Abstract

Ethnographic research brings the researcher into intimate, extended contact with the researched. If well done, a close rapport between participants is nurtured, defences are let down and life proceeds almost 'as normal'. This scenario lends itself to ethical dilemmas. Codes of ethics do not assist in resolving the conflicts between human rights and professional responsibilities. Unresolved, these dilemmas threaten an intellectual and social paralysis in a new environment of rigorous ethical awareness, accountability, and political correctness. This paper explores these issues in the context of research in classrooms where students' interests may conflict with those of their teachers and where the researcher's responsibilities to the profession may conflict with their responsibilities to certain members of the researched.

I will illustrate this scenario by revisiting, behind the scenes, my own widely published research in Aboriginal Education (Malin 1990, 1991, 1994, 1997). I will explore what 'harm' may mean and how ethnographers in the past have attempted to avoid it. I will consider the possible harm I may have generated by publishing and the harm I would have been covering up had I not.

In an effort to redress conflicting ethical responsibilities, I will speculate on possible alternative outcomes had I employed a different research paradigm, specifically participatory action research, or an additional style of reporting, specifically creative non-fiction. In doing this I will briefly explore the respective strengths and weaknesses of these two approaches with regard to my own work and to the issue of rigour in qualitative research.

Introduction

This paper is motivated by ethical dilemmas with my own classroom ethnography, done in the eighties, and with similar dilemmas visited upon some of my post-graduate students currently conducting classroom research in the field of Indigenous Education. Action inquiry and collaborative research between school and university teacher-researchers (Sachs 1998) help, to an extent, to minimise the dilemmas associated with outside university researchers investigating classroom activity. And recently, post structuralist critique of ethnography over issues of representation and objectification of the 'other' have also flagged these dilemmas. It is within this context that I will argue that there is still a vital role for the interpretive or critical ethnography in these so-called 'post modern' times, particularly if we are to expose the processes by which Indigenous students are continuously marginalised in our schools.

Like Lynn Yates, I believe that ".. there is not one overriding methodological framework that transcends all others. " (Yates 1997: 494) I, like Yates, believe that no one type of research is closer to 'enlightenment' than any other, but that certain kinds of research are better able to answer certain kinds of research questions. What is preferable about the situation today, over that of thirty years ago, is that we now have a wider range of research questions, ways
of asking questions, and ways of addressing those questions than ever before. I will explore here whether more recent innovations in styles of reporting (Tierney 1997) may help resolve some of the ethical dilemmas inherent in the ethnographic case study where ethical codes of conduct can only offer limited advice.

The dilemma

My doctoral research used interpretive ethnography to unravel, in part, ways that classroom behaviour and learning were organised in one particular classroom, leading to, over the process of a year, the social and academic marginalisation of three five year old Aboriginal students. Such marginalisation is a form of endemic racism which is unintentional and operates outside the teacher's awareness (Malin 1997). In a nutshell my dilemma became, if I don't publish the story of these three students, then this type of racism, which is invisible to White Australians, is not exposed. If I do publish, I risk undermining that particular teacher's self-esteem and self-confidence causing harm.

From the time of completion of the final report, I was faced with this conundrum. I had selected 'good' teachers for the study, who were recommended by the 'Department' and their principals. I conscientiously abided by the ethical tenets of informed consent, confidentiality and anonymity, disguising the identities of both the teachers and the schools and I did not publish for several years after conducting the research. Nevertheless, I believe that I may have compromised my ethical responsibility to one teacher. Punch (1986:46) reinforces my belief arguing that claims of anonymity 'ring hollow' because, with the close relationships developed, the long term stay and then the richness of description in the findings, it is easy for some insiders, including the main players, to recognise each other and themselves. Worse still, Punch states, is when the people 'recognised' are the wrong ones.

Moral and ethical issues

In attempting to conceptualise my dilemma from a moral or ethical position, I find I am not helped by the official guidelines. The conduct of the research itself was without fault; the problem began with publication. Taking a 'consequentialist' moral view (Bibby, 1997;115), where the rightness or wrongness of the research is judged according to its consequences, clearly some wrong may have occurred.

If I am to be guided by the AARE's Code of Ethics, Principle number three states that "No significant harm to an individual is permissible ..." where harm can include, "harmful social or psychological consequences, such as loss of self esteem..." (Bibby, 1997: 116) Bibby further qualifies this:

"This principle should not be taken to imply that research should not be done into a wrongful practice on the grounds that the perpetrator would suffer loss of reputation or employment if the practice were made public. Most often, it will be the publication and not the research itself which causes harm. Whether or not the research should be published will depend on the case; basically on degree of wrongfulness of the practice." (p. 127)

Because of strict adherence to measures ensuring confidentiality, there is no possibility that the teacher would suffer harm from the publication beyond her personal psychological well-being. Furthermore, my work implicates as perpetrator, not "Mrs Eyers", but society in
general, whereby when a society is configured to the needs of the majority or dominant group, practices which have racist consequences are commonplace and in need of exposing and redressing. Nevertheless, if this teacher read the publications in question, there would be a strong likelihood that she would identify herself within them and this could cause her distress.

I felt that I had to publish to offer a perspective on the plight of three Aboriginal children in a fairly typical classroom. The AARE's Code states that "Researchers have a duty to disseminate research results to stakeholders, to other researchers, to their students and to the general public." And, "[t]he first duty of a researcher is to reach the widest possible audience..." The code emphasises that:

"Researchers should not enter agreements where restrictions are placed on dissemination, other than short-term restrictions to avoid injustice (for example to avoid harm to disadvantaged groups, or to allow a brief time for a response to be prepared by people the research may implicitly criticise.)" (Bibby, 1997:122)

Of course, Mrs Eyers is not a member of a disadvantaged group. However, I believe her human right should extend to not encountering 'harm' because of my research.

Thus, my professional responsibility to disseminate the research findings conflicts with my responsibility to the teacher of my study. And, my responsibility to the teacher conflicts with my responsibility to the Aboriginal students in the study and to the wider society.

Initially, I justified my decision to publish the study results as educational ethnographic case studies, comforted by the point, recently articulated by Bibby that:

"All moral principles have exceptions ... since principles can come into conflict with one another. Maxims that enjoin us to settle for the lesser of two evils or the greater of two goods recognise this straightforward point." (1997:10)

Fear of the possibility that the teacher might read one of my publications was outweighed by the responsibility to inform the wider community of ways that Aboriginal students can be unintentionally marginalised in everyday classrooms.

Similarly, I felt that not giving the teacher a copy of my final report was also the lesser of two evils. Expecting that she would not read the journals in which I published, having disguised her identity anyway, and also knowing that she was no longer in a situation that would likely mean she would teach Aboriginal children, I felt confident that she would remain oblivious of my critique, and thus protected.

Of course, this latter act on my part is in breach of the general principle of the Ethics guidelines that "Participants have a right to be informed of the outcomes and the practical consequences of the research." (ibid:118). However, I did disseminate my findings in public forums presenting at conferences, in addition to publishing in journals (eg 1990), and subsequently in a book (1997).

The problem remains as poignant today as it was then and many researchers pursuing ethnography in classrooms continue to be entangled in conflicting and breached ethical principles. For some, it has meant restricting access to important research findings that may contribute to school teaching and learning. For others, it has meant an abandonment of ethnography and the pursuit of alternative research paradigms as the solution.
A different research paradigm

One solution to the ethical dilemma is to switch paradigms to action inquiry, participatory action research, and the like. In this way the vexed ethics of an outsider-university lecturer-researcher, objectifying the work of the teacher practitioner are lessened. These kinds of action research approaches are either conducted by oneself the practitioner, or in collaboration between practitioner and university-based researcher. These approaches are aimed at solving a problem that is already defined, in a very specific context. They are also used for social engineering (Noffke 1997) such as when a school community or school system wishes to make changes to current trends, for example, in trying to attract female secondary students into the Maths/Science subject areas.

Yet there are certain constraints which can prevent university academics from working in collaborative ways with classroom teachers. Teachers in schools, like those of us in universities, are now being required to do increasingly more as our institutions are subjected to economic rationalisation. Some of the best teachers I know state that they are too busy with their curriculum planning and teaching, finding resources and nurturing their relationships with students, parents and colleagues, to have time for collaborative research endeavours. And, although there are ways for lessening the burden of collaborative research on teachers, there are research questions and issues which can be better addressed by interpretive or critical ethnography. These relate to the scope of the study, the time taken for analysis and the practical experience and perceived status of the university-based researcher.

Ethnography which examines the minutiae of daily life, over time, while also incorporating a wider context than classroom and school, as did my research, is extremely labour intensive and time consuming. It generates huge amounts of data for analysis and often would not be practicable for a practising teacher, unless she were on study leave, for example. Furthermore, not all teachers want to work collaboratively. The teacher I was to call 'Mrs Eyers' was not comfortable with any form of collaboration. She was confident with her approach and satisfied with the outcomes. In addition, I did not have the confidence or legitimacy of being an 'expert' on teaching Indigenous students. I was merely a university student and former teacher. What authority did I have to be offering advice to this teacher with more years' experience than me? Other teachers, like 'Mrs Eyers', may not want to work alongside university students, whether they are post-graduates and experienced classroom practitioners or not, and, furthermore, they may not share a common research interest.

As an example of the scope often sought in interpretive ethnography, after finishing my year's fieldwork in three classrooms, it took me three more years (working part-time) on other fieldwork and analysis, in family and child care settings, before I settled on a framework for analysing the classroom data. In the end, the scope of the study entailed comparisons between home and school, Anglo and Aboriginal Australian students, between teachers in three classrooms, and also Australian Anglo and Aboriginal family case studies. In order to explain relations in the classrooms, I had felt I needed information about relations at home. I used fine-grained micro-analysis of videotaped data, an observation journal and intensive interviews. Interpretive or critical ethnography is ideal for capturing such scope, whereas the strength of action research lies with its flexibility in adapting to practical contingencies and its potential for intervention when certain approaches are not practical or effective. Action research studies have important questions to answer and they can also be extensive and truly emancipatory (e.g Heslop 1998). However, I believe that there remains a continuing need for the broadly scoped, micro-focussed, in depth ethnography albeit with modifications in response to recent concerns which will be addressed below. (Van Maanen 1985, Tierney 1997)
The same paradigm but a different style of reporting

I will explore here whether my ethical dilemma can be solved without abandoning interpretive ethnography if a different style of reporting is used. But before discussing this, I feel I need to address some of the criticisms directed at ethnography by authors with a post structuralist orientation. The post structural critique has been important in its demand for more reflection on the parts of ethnographers and in some regards has led to the strengthening of certain qualities in ethnography that were already present and in other regards has immobilised potentially valuable research.

Traditional ethnography, at least as it was taught to me (Dobbert 1982; Erickson 1986), expected that the researcher would situate herself relative to the so-called 'informants', with regard to social background and theoretical leanings at the very least. It also expected that the findings would be presented as 'interpretations' of reality. It did not make claims for establishing universal laws of human behaviour but 'webs of significance' or meaning (Geertz 1973). Generalisability was sought incrementally across several studies, and always with qualification regarding context. In my research of Aboriginal students adapting to classroom life in their first year of school, I viewed the story that emerged as a kind of instructive fable, not pointing to what most teachers or most Aboriginal students are like, but giving a complex scenario that once happened, and would likely, at least in part, happen again, somewhere else, at another time.

Post structuralism has criticised ethnography for claiming to be 'neutral, authoritative and scientific' (Bochner and Ellis, 1996:22) maintaining that, rather, ethnography can only be 'partial, selective and contestable' (ibid: 22). My reading of the post structural critique is that, by acknowledging the partiality and uncertainty of the results, and with careful contextualising of the researcher's stance, the data, the findings, and any generalisations, then this would avoid the inappropriate 'truth claims' of traditional research. We have come a long way from the time we felt compelled to refer to ourselves in the final report in third person, as 'the researcher', and are no longer afraid to write in the first person. Unlike, the advice I received from one of my supervisors, I encourage my students to use in their reports of findings such terms as 'possible' or 'likely' or 'would seem'.

What would be more difficult to accommodate is the position of some post modernists that:

> The goal is not simply to call into question but to dismantle ethnography as a kind of factual description of other's lived reality; to undo, as Denzin explains, "the voyeuristic gazing eye of the ethnographer." (Schwandt: 306)

There are places where only an outsider's 'gazing eye' can capture and expose the processes of marginalisation and the moments of despair in people not able to speak for themselves. In this regard, Nancy Scheper-Hughes, author of the moving ethnography of a 'shanty town' community in Brazil, *Death Without Weeping* takes direct issue with post structuralism. She writes:

> Many young anthropologists today, sensitized by the writing of Michel Foucault ... on 'power/knowledge', have come to think of ethnography and fieldwork as unwarranted intrusions in the lives of vulnerable, threatened peoples. The anthropological interview has been likened to the medieval "inquisitional confession" ... through which church examiners extracted 'truth' from their naive and naturally 'heretical' peasant flocks. We hear of anthropological observation as a hostile act that reduces our 'subjects' to mere 'objects' of our discriminating, incriminating, scientific gaze. Consequently some young anthropologists have given up the practice of
descriptive ethnography altogether ... I grow weary of these post modern critiques, and given the perilous times in which we and our subjects live, I am inclined toward a compromise that calls for the practice of 'good enough' ethnography. The anthropologist is an instrument of cultural translation that is necessarily flawed and biased. We cannot rid ourselves of the cultural self we bring with us into the field any more than we can disown the eyes, ears, and skin through which we take in our intuitive perceptions about the new and strange world we have entered. Nonetheless ... we struggle to do the best we can with the limited resources we have at hand - our ability to listen and observe carefully, empathically and compassionately.... I believe that there is a role for the ethnographer writer in giving voice, as best she can, to those who have been silenced... Seeing, listening, touching, recording, can be, if done with care and sensitivity, acts of fraternity and sisterhood, acts of solidarity. Above all they are works of recognition. Not to look, not to touch, not to record, can be the hostile act... (1992, p. 27-8, emphasis added).

When justifying autoethnography, a research method and style of reporting popularised by post structuralism, Ellis and Bochner argue that this generates readers who "feel and care and desire" (1996:24) while also enabling "another person's world of experience to inspire critical reflection on your own." (1996:22) These are also outcomes of interpretive and critical ethnographies such as that of Schepers-Hughes cited above, Lowell (1995), Hudspith (1997), and others too numerous to mention here.

I believe that we need to maintain diversity in genres as well as in paradigms rather than all meld to the increasingly popular use of, for example, multiple voices, or autoethnography. I can accept the call for science to become more artful provided it is 'deliberate, careful and empirical' (Bateson cited in Bochner and Ellis, 1996:21). Some have difficulty with the term empirical but for me systematic recording of what one observes and hears, and subsequent corroboration of one's interpretation with those involved, is essential in order to distinguish between research reporting and pure fiction. This is why I have been drawn to the research report genre of creative non-fiction as an option, among others, available to us for communicating with a particular audience (Bochner and Ellis 1996; Patton 1999). Tierney (1997) argues that by being a bit more experimental in writing research reports, by employing a range of the literary tools of fiction, we would probably reach more people and a wider range of people.

Creative non-fiction. Storytelling has long been the means for moral teaching in human societies: Pitjantjatjara speakers have tjukurpa, the Ancient Greeks had Aesop’s fables, and Jews and Christians are well familiar with the parable. These stories teach by allegory and metaphor and the listeners are not explicitly implicated in the plot. The psychology underlying successful anti-racism programs, similarly, avoids spotlighting individuals with the purpose of shaming (Malin 1999). The purpose of my case study was not to shame the individual teacher involved but had she read it, this would have been the outcome. The purpose was to present a scenario. By fictionalising particular aspects of the story, creative non-fiction can dress up this scenario more as an instructive fable which may be easier for practitioners to confront than the 'interpretive vignette'. By fictionalising entirely, I would risk some members of my audience dismissing my claims as mere fabrication. Mienczakowski (1996: 248) inserts fictional segments "(w)here necessary, to link plot, subplot, and narrative" in the scripts of his plays which function as research reports in his area of public health. His informants believe that verbatim accounts from real life, in grounding the theatrical performance empirically, will give it more authority with the audience of health practitioners and clients.
In my first attempt at creative non-fiction I employ verbatim transcripts of videotaped records of classroom life but, unlike in traditional ethnographic reporting, I construct a patchwork or collage of events and actors across time. My experimental sample story told below, presents the point of view of the student, as if she were an older child reminiscing on her first year of school. I make inferences about the actors' intentions and motives which are based upon my knowledge of them from a year spent in the classroom, from interview data, and from my interpretation of actions captured on videotape. The actual inferences are the 'fiction', because a middle-class, middle-aged non-Aboriginal academic cannot really know what would be going on in the mind of this five year old Aboriginal girl. The story is as follows:

**First Steps in the marginalisation of an Aboriginal child**

I never seemed to be able to get things right with Miss Divine. I was five and she must have been at least 45. I really wanted to please her and do what was right but instead I just kept making mistakes. The more I tried to please her the more she seemed to not notice I was there.

I remember one day we had phonics and she was asking us for words beginning with 'c'. I looked around the room and settled on 'carpet'. I had it there on the tip of my tongue but she kept asking everyone else but not me. Then just before choosing me she changed the task asking, "What do you eat for lunch that starts with 'c'?") but I was so set on 'carpet' that when she looked at me for an answer, I blurted out 'carpet' and she retorted, "You can't eat carpet!" What an idiot. I felt so stupid. Next, she handed out our Maths books and was showing us some of the good work that other kids had done. She showed my friend Pam's page to the class declaring it to be so beautiful and that if she kept her work that way she'd be proud of her. I was jealous, I wanted her to be proud of my work too. I couldn't help myself from calling out, "And me too, Miss Divine, me too?" That kind of struck her like a cold wind and she stiffened and retorted tight lipped looking down at the book on her lap, "I hope so!" Something inside me kept forcing me to keep asking her "Do you like my stuff?" But she never looked at me, just kept on talking to the other kids, answering their questions, telling them to sit still. It was as if she didn't hear. When she handed me my book she told me to keep my sums to the right side of the page, and I asked her again, "Do you like my stuff too?" She just leaned forward staring at me, her eyes just a centimetre from mine, "Don't press too hard with your pencil!" and she handed me a pencil.

Instead of her liking me and my work she looked like she hated me. I went back to my desk. I was really upset. I banged Pam's page on the desk and told her that I hated it. I then glared at my quiet friend, William and told him I hated him. Really, I just hated myself because my teacher didn't like me and didn't like my work but I took it out on the only kids who would play with me. What an idiot!

There are successful precedents in Australian fiction of an adult speaking through the eyes of a child, such as in the children's novel *Onion Tears* (Kidd 1989) which, using information from refugee children's written accounts, attempts to capture a refugee child's struggle to come to terms with life in Australia. It remains to be seen whether my experiment with this genre will be judged as equally persuasive as the original example. (See Appendix for the original.)

According to Bochner and Ellis (1996) there are no hard and fast rules about what creative non-fiction is and how to do it although there are common qualities which characterise the articles in their book. They state,
"...the entire book is an argument for self-conscious reflexivity. Many of our authors are struggling with the dilemma of how to position themselves within their research projects to reveal aspects of their own tacit world, challenge their own assumptions, locate themselves through the eyes of the Other, and observe themselves observing." (p. 28)

Most of their articles are autoethnography where the author is speaking about his or her own experience. Some have 'multiple voices' or are multi-layered (Lather 1997). Although I agree that these genres have a place in research reporting, not all suit every purpose. A single doctoral thesis could generate several reports, in a variety of genres, intended for different audiences. Auto-ethnography is not appropriate for my classroom research as by situating myself within the classroom scene, I risk exposing the teacher's identity all the more because researchers do become associated with the teachers they work with, by those around them. As a consequence, it would also be highly likely, that intensive case studies, such as mine, even when partially fictionised would still be easily identified by the major players unless they were split into isolated fragments within various anthologies which included vignettes from other settings. For this reason my experimental report genre cannot be a panacea.

Conclusion

If university researchers are to continue to invite classroom teachers to collaborate in research that is aimed at establishing equity in schools, then they must ensure that those teachers are protected from any harm, including the undermining of their self-esteem.

The very pervasive, unintentional nature of much of the marginalisation process (or racism) which I investigated is most effectively exposed by the long term, indepth, micro-level, penetrative powers and broad scope of critical or interpretive ethnography. Ethical dilemmas are inherent in such an intimate research process.

Is it enough to reassure ourselves that we have opted for the lesser of two evils? In my case this entailed the publication of reports which highlighted potential processes of marginalisation of Aboriginal students which risked shaming a teacher, in her own eyes.

Using different report genres for different audiences, such as the standard ethnographic report for academic audiences and creative non-fiction for the professional audience may provide a partial remedy. Publishing under a pseudonym would further strengthen the disguise. But intact ethnographic case studies are valuable for the context and holistic view that they present which would have to be sacrificed to achieve the true anonymity of the participants.

Maybe the best we can do to protect the well-being of those teachers who offer their classrooms for research, is to warn them, that it is highly likely that the invisible beast of racism is lurking in their classroom organisation too. It lurks in all our institutions, and university-based researchers, like myself, are equally as likely to be hosts as anybody else. So were I able to 'live my research life' again, that is the message I would have to say to 'Mrs Eyers': that we are all in this together; I am no better than you; we bring different skills and knowledge to this research/teaching endeavour; we can assist each other in coming to understand the workings of processes by which some students become disadvantaged and the ways for overcoming these. This is a form of collaboration but with less of the 'research burden' on the teacher as in action research. Occasionally, we will come across that gifted
teacher, who can show us how to get it right for all students (eg 'Mrs Banks' in Hudspith 1997), but mostly we will have to learn from our own mistakes.

In response to some post structural critiques, I remain comfortable with Schwandt's (1997) position that,

... ethnographic interpretations matter even if they cannot be absolutely certain but only at best contingent or conditional in many ways, corrigible, rhetorically crafted, politically motivated, and imaginatively offered." (306)

However, there may be a fine line between this and being "a trickster, a sophist, and a politician" (Bochner and Ellis 1996: 22). It is important that the ethnographer maintains the integrity of the social sciences by producing the most accurate and useful data for promoting social justice while remembering Scheper-Hughes' admonition that "Not to look, not to touch, not to record, can be the hostile act..." (1992: 28).

Acknowledgements: I am most appreciative for the feedback given to me on this paper by Stephen Meredith, Stephen Harris and Sandi Hudspith; and also to the Cooperative Research Centre for Aboriginal and Tropical Health which funded my attendance at this conference.

References


Appendix


Naomi had spent an entire phonics lesson unsuccessfully bidding to be chosen to provide a 'b' word: then, when she offered an answer it was not ratified. Shortly after, her friend Sally (Anglo) received elaborate public praise for her work. Mrs Eyers then handed Sally her book saying, 'If it stays that way, I'll be proud of you!' Naomi, who was sitting on the carpet with the rest of the class waiting for her news book, immediately interjected, 'And me too, Mrs. Eyers? And me too?' Mrs Eyers replied, without looking up, as she ruled up the next book, 'I hope so.' A few seconds later as Mrs Eyers was writing in Rebecca's book, Naomi asked, 'Mrs Eyers, do you like my stuff?' Mrs Eyers said firmly, looking down at the page, 'Er, Ronald (Anglo), I can hear your voice'. Naomi repeated her question. Mrs Eyers looked up at Sandy (Anglo), who had come to ask her a question, and answered it. When Mrs Eyers began to write in Naomi's book, Naomi asked her, 'Miss Eyers, I mean Mrs Eyers, do you like my stuff?' Mrs Eyers leaned over, looking closely at Naomi and Bruce (Anglo) who were the only students left on the carpet, and told them not to press too heavily with their new lead pencils or they would have them confiscated. She handed Naomi her pencil and book. Naomi said, 'Thanks' and began to walk away, but then turned around, held up her book at the previous day's page so it faced the teacher, and she asked, 'Mrs Eyers, do you like that? (pause) Mrs Eyers, do you like that?' Mrs Eyers glanced at Naomi's book, then bent down to pick up Bruce's pencil from the tin and started to write in his book. Naomi walked back to her table unsmiling.

When Naomi had sat down at her table, she asked Sally if she liked her work. Sally glanced at it and nodded that she did. Not long after, when Sally praised Bruce's work, Naomi looked at her frowning and said, 'I hate you!' Shortly after that she pointed to Ian's (Anglo) book next to her and said, 'I hate that!' (page 614 from thesis).
An Undebated Conundrum in the Ethics of Classroom Research: The Conflicting rights of Researcher, Teacher and Student within an Agenda of Reform.

Merridy Malin
Senior Lecturer
Faculty of Science, Information Technology and Education
Northern Territory University
PO Box 795
Alice Springs, NT 0871

Australian Association for Research in Education
and
New Zealand Association for Research in Education
Combined Annual Conference, at the Melbourne Convention Centre,
29 November - 2 December, 1999