Ethical dimensions of relational research

By Linda Finlay and Ken Evans

This paper focuses on the relational ethical challenges which arise at different stages of a research project. During each stage, as researchers we confront the tricky task of minimising the impact of likely (some argue inevitable) power imbalances between ourselves and our co-researcher(s). How do we move towards more collaborative, egalitarian, open relationships as opposed to exploitative, instrumental ones? For us as relational researchers, understandings of the other are found in the fullness of our open relation (Buber, 1937), hence the importance of engaging a mutual participation where "dialogue, parity and reciprocity" are threaded through all phases of research (Heron, 1996, p.11).

Pre-research phase

There are a number of tensions generated when negotiating an initial research contract. Often a delicate balancing act is involved as we seek to set boundaries and establish trust. In addition, research asks people "to take part in, or undergo, procedures that they have not actively sought out or requested, and that are not intended solely or even primarily for their direct benefit" (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004, p.271).

All this means that a great deal of ground work needs to be done before any relational research project gets underway. This reaches beyond purely procedural concerns such as obtaining informed consent and contracts of confidentiality/anonymity. In this pre-research stage, the foundations of mutual trust within a dialogical relationship need to be put in place and the research aims and process generally agreed upon. In Buber's terms, we are called on to move beyond a functional "I-it" relationship, in which we see the other in terms of their use to us, towards an "I-Thou" relationship - one of openness to their personhood. This process is easier said than done. In a situation where the researcher initiates and controls contact and holds professional knowledge, the relationship is inevitably an uneven one. Fuhr (1992) goes so far as to compare this initial phase of research to the relationship between parents and child: just as the researcher-parent has a clear sense about what the research is going to involve, the co-researcher-child is the one who complies and surrenders (Kruger, 2008).

The significant step demanded of the relational researcher is to release control, or rather take "control in a new humanistic sense by being clearly conscious of the choice of letting the informant have a voice" and to lay the ground for a true, authentic, mutual interaction (Kruger, 2008). Box 1 below offers an example of how such a process might occur in practice. Here, Morrow (2006) describes how, in her feminist collaborative research with sexually abused women, the process of 'gaining consent' circumvented her control over data collection.

Box 1 Handing over some control to the co-researcher

"I had originally planned to meet for a short time with each interviewee to explain the project, get acquainted, explain and have participants sign the informed consent form and schedule our longer interview. I had explained this expectation to the first participant, Paula, when we first made telephone contact.   However, after we had finished the informed consent process and I pulled out my calendar to schedule our interview appointment, she objected, saying, "I thought we were going to do the interview now. I'm ready to talk!" I consented and, feeling a little panicky, searched for my interview guide. Unable to find it, I finally responded, "Well, uh, er, um. Tell me, as much as you are comfortable sharing with me right now, um, what happened to you when you were sexually abused." This kind of question, both very personal and potentially disturbing for a participant, is not the kind of question with which I would normally begin an interview, but Paula's desire to tell her story and my own personal style (I've been described as an "earth mother" who elicits trust very early in a relationship) converged to make the question both appropriate and effective."   (Morrow, 2006, p.153).

In the collaboration discussed in Box 1, Morrow indicates that she places her ethical concern for her co-researchers above instrumental research strategy. Such an impulse fits the recommendations of the phenomenological philosopher Levinas (1969) who puts concern for the Other at the centre of his ethics. He argues that ethical human relating involves an ongoing effort to constrain one's own freedom and spontaneity (or allow oneself to be constrained) as part of a project of being 'open' to the Other.

Data collection phase

During data collection researchers face ethical challenges relating to the use (and mis-use) of power. Inevitably, researchers will find themselves being instrumental. Alert to opportunities to obtain data from the other, they may push hungrily ahead. This is exposed at a simple level when, during interviews, we are selective about which questions/answers to follow up. At a more subtle level, the researcher is the one who uses 'expert' knowledge (such as using empathetic responses and reflecting back techniques) to both 'open up' a co-researcher's expressions and close them down again. There are no clear-cut answers here about what level of disclosure or degree of restraint is desirable. The negotiation can only take place within the dialogical relationship, as the example in Box 2 illustrates.

Box 2   Does data collection mean taking advantage of the other?

"In a tape recorded interview, Maria, the informant, becomes excited and emotionally involved with the story of her life as a mother of her handicapped child. Suddenly, and to her own surprise, she bursts out in tears – but continues with her story. At this point, the researcher becomes particularly alert and tempted because behind the tears and a sad destiny, he detects that the informant actually reveals something which is right to the point of the theme he wants to explore in his research.

So, how should the researcher in this example handle the dilemma on the one hand, to obtain substantial research result and, on the other, to heed the necessary precautions to protect the personal integrity of Maria? Should, in the name of science, the tape recorder be stopped and the interview cancelled in order to take care of the informant's personal process?

As a matter of fact, the solution lies within the relation itself, provided that the researcher is aware of the obligation to stay in the impasse, and at the same time to situate the problem where it belongs: in the relationship. In this way the theme is lifted to a dialogical level of interaction, and the acutely conscious becomes the guideline for his work." (Kruger 2008)

The example in Box 2 above shows how tricky it is for us to manage our own power as researchers while seeking to protect and empower our co-researchers. Ideally, the research process is at once strategic *and* respectful. As in therapy, we attempt a balancing act: we seek to enable and facilitate disclosure while at the same time intervening to protect our co-researcher from too much exposure. Such "dialectical oppositions" (Ellis, 2007, pp.20-21) involve moving back and forth between expression and protection, between disclosure and restraint (Bochner, 1984).

In the following passage Ellis describes the relational ethical process she engaged when collaborating with two other researchers on their experience of bulimia nervosa:

 "Given the emotional and personal nature of the project and especially my position vis-à-vis the other two researchers – still PhD students when we began – ethical concerns arose regarding our relationship with each other. We had to be on guard continually to process how we were feeling about the project and what we wanted out of it. I emphasized that Christine and Lisa not reveal anything to me they might regret later because they might be concerned with how I, their professor, saw them. We came up with strategies so that they might write privately and talk together without me. When we shared stories, we held them in confidence until we agreed to make them public. In each meeting, we created opportunities to change our minds, and to add to or delete from the stories we had told as we mined transcripts from the previous meeting…

We agreed to use mild discomfort as a cue to explore further. At the same time, we were committed to protect one another from distress and harm. We tried to develop trust by openly sharing our lives; however, we also had to respect each other's needs for privacy and restraint." (Ellis, 2007).

So far, the discussion has focused on 'researcher power' and the need for researchers to relinquish some of this in favour of their participants. Yet efforts to 'empower' our co-researchers may be misplaced as it implies we're still in the powerful position of controlling access to power. Further, it is simplistic to suggest power is exerted in only one direction. Power comes in different guises, inhabiting structural dimensions such as class, race, gender, ethnicity and so on.   Relational researchers need to be alert to how different types of power cross-cut each other and impact on the research relationship.

Research by McFadden and McCamley (2003) involving their collaborative project with young people on sexual health shows something of the complexity that can be involved. These researchers were initially interested in giving young women an opportunity to

share their concerns about the ways men undermined them. However, they soon discovered that the young men were also vulnerable and deserving of a 'voice'. They struggled to set aside their feminist mindset and their own previous experiences where they had perceived the men as the ones with more power.

> "This required us to re-negotiate our positions within planning meetings where we were compelled to listen to, and engage with, debates relating to the experiences of young men…We had to work…at questioning our resistance to the proposed direction of the research…There was a need to work towards a greater empathy when engaging with male sexual experiences, a 'head-shift'." (2003, p.203).

Data analysis phase

Here, qualitative researchers confront the question of the degree to which they can, or should, involve participants in the analytical process. The outcome depends, to an extent, on the type of research involved. In discursive forms of research, for instance, participants are unlikely to get involved in analysis given its highly technical nature. Discursive methods tend to "utilise counter-intuitive, and possibly impenetrable, understandings of subjectivity which participants may reject, not least because it can appear to ironicise their lived experience" (Madhill 2008). While these researchers usually carry out their analysis on their own, the process of identifying and naming discourses still involves ethical and 'moral/political' choices on the part of the analyst (Parker, 1992). For this reason, discursive researchers are encouraged to be reflexive about how they position themselves and their participants within the social world.

In contrast, collaborative and participatory action forms of research rely on the process of iteratively taking evolving understandings back to participants. Arvay (2003), for instance, advocates a Collaborative Narrative Method which thoroughly involves co-researchers in each of seven stages of research, from pre-interview negotiation, through transcription and interpretation to eventually sharing the stories. Halling (1999) suggests another kind of collaborative approach where research is conducted entirely through group members' dialogue. His dialogical phenomenological study of forgiveness saw him collaborate with a group of Masters' students, with positive results:

> "Working in dialogue and comparing personal experiences and the interviews with each other allowed us to come to a rich, collective understanding of the process of forgiving another… Freedom infused the process with a spirit of exploration and discovery, and is evident through the group members' ability to be playful and imaginative with their interpretations. Trust provides the capacity to be genuinely receptive to what is new and different in the others' experiences and expressions and accounts for respect toward each person's descriptions, interpretations, and stories" (Halling, 1999, p.11).

While Halling is committed to the fullest possible collaboration with his co-researchers, other relational researchers involve their co-researchers only to the extent that the latter *wish* to be involved. The reflexive account in Box 3 offered by Finlay (2006, pp.194-195) about her research with Ann on the lived experience of multiple sclerosis is a case in point.

Box 3 - Involving participants as co-collaborators?

"Ann and I collaborated in this research in a number of ways. First of all she agreed to share her experience with me as she was keen that I 'spread the word' to therapists about what it was 'really like to have MS'. Together, we embarked on a project whose findings, we both understood, would eventually be made public. Ann was content for me to share the findings with therapists. That the interviews were conducted in a natural conversation style helped foster that sense of collaboration. As I moved onto analyse the interviews I consulted Ann several times, discussing with her my perceptions and analysis. In these ways Ann can be said to have played a part in co-constituting the findings.

As Ann was a physiotherapist she had a reasonable understanding of the aims, process and intended outcomes of my case study research. This was important as it meant that her consent to take part in the research was properly informed. It also meant that Ann could take on a more collaborative role in the research *to the extent that she wanted to*. In a spirit of openness, I left this decision to her. While she wanted an opportunity for discussion, she seemed content to hand authorial control to me, understanding that this would be *my* research. As a health professional, Ann was interested to discuss both the findings of my broader study and my analysis of her particular interview.   I was pleased to share my findings with her. In return, she offered me her reactions.

Ann was particularly active on hearing my preliminary analysis of the interviews with her. She affirmed certain themes, suggesting I had captured her experience 'nicely'. At other points she suggested my analysis (particularly my metaphorical flourishes) needed to be 'toned down' as she didn't feel they adequately represented her ordinary, everyday experience. One notable example here was my initial use of an analogy: that of Ann situation being akin to 'living with an alien monster'. I rather liked this metaphor, regarding it as both punchy and poetic, and was reluctant to let it go. However, it was not something Ann could relate to. I therefore deleted all references to the monster while retaining (I ruefully acknowledge) some sense of the notion of alien infiltration.

In retrospect, I can see that it was useful to get Ann's feedback. For one thing, it helped me to better appreciate how Ann had, in fact, managed to reconnect with her 'disconnected' arm. I remain uncomfortably aware that our collaboration was partial and not entirely mutual. While Ann gave me some feedback, I retained control of my analysis and writing. In the end it is I who was choosing where, when, what and how to publish the findings. And, in the end, these are my findings, my interpretations. I could have involved Ann much more collaboratively, but chose not to."

Many qualitative researchers embrace the idea of **participant validation** or member checking as a way to 'prove' the validity of their research. Here, researchers refer their evolving analysis back to their co-researchers for confirmation: when the participant agrees with the researcher's assessment, it is seen as strengthening the researcher's argument. Such confidence, however, may be misplaced. It needs to be remembered that participants have their own motives, needs, and interests. They also have varying degrees of insight. Moreover, what may have been 'true' for them at the time of the interview may no longer be the case. Their ability to put themselves back into the

specific research context may well be limited. For all these reasons, processes of participant validation need to be engaged in carefully and with awareness of the complex conscious, unconscious and contingent dimensions which may lead a co-researcher to support or refute any one analysis. (Of course the researcher, too, is subject to their own complex conscious, unconscious and contingent elements: hence   the need for researcher reflexivity.)

In his critical exploration of participant validation, Ashworth (1993) supports it on moral-political grounds but warns against taking participants' evaluations too seriously: after all, it may be in their interest to protect their 'socially presented selves'. As he notes, "Participant validation is flawed nevertheless, since the 'atmosphere of safety' that would allow the individual to lower his or her defences, cease 'presentation', and act in open candour (if this is possible), is hardly likely to be achieved in the research encounter." (Ashworth, 1993, p.15).

In the case of the research with Ann above in Box 3, it could be argued that Ann's involvement in the co-production of the findings strengthens the trustworthiness and ethical basis of this research. This is not the same as saying that Ann has 'validated' this study and so ensures its 'veracity'. As relational researchers we do not claim to seek a 'truth' which can be validated in this way. Instead, we adopt more of a relativist position acknowledging that findings emerge in a specific context. We argue that another researcher, or a study undertaken at another time would unfold a different story.

Concluding the research

The end phase of research involves tying things up with co-researchers, and also writing up and disseminating the research. While the first process is conducted within the relational context, the second usually occurs away from co-researchers and is therefore outside the relational context.

The process of tying up the research with co-researchers usually involves some sort of debrief towards closure of the research relationship. When and how this is achieved varies enormously depending on the type of research involved. For some research it may occur at the end of the interview/observation stage, with researcher and co-researcher perhaps sharing their experiences of doing the research. In more collaborative types of research, the process occurs through the different research stages right up to writing-up or presentation. Here, closure comes with seeing a tangible, jointly produced end product.

Whatever the case, co-researchers need time to reflect on their experience. As Kruger (2008) puts it:

> "It is of the utmost importance in this final phase of the research process that the informant is offered an opportunity to tell about and reflect on his or her experience and in this way lay the ground for a true interactive summing-up"

When, after achieving some degree of closure of the research relationship, researchers present their findings to the wider professional and academic community, fresh ethical questions emerge. To begin with, there is the issue of how others may react to experiences that co-researchers have been willing to share. For example, in the Ellis,

Kiesinger and Tillmann-Healy, (1997) research on the experience of bulimia (described above), the co-researchers needed to think very carefully about how they would be seen by others after telling their stories – particularly as they were about to apply for academic jobs. The research article they collaboratively wrote was to become part of their job application packets and clearly identified them as women with eating disorders if not other emotional vulnerabilities (Ellis, 2007).

In their feminist account of researching 'Asian' women's experience of childbirth, Marshall, Woollett and Dosanjh (1998, p.128) examine their role in the representation of their research participants. In particular, they acknowledge some selective silence on their part when it came to writing up their research:

> "We have used accounts…to point to care where the woman is viewed and treated on the basis of ethnic grouping…But additionally, in these extracts there is a singling out of black nurses. This raises the issue of what to do when working with marginalized accounts which themselves reproduce prejudicial viewpoints and evaluations. Our decision to date has been not to report these aspects of the accounts. (Leaving silenced aspects of the accounts that we do not want to hear?)…These tensions around the representation of 'experience' were and are central for us as researchers. In adjudicating between what and what not to write up we could be accused of taking the political-moral highground…this sort of 'suppression' results in a misunderstanding of power…and hence, prevents opportunities for countering oppression which currently exist."

Perhaps a more pernicious ethical challenge when writing up research is the sense of discomfort researchers may feel about treating co-researchers as *objects* to 'talk about' rather than as persons to 'talk with'. Put in Levinas' terms (1969**),** the power we can misuse is a function of the way we objectify others in relation and that we should choose to act to reduce such dominance. Exploring the guilt and shame that go with writing about others in an objectifying way, Josselson (1996) expresses this discomfort well:

> "My guilt, I think, comes from my knowing that I have taken myself out of relationship with my participants (with whom, during the interview, I was in intimate relationship) to be in relationship with my readers. I have, in a sense, been talking about them behind their backs and doing so publicly. Where in the interview I had been responsive to them, now I am using their lives in the service of something else, for my own purposes…I am guilty about being an intruder and them, to some extent, a betrayer…And my shame is the hardest to analyse and the most painful of my responses. I suspect this shame is about my exhibitionism, shame that I am using these people's lives to exhibit myself, my analytic prowess, my cleverness. I am using them as extensions of my own narcissism and fear being caught, seen in this process. (Josselson, 1996, cited in McLeod, 2001, p. 198).

There are no easy ways to preclude such feelings of discomfort. However, being reflexively aware both of the nature of our research enterprise and of our ethical responsibilities is a good place to start. Just as in life, we have to make choices in difficult, uncertain circumstances, and cope with competing demands and responsibilities.

It also helps if you believe your research has the potential to benefit, at some level, your co-researchers even if your initial intention was to benefit a wider community. In the following extract) a co-researcher in Morrow's study of the experience of sexual abuse (mentioned above) shares her positive response to the experience of being a co-analyst:

> "The participant co-researcher analytic process was a shared voice…That creates the experience of being understood. The amount of, just, honor and respect – it's just not like anything I've ever experienced, Sue. The research is also…it rings true…You have done something really extraordinary. It's so much more than a dissertation…Honor and respect. That's what we all lost. Reading it was an experience of that. It's touching the place I've been protecting, I think – the place I'm afraid to open up, even to myself. It's the place that believes I'm honourable, worth knowing." Morrow's (2006, p.165).