research—and their perceived utility in a rural Mexican context. In the actual research context, attention to anonymity and confidentiality become challenges to research participants' perceptions of what is ethical, to the meaning of one's words and how those words represent individual integrity, and indeed to the whole question of individual and community identity. (Canella & Lincoln, 2007, p. 330)

Warnings against over-identification with specific points of reference have also been voiced by scholars interested in the politics and ethics of identity. Lebow (2013), for example, describes how, whilst there are 'uncertainties and tensions associated with multiple, and possibly conflicting, identifications' (p. 310), suppressing uncertainty in order to 'maintain [...] belief systems' leads to a 'unidimensional'

approach (p. 310). In contrast, he argues, being ethical 'requires facing up to contradictions of all kinds, especially internal ones' (p. 310). The ethical value of acknowledging multiple identifications is presented as relating to the way that they 'sensitise us to a diversity of ethical perspectives and the communities in which they are anchored' (p. 313). Here, too, ethical dialogue is privileged over monologue.

We can also see a similar emphasis in the recent BERA *Ethical guidelines for educational research*:

> We recommend that at all stages of a project—from planning through conduct to reporting—educational researchers undertake wide consultation to identify relevant ethical issues, including listening to those in the research context/site(s), stakeholders and sponsors. (BERA, 2018, p. 2)

Ethics reviewers as well as researchers have been presented as operating in relation to multiple points of potential influence and authority. Sikes and Piper (2010), for example, describe how

> . . . zeitgeist, politics, organizational reform and legislation at the national and local level all impact upon the ethics review process by affecting understandings about what is and is not ethical or what is, or is not, potentially risky research. (p. 209)

Yet this kind of loose listing is not exhaustive and arguably not helpful. This is because the recognition of multiplicity alone doesn't really force us to recognise when we are identifying in a blinkered way. What is needed is an ordered way of recognising what these potential points of authority might be (thus making visible what we are *not* taking into account). In what follows we therefore present a scheme that represents a universe of ethical resources in relation to which academic accounts might be constructed. Through examples taken from educational research writing, we consider both the embodied and objectified points of reference that might be drawn from, and in so doing recognise the assembled, sometimes cobbled together, nature of researchers' ethical stances. The scheme that we present is thus motivated by the intention to provoke an estranging move from belief in our own ethics.

Establishing ethical authority: points of reference

The problem we have introduced above concerns the extent to which one invests faith in, or looks askance at, one's ethical investments *and* how we might encourage a distancing move from these. As we have suggested, one way of approaching this is by examining the different resources recruited in the discussion of ethical issues in accounts of educational research. Our focus is therefore not on how researchers actually make decisions, but how they establish the legitimacy of their actions in the reporting of their work. The scheme we present below is a response to an earlier model presented in Whiteman (2012). In that work, four domains of ethics were presented that scholars might position themselves in relation to in establishing ethical stances (the ethics of the researcher, researched, academy and institution). The problem again was that this was a list, rather than a logically complete space. We have moved towards the latter through a consideration of the nature of the varying

resources by which ethical positions are established in accounts of research and organised these in terms of analytical dimensions (rather than empirical categories).

To take one example, this is how Paechter (2013) reasons her decision to use publicly accessible material from the website *Wikivorce* (a site for those going through divorce) in a retrospective manner:

> My partially insider status was instrumental in providing an approach to this issue. I considered how I, as a Wikivorce member, might feel about someone using my own 2007 postings as part of their research. My conclusion was that it was reasonable to expect the site owner, as a trusted and involved participant, to give consent to the research as a whole on behalf of the community, but that I would want to give individual consent, probably using my online pseudonym, for any interviews, and that it should not be made any easier than it is now for my postings to be 'joined together' by a subsequent reader to give a more comprehensive picture of me. (p. 80)

Here, Paechter is referring to a local instance from her own experience to support the legitimacy of her actions, drawing on her own experience and feelings in order to justify her decision. She does this in an *uncoded* rather than in an explicitly principled or *coded* way: 'how I... might feel', 'it was reasonable', 'trusted and involved participant', 'I would want...', '*probably* using my online pseudonym' and so forth. In the sentence that follows, however, Paechter cites another author:

> Shoemaker (2009) points out that what upsets people about data mining is that, while it draws on individual pieces of publicly available data, it brings them together in ways that as a whole undermine privacy. (p. 80)

Here the justification is made by reference to an *uncoded* example, but has moved to a more *general focus* by recruiting from public *peer debate* in the literature on research ethics rather than personal *disposition*. Paechter returns to the original, *local* strategy following the citation of Shoemaker:

> There is an analogous issue in conducting the Wikivorce study: in any individual posts people do not give away a great deal about themselves, but by reading someone's entire posting history I can obtain, and communicate, a much more detailed picture. This in itself might be worrying for me as a participant, but combined with individual interviews it could have seriously distressing results. Consequently, I felt that, as a member, I would not want it to be possible for anyone reading the research to be able to connect my public domain posts with anything that I might say in a private interview. (p. 80)

In their justification for the use of covert methods in a study of the workings of essay mills in the UK—one that involved the creation of a false student identity to discuss and arrange the purchase of two assignments which were then assessed in a covert marking exercise by academics who were not aware of the purpose of the task—Medway *et al.* (2018) enter immediately into *general peer debate*. They do this by locating their own approach in alignment with an extant position:

> Arguments concerning the use of such covert research techniques vary. Some argue that they involve elements of deception, violation of trust and misrepresentation (Homan, 1991; Herrera, 1999, Spicker, 2011), as was arguably the case here in the use of a fabricated persona to interact in live chat and withholding critical information from markers until a task was completed. In such scenarios, Calvey (2008: 905) suggest that covert approaches to data collection become 'effectively marginalized as a "last resort

> methodology.”' Others have argued that there may be unique situations in which covert research might be justified; for example, if doing the research by more overt means altered the phenomenon being studied (see e.g. ESRC, 2015). It is argued that this study equates to such a unique situation, on the basis that an overt approach to studying the essay mill websites would have been less likely to reveal the typical service they provide to their 'clients', whilst informing academics that the essays they marked were from essay mills beforehand may have impacted the grade given. (p. 399)

The reference to the ESRC document invokes a *code of ethics*, which is a *coded general* strategy that contrasts with the *uncoded* strategies that characterise the rest of the extract. In the following paragraph, they return to their uncoded strategy, situating their own work within an established tradition of *peer debate*:

> It is also worth considering that there is a long tradition of covert research in areas of human interaction that fall into grey areas of legality and morality. Examples from the last 20 years would include research on cannabis dealing (Fountain, 1993), bogus advertising (Goode, 1996), organ trafficking (Scheper-Hughes, 2004) and workplace lying (Shilman, 2007). The present study, examining a transactional process that is legal but potentially leads to fraudulent student activity down the line, also falls into an established practice of employing covert observation to research human and organisational behaviours and actions of questionable and debateable morality. (p. 399)

These examples of ethical justification introduce three dimensions of points of reference that are available to be drawn upon in the establishing of ethical positions. The first two are *focus*, scaled as *local/general* and *coding*, that is *uncoded/coded*. The third dimension is illustrated in the contrast between Paechter's explicit reference to her own *disposition* and the inference by Medway *et al.* that adopting an overt approach to research would have impacted on its outcome. No evidence is offered here—nor could it have been in respect of this particular case, given the nature of the argument being made for covert investigation. This inference nevertheless entails an assumption of a disingenuous ethics on the part of the site: that its agents would possibly have altered their grading if they had known they were under academic scrutiny. So the third dimension is *referential level of analysis*, which is scaled *agent/site* or, more broadly, *community/society*. There is potentially a fourth dimension, which is whether the legitimation is or is not predicated on evidence from the literature, from empirical or personal experience and so forth. Since, however, making empirical or theoretical claims without evidence, in the case of the former, or argument, in the case of the latter, is not a legitimate academic strategy, we will not pursue the fourth dimension further here. Each of the three dimensions is an independent, binary variable. Taking the cross product of these variables gives rise to the scheme in Figure 1.[4]

This scheme provides a map of sites that constitute and are constituted by subjective interrogators that also see each other. So, for example, the institutional procedures (*code of ethics*) will have an eye to their interpretations of civil and criminal law. This was, after all, a principal motivator for the introduction of research ethics monitoring (initially in the context of medical research) in the first place. The first concern of the institution is its own protection in the face of possible civil or criminal action taken against it. It is, therefore, likely to establish a code—to a greater or lesser extent to be rewritten/reinterpreted in respect of each submission and each policy review—as an attempt to ensure this protection. Given the inevitability of unforeseen

Referential Level of Analysis	Focus	
	Local	General
Uncoded		
Agent/Community	*disposition*	*peer debate*
Site/Society	*inference*	*stock narratives*
Coded		
Agent/Community	*ethical cadence*	*code of ethics*
Site/Society	*official rules*	*Law*

Figure 1. Points of reference

contingencies (including unanticipated interpretations), the strategy will be to divert blame away from the institution and so, by default or explicitly, on to the researcher who will be presumed to have breached the institutional code. In other words, whilst the participants on the ethics committee will be members of the academic community, they are likely to privilege the *law* in the dynamic construction of an *ethical cadence*. This is referred to as such because it is expected to be dynamic within and between individual research activities, though stabilised in the writing up of research reports, as illustrated in the two examples given here.

Sedimented ethical codes are likely to exhibit greater stability depending on the level of analysis. One might expect that those constructing trans-institutional *codes of ethics*, such as the BSA statement of ethical practice, may pay rather more attention to *stock narratives* and to *peer debate* to the extent that their institutional location is less likely to become the object of legal interrogation. This, of course, is an empirical issue. Nevertheless, the trans-institutional codes of ethics will of necessity exhibit a greater level of stability than those limited to individual institutions.

The participants in any given research setting will draw on *dispositions*, *inferences*, *stock narratives*, *official rules* and the *law*—though possibly not *peer debate* (or perhaps not debate amongst the same set of peers)—in the construction of their responses to ethical questions, which is to say, in their production of their respective *ethical cadences*. The researcher, similarly, will have access to all of these sites in the construction of their ethical cadence and may (or may not) place a degree of emphasis, in addition, to *peer debate*.

It should be clear that the position of the researcher is identified both with the *ethical cadence* and with uncoded, even tacit, dispositions. This dual location ensures a degree of instability in the ethical cadence, even without reference to the other sites.

It is also important to note that the sites represented in the scheme constitute not only resources for the construction and interrogation of ethical positions, but also audiences for the evaluation of such stances. Thus, the wise researcher will ensure that they mediate their plans and, indeed, their actions in multiple ways within this audience space. The researcher is also likely to have research interests that lie outside of this space, which is to say, they are aiming at the production of original knowledge and may be working within a budget. From time to time, such interests will come into conflict with their *ethical cadence* and/or one or more of the categories identified in Figure 1. In these cases, there will be a need for compromise that, again, will have to be mediated within the multiple audience space.

The necessarily dynamic and contextual nature of the process of constituting *ethical cadences* problematizes research ethics education other than by exemplar (fictional or otherwise) and, indeed, the process is fundamentally pragmatic. Published academic work and official ethics reviews, however, are driven to produce coherent products in the form of academic argument commonly formulated on the basis of syllogistic logic (albeit hedged by the use of natural and literary language). This of necessity removes much of the ambiguity of the contingent: here, exemplars are idealised and often fictionalised, but in any case textualised, and so *recontextualised* as we illustrate below.

The coding of *dispositions* in the form of an *ethical cadence* might be seen to be a way to resolve ethical dilemmas. Here is the claim made by Maxwell and Schwimmer (2016) in a meta-analysis of research on ethics education for trainee teachers:

> [...] reflecting on the ethical dimensions of teaching increases teachers' sensitivity to the ethical issues that arise in professional practice; and [...] grappling with ethical problems intellectually promotes students' cognitive moral judgment development, making them more likely to find the most rationally defensible solutions to the ethical dilemmas encountered at work. (p. 366)

A call for rationally defensible solutions seems to be an intention of Stutchbury and Fox's (2009) and Flinders' (1992) apparent attempts (above) to lay a claim for a position for a moral philosopher in the division of labour for research of all kinds. Yet Figure 1 also draws attention to the fact that there are elements at play that may unsettle one's ethical cadence in ways that are not necessarily rationally defensible: those relating to the researcher's personal *disposition*, which may bite away at the idea of ethical coherence. Considering the nature of these provides a different perspective on what is going on in Figure 1.

Rationalising ethics?

Rational defence of one's actions is often likely to be demanded, but does it outrank the non-rational (which is not necessarily to say irrational)? Horton (2005) reports an 'unease' that seems to be an excess over his own learning of ethics:

> I have been called 'a natural at talking with kids.' I am 'police cleared' to conduct research with children. I have completed workshops on 'Child protection,' 'Ethics of teaching and learning' and 'Implementing codes of practice.' My research conduct has always been well within the legal-ethical strictures of the Children Act 1989, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989 and the Human Rights Act 2000, as well as codes of

practice prescribed by the Medical Research Council (1991), the British Sociological Society (1993), the Market Research Society (2000) and the National Children's Bureau (2000). I am confident that my past and proposed qualitative research with children is 'ethical' by all of the criteria laid down (Matthews *et al.* 1998 and Valentine 1999). Why then, when all of these seductive ethical certainties (see White 1998) are subtracted, do I still feel a vague, nagging, indescribable sense of unease when recalling research I have done with children.[5] (p. 94)

Examples of the unease to which Horton was referring included moments when he experienced children using racist language, or when he observed violent events ('[...] children mercilessly bullying "hearing impaired" and "special needs" classmates, kicking a hedgehog to death in the playground or stabbing a baby blackbird with a compass' (p. 97)).

There is an 'urgent need', he argues:

> to address the possibility that many causes of *real* ethical unease—gut reactions, angsts, 'funny looks', 'what ifs', in fact practically everything that bothers me about the moments re-presented in this chapter—are unprescribable and unpredictable there and then, and *unrepresentable* here and now. (p. 165)

In making this case, he cites Whatmore (1996, p. 37), who notes 'the significance of embodied, as against abstract, capacities in shaping ethical competence and considerability'.

Dowling (1994, 2009, 2013) has introduced the term *discursive saturation* (DS) to distinguish between strategies that do (DS$^+$) or do not (DS$^-$) realise linguistically the principles of a given practice (which can itself be understood as DS$^{+/-}$). The scheme in Figure 2 is presented to identify the modes of recontextualisation between these two forms: what is at stake here is what happens when one activity (such as the defending of one's ethical actions) casts its gaze on another in order to provide the resources for this defence (the potential variety of which we have drawn attention to in Figure 1).

DS is clearly related to, but is not the same as, coding: emotions may be described in, for example, literary language or may be coded in, for example, psychological language, but the embodied emotions will always be in excess of the description or coding ['Feelings are immediate, sensory and cannot be fully represented in language

Recontextualising Strategy	Recontextualised Practice	
	DS-	DS+
DS-	*improvising*	*de-principling*
DS+	*rationalising*	*re-principling*

Figure 2.   Modes of recontextualisation (Dowling, 2013, p. 329)

(Cromby, 2012); they are always "more than words can say" (Todres, 2007)'; Boden *et al*, 2016, p. 1080]. In any event, the description or coding is always liable to be contested: ultimately, the two forms are irreconcilable. The top row of Figure 2 is exemplified by John Horton's 'gut reactions' and 'funny looks'. These are actions that are never explicitly principled. They may be reactions to other unprincipled actions—*improvising*—or to explicitly principled actions, such as a principled defence of covert research, a DS$^-$ action that is *de-principling*. Clearly these recontextualising actions are incompatible with the recontextualised actions, they talk past each other, so to speak.

The lower row of Figure 2 shows modes of recontextualising by explicitly principled discourses, for example, as occurs in the analysis of data collected in empirical settings. Horton's analysis may constitute a *rationalising* of his settings involving children. This is not to say a defence of the children's actions, but a theoretical organising that establishes their coding, ultimately in a theoretical language. *Re-principling* would be illustrated by a principled critique of a principled moral or ethical code. Again, DS$^+$ recontextualising is incompatible with the actions that are recontextualised. This is why sociological analysis can only ever interrogate but not instruct the settings that are analysed[6] (Dowling, 2009; Dowling & Brown, 2010). This is not to be seen as a problem. The central argument that we are making in this article is that research ethics must be opened up and not closed down other than as local and dynamic *ethical cadences* that themselves will be altered in the context of different audiences within the points of reference scheme. Being/becoming ethical therefore involves a constant dialogue between alienation and affiliation.

This dialogue also extends to that between the researcher and participants who are directly or indirectly involved in the research. As we have noted above, these participants will also have access to the range of resources included in Figure 1; they will also exhibit responses to ethical issues in both DS$^+$ and DS$^-$ modes. Here is another source of the instability of *ethical cadence*. The most obvious context in which this dialogue might be expected to take place is in the negotiation of informed consent. This negotiation can present practical as well as ethical difficulties, especially where the theme of the research is particularly sensitive and/or where the local setting requires, for example, a wife to seek her husband's permission to be interviewed (see e.g. Ajuwon & Adegbite, 2008), or where there may be bureaucratic obstacles to be overcome, suspicion concerning confidentiality or doubts about the potential value of the research (Vuban & Eta, 2019). Cook and Inglis (2009) point out that the research process can be a learning experience for research participants—in their case, where the participants are individuals with learning difficulties—but it is not unreasonable to expect that this should generally be the case.

An interesting illustration of the potential openness of researcher/participant dialogue is presented by Sumsion *et al.* (2011) in their discussion of their research with infants—children aged from birth to 18 months:

> [...] we bring to the project a commitment to recognising and valuing infants as competent social agents, co-constructors of and active participants in their social worlds, and capable of conveying their experiences. We are mindful, for example, of their capacities to communicate their emotional states and to regulate their emotional environment through vocalisations, gaze, facial expression, eye contact, body language and gesturing (Cole, Martin

and Dennis 2004). We are acutely aware, however, that if we are to be fully receptive to infants' communications, including their communications with us about their involvement in the research process, we need to further develop our capacities to become deeply attuned to infants. Attuning respectfully to infants requires us to acknowledge, with considerable humility, the impossibility of conclusively knowing their experiences and thus the need for tentative interpretations. (pp. 114–115)

The problem as regards pre-linguistic children seems clear, but whilst their entry into language and legal responsibility may enable the satisfaction of *codes of ethics*, the possibility that there will always be an excess of DS^- over DS^+ responses suggests that this alone will not be sufficient.

Conclusion

Accounts of ethics, whilst acknowledging their localised production, often aim for some sort of coherence. Yet ethical cadences are, in practice, often cobbled together. Drawing attention to their constructed nature can be seen as a challenge due to widespread investment in the idea of 'being ethical', but is a way of creating resistance to any simplistic or universal idea of being ethical as a virtue. This article has sought to provoke an estrangement from taken for granted, spontaneous ethical positioning by reference to alienating mechanisms, mapping out a logical space of potential resources that might be drawn from in the construction of an ethical stance. These are resources, points of reference, not questions and certainly not answers. The questions to be asked and the responses to them are both to be understood, we argue, as the products and not as precursors of the research process. They are components of the findings of research that, as we have argued, must be mediated appropriately and differentially to the various audiences marked out in Figure 1 during the course of—and subsequent to the completion of—a given research project. So what of the preliminary ethical review that is now required in, we believe, most institutions that conduct educational research and also by funding agencies such as the ESRC?

Firstly, we believe that the introduction of mandatory and audited preliminary ethical reviews in educational research—in the early 2000s in the UK context—was a necessary and long overdue move. The problem—and much of the debate that has ensued since—has been the result of a widespread confusion as to the purpose of these reviews and the bureaucratising of the auditing apparatuses that regulate them. It seems clear to us that the institutionalising of ethical reviews remains essential for the purposes of protecting the institution against potential civil action and against negative publicity; the institution also bears a responsibility of care for its staff and students and for the research participants that they may recruit. Difficulties arose, however, because the self-defence aim was conflated with research ethics (and even moral philosophy) education and was managed by the generation of bureaucracies in the form of documentation, guidelines and research ethics committees and administrators. These strategies are fine for self-defence, but wholly inappropriate for pedagogy. It seems to be a general rule that, whenever a bureaucratic apparatus is established, with individuals appointed to take responsibility for it, the resulting regime will grow potentially to the point of overwhelming the original practice that it was designed to serve. We are in danger of this happening to research activity.

Our argument, then, is that—apart from the self-defence function (which can be handled comparatively lightly)—the discourse of research ethics should be returned to research education, where exploration in the context of ambiguity is called for.[7] The scheme that we have presented in this article—augmented by the irreducible distinction between high and low discursive saturation strategies (DS^+/DS^-) and the call for genuine dialogue with research participants—is intended to map out the terrain for the development of one's ethical cadence in the context of doing research. Thus, it also serves as a basis for the research ethics curriculum. Whilst it might be used to interrogate the ethical positioning of others, its function is to destabilise, to enable estrangement from any single point of reference with which we may become over-identified and so emphasise the emergence of research ethics expertise as process. This is, then, a case, but not a manifesto that is intended to tell researchers, or indeed educators, what to do. Rather, it is a case that presents structured resources that should disrupt their sense of ethical practice, to be variously re-stabilised in the contexts of their enactments of, and accounting for, their practice.

NOTES

[1] Then the Institute of Education, University of London, before its merger with UCL.

[2] A similar bureaucratisation of informed consent forms places the same kind of burden on research participants as perhaps do the forms that we are assumed to have read when we purchase software licences.

[3] '[…] not only for the protection of those who have been/are the "objects" of research (or those affected in other ways by that research) but to insure the survival of a diversity of knowledge and the academic freedom and support that would insure diverse research paradigms and approaches' (Canella & Lincoln, 2007, p. 317).

[4] The two schemes that are presented in this article are organised on the basis of binary not continuous variables. Two points must be made here. Firstly, continua are meaningful only where a metric is available to locate a coding on the scale, and this condition is possible only in quantitative but not in qualitative analysis. Secondly, in any digitising, of which this may be considered a form, it is necessary to reduce the level of analysis of lexias (Barthes, 1974) to a point at which a unique coding is possible. It can be seen here that the codings made vary within the examples introduced, and this is to be expected: actors will generally deploy more than one and sometimes all of the strategies in a scheme. This does, however, present difficulties for quantification, because there is likely to be no consistency in the unit of analysis; this, however, is qualitative analysis (Dowling, 2013).

[5] An 'indescribable sense of unease' that we might also attribute to the young man in St Matthew's Gospel (see Dowling, 2009, p. 55).

[6] We might make the same point about philosophical analysis and hence our questioning of philosophical fundamentalism.

[7] This is not always the case outside of the university, where one of us is frequently asked in astonishment by overseas students, 'what *have* you done to your education [i.e. school] system!'

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