

INTRODUCTION

There is a well established need to maintain high ethical standards in the conduct of social research, such that principles of justice and respect are upheld and the people involved are protected from harm. Much of the focus of ethical discussion concerns the protection of research participants - the need to ensure that they are fully informed and participate freely in a project, that their confidentiality will be protected, and their dignity and autonomy respected at all times (ESRC Framework for Research Ethics, 2010). The role and protection of researchers is also of key concern. However, ethical considerations also arise in relation to institutions, funders, project partners (e.g. service providers), recruitment 'gatekeepers', and family and community members (albeit the views, interests and need for protection of these varied 'stakeholders' are not of equal weight and are usually accorded less priority). Ethical considerations are wide ranging; they are not discrete activities but permeate the design and conduct of social research. Indeed, they have implications for every area of the research process, from the formulation of research questions through to the presentation of findings (Mauthner et al, 2002).

In this guide we focus on the ethical considerations that arise in the conduct of Qualitative Longitudinal (QL) research (see guide no. 18 for an overview of the ethics of QL data archiving and re-use). We have located our discussion in the broader context of qualitative research practice, and indeed, of social research more generally (ESRC, 2010). The core issues and principles are the same in each case, and those concerning the protection of participants have been extensively documented in the research literature. However, as Wiles (2012) observes, it is helpful to re-work familiar issues in new research contexts. While the ethical considerations explored here are not exclusive to QL research, the process of conducting qualitative research longitudinally, often over substantial periods of time, heightens particular ethical issues, while the engagement with time as a topic of enquiry raises specific ethical considerations. The challenges are magnified in relation to the tenor, flux and recurrent nature of the QL research process, requiring ethical reasoning and practice to be temporally situated. In this guide we provide a brief overview of these complexities, drawing on insights generated from the projects in Timescapes, and with reference to related accounts of ethical practice in QL research (Birch and Miller, 2002; Miller and Bell, 2002; Morrow, 2009; Wiles, 2012).

KEY POINTS

- Ethical considerations that are common to social research are magnified in QL designs, where data generation and analysis and interpretation are cumulative processes. Time is a complicating factor, but also a resource for facilitating ethical practice.
- Ethical practice in QL research benefits from a two pronged approach. The first, a pro-active strategy, involves developing a bespoke ethical protocol for a project, which can be derived from pre-existing principles and frameworks. The second, a re-active strategy, involves ethical decision making in unforeseen circumstances. The likelihood of such unanticipated occurrences increases over the extended time frames of QL inquiry.
- Temporal ethics requires key considerations (around consent, the care of participants, confidentiality, and the representation of lives) to be negotiated and revisited over time, and viewed as ongoing processes
- Care of participants and the sustaining of relationships between researchers and participants is a central consideration in QL research: this is embedded in each phase of the research process, from recruitment and data generation to analysis and dissemination.
- QL research with groups (e.g. families or organisations) or where a sample of participants takes on a group identity, require special consideration, particularly around the issues of ongoing consent and internal confidentiality.
- Reflexive practices can aide the management of ethical dilemmas within QL research and help to build a knowledge bank of good ethical practice for the benefit of other researchers.

ISSN 2049-923X (Online)

THE ETHICS OF RESEARCHING LIVES QUALITATIVELY THROUGH TIME

Timescapes methods guide series **2012**

Guide No.11

Bren Neale & Esmee Hanna



SERIES EDITORS
Bren Neale & Karen Henwood

BACKGROUND

While the field of research ethics is well established, ideas about the ethical conduct of research are continually open to new reflections and refinements. The existence of broad sets of ethical principles that researchers can draw on and adapt for specific research designs and topics can be very useful (see Wiles, 2012 for an up to date review of ethical frameworks, including regulatory frameworks). Pre-existing frameworks can help researchers to think through the ethical dilemmas and challenges that they are likely to face. At the same time, our approach in Timescapes reflects a commitment to situated and emergent ethics, in preference to principle- or rule-based ethics – for example those that are contractual in nature. This is based on the view that ethical practices cannot be fully determined a priori, for they are context specific and require a sensitive appraisal of local circumstances and sensibilities. Indeed, ethical dilemmas need to be dealt with through ‘careful judgement based on practical knowledge and attention to detail in context of time and place’ (Edwards and Mauthner, 2002: 27). Researcher reflexivity – the process of sharing reflections on the research process and how data and findings are produced (Henwood 2008) - is an important dimension of this process. The notion of emergent ethics has particular relevance for longitudinal enquiry because it entails engaging with ethical issues as they arise and as ongoing processes, with scope to reconfigure ethical protocols and refine practices as a study unfolds (Wiles, 2012).

It may be useful here to draw a distinction between pro-active and re-active strategies. The first involves formulating bespoke ethical protocols for individual projects at the design stage, drawing on pre-existing ethical frameworks and moulding them to particular purposes. This ensures that ethical practice is not divorced from broader ethical and moral principles (Wiles, 2012). The second involves careful ethical decision making when unanticipated events or dilemmas arise in the research process. These may lead to refinements in ethical practice and broader changes in the ethical grounding of a study. We give examples of both below.

QL research adds new complexities to the ethical conduct of research. Well established ethical considerations, such as informed consent and confidentiality, take on new meaning when considered as long term processes. Similarly, the elongated time frames for empirical research create long term relationships between researchers and participants that need careful consideration over time. Research team work is also elongated in ways that requires care, not only in managing risks in long term fieldwork, but in terms of developing and sustaining research roles and relationships, considerations around the career trajectories and life transitions of contract researchers, and age and generational issues that affect academic livelihoods. Within Timescapes, collaborative working that acknowledged such concerns emerged as an important methodological and ethical commitment (Neale et al, 2012).

In what follows we outline a number of ethical considerations concerning the evolving relationship between researchers and research participant, and how best to protect and respect participants over the long term, while enabling their participation and their voices to be heard. The specific issues covered are consent as an ongoing process; the ethical sustaining of relationships between researchers and research participants, including group relationships; confidentiality in long term research and the ethical representation of lives in the construction and display of research data. We conclude by examining strategies for decision making when unexpected ethical dilemmas arise.

CONSENT AS AN ONGOING PROCESS

Gaining consent in QL research is not a one off task but an ongoing process (Birch and Miller, 2002). This in itself creates some challenges: consent may be differently ‘informed’ when the future direction of a project may be flexible and subject to change, and a continual revisiting of consent may become a burden on participants and create instability. Being transparent about the aims of a research project, and the anticipated outcomes and impact, is generally regarded as good practice. In a QL context this also means being transparent about the longitudinal design of a study and the long term commitment needed from participants. QL researchers employ a range of strategies in addressing ongoing consent. One option is that of refresh and remind – refreshing the ethical context for the research at each wave of data generation, while reminding participants of the parameters of the research and their right to withdraw. This can be achieved through routine checking and updating of either verbal (recorded) or written consent. Information leaflets provided as the basis for consent can be re-issued to participants at each research encounter, and the content modified where needed. An alternative ‘light touch’ approach, which merges ongoing consent with the negotiation of access, involves a simple verbal request for a follow up visit. A third, complementary strategy is to open up exploratory and flexible conversations with participants at key intervals about longer term plans for the research and their involvement in the process (what Birch and Miller (2002) refer to as ‘ethical talk’ or ‘moral conversations’). This has the added benefit of generating feedback from participants about their engagement in a longitudinal study. Researchers also vary in whether or not they integrate consent for participation in a project with consent for archiving data (see guide no. 18 for a more detailed discussion).

There is a fundamental tension evident between efforts to maintain a sample over time and the importance of ensuring that participants are properly informed, and have the opportunity to voluntarily withdraw from the research at any point. Where ‘gatekeepers’ such as family members or professional organisations are involved in recruitment, the issues are made more complex; care is needed to ensure that an individual is consenting freely and not being coerced into, or out of participation (Miller and Bell, 2002). Similar considerations arise in relation to payments or the giving of gift vouchers to participants, and whether these are seen as recompense and reward, or, more dubiously, as incentives that may have a coercive effect (Morrow, 2009). Given the time commitments needed from participants in QL research, some reward is often justified, particularly where participants are lacking in resources; indeed an equally important ethical principle is that participants should not be economically exploited through their involvement in research. In two projects in Timescapes, £50 gift vouchers were given at each research encounter to participants who were engaged in lengthy and repeated life history interviews. Finding a way to be transparent at the outset about the giving of such gifts, and to explain their purpose clearly to participants, helps to avoid the potential for coercion.

Over time, care is needed to make clear to participants that they are free to choose not to participate in later interviews or research encounters, even if this results in some attrition. In this regard, the element of time in QL research, and the flexibility this gives in the field, is an important resource. It gives participants the choice to opt out temporarily, with the option to rejoin a study at a later date. This is a commonly reported occurrence in QL research, and would seem to take the pressure off participants when the timing of fieldwork may not mesh well with changing events or circumstances in their lives.

The Young Lives and Times project underwent some transformations and breaks in continuity over time, including new sources of funding and modifications to institutional affiliations, new research questions, refinements in methods, the addition of a new sub-sample, and changes in researchers. Maintaining a central identity for a project over time is essential, but for this study it was a challenge, given these transformations. The original sample of young people was kept informed of changes through newsletters and cards sent to home addresses. With the arrival of new researchers, letters of introduction were sent, containing photographs and short biographies. The parents had initially given consent for the participation of their children (then aged 13), although their subsequent consent was not legally required. However, ongoing parental involvement varied considerably, and it was clear that some parents valued direct communication and updates from the project team. This was important to maintain the confidence of the family in the core ethical principles of informed consent, confidentiality and respect. In one case, the team failed to communicate directly with a 'gatekeeper' mother, who was concerned for her daughter when a new male researcher was recruited. Despite the best efforts of the team to reassure the mother and to convey the credentials of the new researcher, this resulted in the loss of the young participant to the project (although she retained the right to opt back in at a later date). In the aftermath, the team modified its strategy for communicating with the families. Care is needed to fully communicate changes in project design and orientation to all family members and other stakeholders, if consent is to be properly informed and renewed. Where there is a change in researcher, a personal introduction and hand over may be preferable to a written approach.

Setting and maintaining ethical boundaries around support and over involvement are heightened further when working with hard-to-reach and vulnerable participants (Hemmerman, 2010):

The Intergenerational Exchange project involved repeat interviews with grandparents on a low income housing estate. In such settings, trust can be fragile and subject to change over time. There was a need to be continuously flexible and 'field ready' to gain access, while sample maintenance became a continuous process of frequent, informal visits that ran the risk of intrusion. Responding ethically to need in such settings may lead to over-involvement in the provision of support. Prior to an interview, it was not uncommon for the researcher to help sweep up and go to the corner shop to buy milk. The usual boundaries of relationship maintenance were severely challenged in this study and issues of emotional risk were heightened for the researcher. The project raised questions about the 'depth' of access that should be maintained with disadvantaged groups and the need to clarify the limits of researcher support at the outset (Hemmerman, 2010).

The question of how much and what kind of support may be legitimately provided as part of an ongoing, reciprocal relationship needs to be worked out in relation to local circumstances and contexts. A central consideration concerns the need to be open and realistic about the levels of support that can be provided and the likely outcomes of the research – this will ensure that participants' expectations will not be raised inappropriately, either in the short or longer term (Morrow 2009). In the baseline study of young fathers (part of Young Lives and Times) a young participant repeatedly expressed the wish to enter higher education, but had no knowledge of how to do so. After consulting with the team and the practitioner gatekeeper, the researcher adopted the stance of 'friendly professional' to advise the young man, and, as a result he enrolled on a full time degree programme. The risk of influencing the life chances of this participant – a central focus of this research - was over-ridden by the ethical need to provide appropriate support as part of an ongoing research relationship.

The possibility of a disjuncture occurring between ethical research protocols and what happens in practice is not uncommon in social research. However, as the case above shows, this possibility is heightened in longitudinal research, particularly in large scale enquiry, where the passage of time may weaken or disrupt the seamless continuity of a project (Morrow, 2009).

SUSTAINING ETHICAL RELATIONSHIPS IN THE FIELD: CREATING BOUNDARIES AND BALANCING SUPPORT AND DISTANCE.

In prospective QL studies, which track individuals and groups in real time, fieldwork may take place over many months or years. Methodologically, this requires consideration of how to maintain a sample over time. Ethically, the question becomes one of how to sustain and nurture long term research relationships in a manner that builds trust and reciprocity, but does not lead to over dependence, intrusion or neglect, to the detriment of either researcher or researched (Birch and Miller 2002; Morrow 2009). Managing these relationships over time requires consideration of how to maintain professional boundaries, while allowing opportunities for researcher disclosure and reciprocal offers of help and assistance to flow from researcher to participant (Hemmerman, 2010). Across Timescapes, individual projects and researchers, working with different substantive topics and constituencies of participants, managed these interactions and balances differently; there is no prescriptive approach that works for all researchers in all research contexts.

In her doctoral project on the lived experience of welfare reform, Patrick shared basic information about her life with participants, and gave some rudimentary benefits advice, as she had practitioner experience as a welfare rights adviser. This was seen as a central part of the reciprocal offer and it would have felt un-ethical to refrain from providing advice where it could materially benefit the participant. The potential drawback of influencing participants' experiences of welfare was outweighed by the ethics of developing a degree of personal involvement and trust, which helped to sustain supportive research relationships. At the same time the researcher made clear the limits of her own capacity to provide any additional support or to maintain relationships beyond the end of her project. She also made clear her limitations in influencing welfare policies as an outcome of the project – something that had initially motivated some of the participants to take part in the research. Patrick also took the time to support the 'gatekeeper' organisations that had helped in sample recruitment. She attended key events and gave reciprocal help with their broader programme of work, becoming an active stakeholder over the longer term (Patrick, Methods guide no. 3).

In the examples above, the support offered was clearly defined and bounded; this helped to ensure that the purpose of the research was

not misconstrued by participants, and that the line between 'research' and 'intervention' was not breached (Morrow, 2009).

Where involvement with a sample is due to cease at the end of a longitudinal project, a clear and transparent exit strategy from the field is also needed. This will help both researchers and participants, who may have built up valued relationships within the group over time, and developed a distinctive identity as part of a long term study. In these circumstances, it is important to mark the closure of a project, or the current phase of a project where there is the possibility of a longer term follow up (Morrow, 2009).

THE ETHICS OF RESEARCHING GROUPS OVER TIME

.....

Where QL designs involve the study of groups rather than individuals, further ethical considerations may arise, particularly around individual versus collective consent to participate, and that of internal or network confidentiality. Groups such as families or organisations may be the unit of analysis, or the sample itself may take on a group identity and be brought together at regular intervals via focus groups or other events, or through shared web spaces. Such strategies are common in QL research for they can help to keep samples engaged, but work is needed to instil the values of internal confidentiality as a benefit to all. A common approach is to issue ethical guidelines that participants can sign up to, to prevent disclosure of identities (Patrick Methods guide no. 3).

The intergenerational design of the Work and Family Lives project involved bringing children and parents together for group interviews, as well as conducting individual interviews. A number of ethical issues arose, such as how best to ensure confidentiality for individual family members, how to handle potential tensions in the group interview setting, and how to give space for children's less powerful voices to be heard. The researchers found that a family interview could open up particular issues and cause emotional distress to family members in ways that could not have been foreseen. For example, an innocuous question about a recent family event raised a difficult topic (the parent's separation) that the family members did not wish to disclose or discuss with the researcher at that time. Having strategies in place to mitigate harm in the aftermath of such incidents is necessary, and requires particular skills on the part of the researcher. Care was also needed to ensure that information previously imparted in confidence to the researcher in a one to one interview was not revealed to the group (see Harden et al, 2010; and MacLean and Harden, guide no. 8 for a more detailed discussion).

A QL study of third sector organisations revealed some of the same issues around confidentiality and group dynamics over time, and over the disclosure of information affecting the group (see Macmillan et al, guide no. 15). In this case, there was a lack of clarity over who had the authority to confer access within an organisation and who should be approached to give consent when researchers were revisiting for follow up interviews. Participation had to be renegotiated at both an individual and organisational level – a dual ongoing consent process was necessary. The design of the project meant that the identities of participant organisations could not be kept entirely confidential

from one another, creating the need for strong trusting relationships to be built to ensure that case study data would not be shared across potentially competing organisations. The temporal flexibility of the research brought some advantages for both researchers and participants in managing sensitive information. Troubling events or issues that occurred within an organisation during or around the time of a fieldwork visit, did not need to be opened up or dealt with in the pressure of the moment, but could be discussed at a later date, in retrospect, when the dust had settled.

It is clear that when researchers revisit particular families or communities they are not going into neutral situations - circumstances are perpetually changing in ways that can have significant impact on lives and on the dynamics of research interactions (Morrow, 2009). Where researchers witness or open up particular problems or troubles, the strategy of letting the dust settle, and inviting (and reporting on) reflections on such matters at a later date is effective. This flexibility in the timing of sensitive disclosures, made possible in QL enquiry, can be beneficial to both participants and to researchers and to the ethical sustaining of research relationships (see Macmillan et al, guide no. 15).

REPRESENTING LIVES OVER TIME- BALANCING CONFIDENTIALITY AND AUTHENTICITY

.....

Finding ways to represent people's lives in the analysis and display of research data and dissemination of findings is an ethical issue in all social research. The representational process comes into play in varied contexts: the production of descriptive and analytical case studies; academic presentations; publications targeted at different audiences; the preparation and display of data in archives, public exhibitions, and on websites; and media reporting. Decisions about the representation of people's lives are context specific - different approaches will be needed for these different forms of output.

Most discussions on this topic focus on published outputs and how they may pose risks to people's lives, futures, reputations and relationships (Morrow 2009). However, less attention has been paid to how participants are represented in the analytical production and display of data – these are phases of the research process that are extended and become more visible in longitudinal research. Ethical practice requires a balance between, on the one hand, preserving confidentiality and otherwise protecting participants, (through altering data or placing controls on its use), and, on the other, preserving the integrity of people's accounts (see guide no. 18 for a more detailed discussion). In QL research, the ethics of this balance is complicated by the ongoing relationships of trust and respect between researcher and participant, and by the cumulative creation of case study data that is particularly revealing of individual lives and, potentially, people's identities (Colthart and Henwood 2012).

This is further complicated in QL research because of the way that time, and different time frames, are woven into the research process. This may open up new vistas for participants - for either good or ill. For example, when participants document the present, imagine the future or revisit the past, researchers may take these versions of events back to them at a later date to reflect on changes in their perceptions or circumstances over time (see Thomson, guide no. 13 for a discussion of recursive interviewing). Building time as a topic of enquiry into the research in these ways needs careful handling, for it may pose emotional risks for participants in overwriting or revisiting the past, or reconstructing the future. These time frames are not fixed

in people's lives but continually open to re-interpretation as individuals selectively remember, change plans or modify aspirations (for a discussion of these issues in relation to the scrutiny of lives in life history interviewing, see Miller, 2000). Walkerdine and her colleagues found that capturing a version of a life that is then replayed back to participants, even in the short term, may be unsettling. It may bring home a reality that they do not necessarily wish to be confronted with in such a stark and 'fixed' way, or to share with researchers.

In the 4.21 longitudinal study of changing modes of femininity (Walkerdine et al, 2001; Pini and Walkerdine, 2011), participants in the final phase of the project were invited to use video diaries to generate data about their everyday lives. The rationale was that this method would be less invasive and more empowering for the young women, enabling them to generate data unmediated by the researcher, and to 'show' their lives rather than necessarily speak about them. In the event, these rationales proved to be problematic. Some of the young women from less affluent backgrounds were uncomfortable with this exercise and, on playing back the material they had recorded, chose to delete much or all of the content before handing the tapes back to the researchers. There were background concerns about being subjected to a subtle form of surveillance, through the normative gaze of middle class psychologists. How the young women were represented in the diaries generated a sense of shame about their accents and surroundings, and a wish not to appear 'common' to their audience of researchers.

This raises a broader issue relating to the ethical representation and status of data – whose data is it, which 'voices', and which versions of events carry authenticity? (for both researcher and participant interpretations may shift over time). There are no easy answers to these questions, but it is clear that tensions may exist between opting for gritty realism (showing it like it is), or 'massaging' data in ways that may sanitise it and give it a more positive gloss for the benefit of participants (Allred, 1998). Where data is generated by participants themselves, as in the example above, these issues are further complicated (see Bytheway, guide no. 7 on the ethics of using highly sensitive material from written diaries generated by participants). A broad principle that researchers may try to adhere to is that of preserving some degree of 'fit' between the accounts given by participants, and the accounts produced by researchers. This was certainly the case for the oral historians in Timescapes, who adhered to strong principles around the ownership of the data, the rights of the participants and the ethical principles of shared authority (see Bornat, guide no. 12).

The ethical representation of lives in the analytical process has been explored in some detail in the Making the Long View project (Henderson et al, 2012; and Henderson, methods guide no. 6). The team has constructed extremely long longitudinal case histories, gathered over a decade in multiple waves of interviews. The production of these analytical case histories requires considerable contextual understanding and detail on individual lives, yet this detail might compromise protection and reveal the identities of participants. Indeed, confidentiality may be difficult to maintain where data gathered at different points in time, or across family groupings, is brought together to construct case histories. Such data can also reveal inconsistencies and silences (missing data) across cumulative accounts gathered in waves (Harden et al., 2010), raising questions about its ethical interpretation and representation for both primary and secondary use.

In Making the Long View the ethical questions of confidentiality, privacy and anonymity, heightened by long term relationships between researcher and participant, further complicate the representational process. So does the inevitable inclusion of the researcher in the data, as researcher and research process become increasingly reflexive. The nature of the data raised awareness of all the voices to be woven into the accounts - the participant, the interviewer/researcher and the other analysts within the team and their changing reflections and interpretations over time. Aiming for 'thick descriptions' that drew directly on the participants' own words and style of speaking, the team experimented with ways of making these voices explicit. QL research both increases the ethical commitment and responsibility for giving voice to participants, whilst protecting them from unlooked-for exposure; it therefore requires a more nuanced approach to representing all voices involved in the research process. The case history method under development in this team is ideally suited to this task.

A further example concerns the display of research data in public exhibitions. Where such events are likely to be attended by the research participants, great vigilance is needed in addressing issues of confidentiality and authentic representation. In one such event, photographs of a sample of young people from the Young Lives and Times project were displayed with the faces blurred. However, feedback gathered from the participants through a video box evaluation of the event, held later in the day, revealed that they did not wish for their identities to be obscured in this way – they wished for their lives to count, in an authentic manner. Consulting with the young people prior to the exhibition would have been a better strategy. Presenting excerpts from interviews in public spaces also needs special care - a balance needs to be struck between preserving authentic details and revealing sensitive and possibly negative information about a life. In a follow up exhibition, participants were consulted over the display of data from their interviews. This was necessary to enable the team to reconcile the messages from the research with an ethically acceptable representation of the participants' lives.

The example above raises the further issue of who decides what is best, and whether the participants (in this case young people) have sufficient knowledge about what the exposure of their lives could mean. In response to participants' wishes, an increasing trend has been noted toward authenticity and the identification of participants in research, in preference to anonymising or otherwise altering data (Wiles, 2012). Consulting with participants over how they wish to be represented in different contexts is a valuable practice (Wiles, 2012), ensuring that the issues around identification and authenticity can be fully explored, and decisions jointly reached and agreed. The longitudinal time frames for QL enquiry can facilitate such a process.

BUILDING STRATEGIES FOR ETHICAL RESEARCH PRACTICE

The examples given above show the care and attention needed by QL researchers in developing ethical practices in a context where there are ongoing relationships between researchers and participants, and illustrate the situated and emergent nature of ethical decision making. Our final example shows the ways in which ethical dilemmas may be resolved through consultation and situated decision making, illustrating the reflexivity that Timescapes researchers have employed in their ethical practice (Wiles, 2012). This example also reveals how the issues outlined above - those relating to ongoing consent, family dynamics, confidentiality and the ethical representation of lives - may merge in complex ways over the extended time frames of QL research.

The Ethics of Archiving 'Family' Data

A process of working out 'the proper thing to do' can be facilitated by consultation on ethical issues and the sharing of good practice. In 2009, Edwards and Weller consulted with their advisory group and the Timescapes team on an ethical issue that had arisen in the Siblings and Friends project (Weller and Edwards, 2012; see also Wiles, 2012). Following the unexpected death of a teenage participant, who had given verbal consent for archiving, the team considered whether further consent was needed from the family and whether any data could be made available to family members in a way that would not violate confidentiality or cause harm.

A strategy was worked out in the context of knowledge about the particular family. The team visited and consulted with the young man's mother. Following this discussion, the mother was presented with a CD of selected recordings from her son's interview material – those relating to positive aspects of his life, such as his hobbies and work ambitions, and that did not reveal sensitive information. The mother was also able to record her memories of her son, which now form part of the archived material. The process of ethical consultation in this case was documented on the Timescapes website (www.timescapes.leeds.ac.uk/), as a valuable contribution to the ethical knowledge bank that is growing for QL research.

This example shows that while ethical dilemmas cannot be anticipated at the outset, it is worth devising strategies to guide decision making as and when they arise. Several models have been formulated to help researchers (reported in Wiles, 2012). Drawing on the work of Israel and Hay (2006), a 'belt and braces' model may cover a number of discrete stages. These include clear identification of the problem and the stakeholders involved; consulting with appropriate individuals or a network that is already in place; thinking through varied options, their consequences for each stakeholder, and the longer term implications of these options for the research; considering this situated knowledge against a backdrop of broad ethical and moral principles; documenting the course of action decided upon and its outcome; and reflecting upon the issue and what may be learned from it. Contributing to the knowledge bank through such documentation is good practice and valuable for other researchers.

CONCLUSION

QL research requires a pro-active approach to research ethics, drawing on general ethical principles that can be adapted and situated within a temporal framework. Given the extended time frames for QL research, there is an increased likelihood that ethical dilemmas will arise in unforeseen ways as the research unfolds. These dilemmas may take many forms, and may relate to changes in the research environment or unanticipated changes in the circumstances of researchers, participants or other stakeholders. It is helpful, therefore, to have strategies in place to re-actively address and respond to such dilemmas as and when they arise. A central concern in QL research relates to the care of participants and the evolving relationship between participants and researchers. It is worth acknowledging that 'walking alongside' people as their lives unfold inevitably touches the lives of both participants and researchers. Research participants remain highly visible in QL enquiry, not simply in fieldwork settings but in the construction of the data, requiring particular care in the representation of their lives.

While the longer time frame for QL enquiry magnifies the challenges of research ethics, time also operates as a resource. We have seen how the cyclical nature of field encounters can give flexibility concerning when participants may engage in the research process – with choices about opting out and opting back in at a later date. This same flexibility operates in relation

to the disclosure of difficult or sensitive issues, giving participants the option to explore these in retrospect or when trust has developed with the researcher. The sustained involvement of participants in a study facilitates the process of consulting with them and reaching an agreement about the best ways to represent their lives in different contexts and research outputs – whether to use disguises to protect confidentiality, or to enable their lives to go on record without alteration. Whatever decisions are reached, aiming for some degree of shared authority is likely to create a better fit between the accounts of participants and those of researchers.

A concern with research ethics is seen in some quarters as 'ethics creep', a gradual move towards highly regulated systems, or, alternatively, a growing pre-occupation that runs the danger of overriding or overwhelming the substantive focus of a study (Wiles, 2012). However it is simply not possible to take ethics out of the equation or sideline the issues they raise. Ongoing dialogue and effective communication with research participants over the rationale and direction of a QL study, the methods used, strategies for dissemination, and their part in these processes, are necessary elements in the effective conduct of a study. Allowing time for these processes is essential if QL research is to be effectively grounded in the broad ethical principles of justice, respect and the avoidance of harm.

REFERENCES

- Aldred, P.** (1998). 'Ethnography and Discourse Analysis: Dilemmas in representing the voices of children'. In Jane Ribbens and Rosalind Edwards. (eds). *Feminist Dilemmas in Qualitative Research*. London: Sage. pp 147-170
- Birch, M. and Miller, T.** (2002). 'Encouraging Participation: Ethics and responsibilities'. In. Melanie Mauthner, Maxine Birch, Julie Jessop and Tine Miller. (eds.). *Ethics in Qualitative Research*. London: Sage pp 91-106
- Colthart, C. and Henwood, K.** (2012) On Paternal Subjectivity: A Qualitative Longitudinal and psycho-social analysis of men's classed positions and transitions to first time fatherhood. *Qualitative Research*. Special issue on Timescapes.
- Edwards, R. and Mauthner, M.** (2002). 'Ethics and Feminist Research: Theory and practice'. In Melanie Mauthner, Maxine Birch, Julie Jessop and Tine Miller. (eds.). *Ethics in Qualitative Research*. London: Sage pp 14-31
- Economic and Social Research Council.** (2010). Framework for Research Ethics. www.esrc.ac.uk
- Harden, J., Backett-Milburn, K., Hill, M. and Maclean, A.** (2010). 'Oh, what a tangled web we weave: Experiences of doing 'Multiple Perspectives' Research in Families'. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*. 13(5) pp 441-452
- Hemmerman, L.** (2010). 'Researching the Hard to Reach and the Hard to Keep: Notes from the field on Longitudinal Sample Maintenance'. In Fiona Shirani and Susie Weller. (eds.). *Conducting Qualitative Longitudinal Research: Fieldwork Experiences*. Timescapes Working Paper Series no.2. [Online]. Available at:www.timescapes.leeds.ac.uk
- Henderson, S. Holland, J. McGrellis, S. Sharpe, S. and Thomson, R.** (2012). 'Storying Qualitative Longitudinal Research: sequence, voice and motif'. *Qualitative Research*. Special Issue on Timescapes, 12 (1) pp 16-34
- Henwood, K** (2008) Qualitative Research, Reflexivity and Living with Risk: Valuing and practicing epistemic reflexivity and centring marginality *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 5: 45-55.
- Israel, M. and Hay, I.** (2006). *Research Ethics for Social Scientists*. London: Sage.
- Mauthner, M., Birch, M., Jessop, J. and Miller, T.** (2002). (eds.). *Ethics in Qualitative Research*. London: Sage.
- Miller, R.** (2000). *Researching Life Stories and Family Histories*. London: Sage
- Miller, T. and Bell, L.** (2002). 'Consenting to What? Issues of Access, Gate-Keeping and Informed Consent'. In Melanie Mauthner, Maxine Birch, Julie Jessop and Tine Miller. (eds.). *Ethics in Qualitative Research*. London: Sage pp 53-69
- Morrow, V.** (2009). *The Ethics of Social Research with Children and Families in Young Lives: Practical Experiences*. Young Lives Working Paper Series: no 53. www.younglives.org.uk/
- Neale, B. Henwood, K. and Holland, J.** (2012). 'Researching Lives through Time: The Timescapes Approach'. *Qualitative Research*, Special issue on Timescapes 12 (1), 1-15.
- Pini, M. and Walkerdine, V.** (2011). 'Girls on Film: Video Diaries as Auto-Ethnographies'. In Paula Reavey (ed.) *Visual Methods in Psychology: Using and Interpreting Images in Qualitative Research* London: Routledge.
- Walkerdine, V. Lucey, H. and Melody, J.** (2001). *Growing Up Girl: Psycho-social explorations of Gender and Class*. London: Palgrave Macmillan
- Weller, S. and Edwards, R.** (2012). 'The Death of a Participant: Ethical Dilemmas in Qualitative Longitudinal Research with Young People'. In te Riele, K. and Brooks, R. (eds.). *Resolving Ethical Challenges in Youth Research*. Abingdon: Routledge
- Wiles, R.** (2012, in press). *What are Qualitative Research Ethics?* London: Bloomsbury Academic.

RESEARCH TEAM CONTACT DETAILS

Bren Neale: b.neale@Leeds.ac.uk

With thanks to Janet Holland and David Grainger