STUDIES IN EDUCATIONAL ETHNOGRAPHY

# Ethics, Ethnography and Education

EDITED BY

Lisa Russell, Ruth Barley
and Jonathan Tummons

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# Studies in Educational Ethnography

**Series Editor: Professor Rodney Hopson, University of Illinois-Urbana Champaign, USA**

*Studies in Educational Ethnography* presents original research monographs and edited volumes based on ethnographic perspectives, theories and methodologies. Such research will advance the development of theory, practice, policy and praxis for improving schooling and education in neighbourhood, community and global contexts.

In complex neighbourhood, community and global contexts, educational ethnographies should situate themselves beyond isolated classrooms or single sites and concern themselves with more than narrow methodological pursuits. Rather, the ethnographic research, perspectives and methodologies featured in this series extend our understandings of sociocultural educational phenomena and their global and local meanings.

# Ethics, Ethnography and Education

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United Kingdom – North America – Japan – India – Malaysia – China

Emerald Publishing Limited
Howard House, Wagon Lane, Bingley BD16 1WA, UK

First edition 2022



**British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data**
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-83982-247-6 (Print)
ISBN: 978-1-80071-008-5 (Online)
ISBN: 978-1-80071-010-8 (Epub)


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Certificate Number 1985
ISO 14001

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# About the Editors

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**Poonam Sharma** has been a Teacher Educator and Ethnographer at the Tata Institute of Social Science, India, since 2018. She teaches courses in the areas of Curriculum Studies, Childhood Studies and Qualitative Research. Her doctoral research was a year-long ethnographic work focusing on the educational experiences of children in the context of low fee-paying private schools. The study focused on how disadvantaged families support their child's schooling. It brought together the new sociological perspectives on childhood and ethnographic expertise for understanding families and schooling. Her research was supported by the National Council of Educational Research and Training, India Doctoral fellowship award. She is a recipient of the DAAD Student Exchange Program Fellowship for the year 2010 (Desutscher Akadmischer Austausch Dienst, 2010). Her research interests include Pre-service teacher education programmes, Low fee-paying private schools, Childhood Studies, Ethnography and Private Supplementary Tutoring.

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**Matilda Ståhl** is Doctor of Philosophy with education as major subject. She defended her doctoral thesis in December 2021 and is currently working as a post-doctoral researcher and university teacher at Åbo Akademi University, Finland. Her research is focused on identity (co)construction online/offline within an educational context. The ethno-case study discussed in the current chapter, co-authored with Dr Fredrik Rusk, is part of her thesis.

**Yang Zhao** is currently engaged in a PhD in Education in Scottish country dancing at the University of Edinburgh (funded by China Scholarship Council). She graduated with Cohort 2016 Choreomundus – International Master in Dance Knowledge, Practice, and Heritage in 2018. The Erasmus Mundus joint master was awarded by four partnership universities: Norwegian University of Science and Technology (Norway), Université Clermont Auvergne (France), Szegedi Tudományegyetem (Hungary) and Roehampton University London (UK). While enrolled in an MSc in Dance Science and Education at the University of Edinburgh in 2016, she was actively engaged in learning Scottish dancing.

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# Series Preface

The edited book by Lisa Russell, Ruth Barley and Jonathan Tummons, *Ethics, ethnography, and education*, presents timely and prescient contributions to topics for the novice and accomplished educational ethnographers who wrestle with questions of ethics. Within nine chapters, the ten contributors provide a landscape of challenges and complexities of shifting and responses to ethical dilemmas in the field taken from ethnographers working in the Basque Country, England, Scotland, India, Sweden and the Americas. Within the current context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the nature of fieldwork has changed for the many ethnographers and authors facing this reality. However, the book contributors also provide new ways of thinking and addressing issues related to data ownership, consent, participant representation(s), culture, dissemination of findings and working with unique country and community contexts and populations of study.

This book, volume 17 of the Studies in Educational Ethnography's book series, returns readers to the UK and Europe where the series was founded by Prof. Geoffrey Walford some 15 years earlier. From Walford's introduction to the series through this volume, the book series' primary objective is to present original research monographs or edited volumes based on ethnographic perspectives, theories and methodologies. Such research will advance the development of theory, practice, policy and praxis for improving schooling and education in neighbourhood, community and global contexts. In complex neighbourhood, community and global contexts, educational ethnographies should situate themselves beyond isolated classrooms or single sites and concern themselves with more than narrow methodological pursuits. Russell, Barley, Tummons and colleagues provide a rich and nuanced perspective an everyday ethics in a changing world, illustrating the tensions ethnographers face in managing ethics, translating ethics in multiple sites of engagement, all while paying attention to the most vulnerable, marginalised and young.

The book series is located within the College of Education, University of Illinois-Urbana Champaign. Located in the Quantitative and Qualitative Methodology, Measurement, and Evaluation (QUERIES), Department of Educational Psychology, the College of Education is home to multiple traditions of research and evaluation scholarship in humanities and social sciences for decades. On the campus, the University annually hosts the International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry (ICQI), a venue for qualitative researchers who travel from around the world to the cornfields of Illinois each May.

For more details about the series, we invite you to visit the website or communicate directly with Kim Chadwick (kchadwick@emerald.com) or me (hopson@illinois.edu).

Rodney Hopson
*Series Editor*

Chapter 1

# Is This Ethical? Using This Question as a Starting Point

*Lisa Russell*

## Abstract

This chapter outlines the history of ethical regulation and considers how the position of ethics has shifted. The intent of this book is to explore novice and accomplished ethnographers 'everyday, real-life' ethical challenges and considerations against a backdrop of theoretical and ethical guideline scrutiny.

*Keywords*: Everyday ethics; representation; tensions; voice; process; ethical dilemmas

## Introduction

All ethnographers, whether regarded as novice or expert engaging with education-based research must grapple with questions of ethics. The question of what it means to behave ethically is not isolated from how we engage ourselves as 'researchers' and indeed how we operate as 'ethical beings' within the world (Dennis, 2018). It is not uncommon, in planning or in carrying out research, for the question to arise: is this ethical (Hammersley & Traianou, 2012)? Perhaps, the very first question any researcher should ask themselves before embarking upon any research journey should be this very question. At first glance such a question may seem unproblematic; however, any researcher engaging with participants in the real world knows only too well that the management of good ethical research is a very complex process that differs according to context. Particular ethical challenges related to the intimacy, complexities, and longevity of ethnography mean that many ethnographers need to negate shifting and immediate responses to ethical dilemmas as they occur, as well as consider the longer-term implications related to ownership of data, informed consent and accurate representation of participants, their culture and voices when writing about and disseminating findings in relation to their ethnographic findings.

**Ethics, Ethnography and Education, 1–10**

**doi:10.1108/S1529-210X20220000019001**

This is a book for all educational ethnographers who wish to learn more about the lived experiences of the ethnographer and their participants when engaging with and managing ethics in situ and beyond. The book provides a focus for discussion on how ethnographers working in the Basque Country, England, Scotland, India, Sweden and the Americas define and practise ethics in educational sites. The examples explored are taken from the ethnographers' direct experience in the field, including the ethical challenges posed by the growth of online and virtual ethnographies before and in the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic. Discussions to write this book were born from the Oxford Ethnography and Education Conference, with some chapters being presented there as 'working papers' before Covid-19 hit, whereas other chapters were written in the aftermath of the pandemic when the world and its priorities and day-to-day living changed in the blink of an eye. Some scholars have argued that the pandemic transformed the way in which academics research and thus has shaped some of the subsequent ethical dilemmas that have been experienced. Within this book, educational ethnographers from across the globe reflect on their management of ethics in situ and beyond over a longitudinal, uncertain and intimate nature.

Ethnographers delve into the everyday experiences of their participants and as such are more likely to become involved with their participants and occurrences in the field over a longitudinal, intimate period (Delamont & Atkinson, 2018). Shorter forms of ethnography are increasingly occurring however, largely due to funding and resource constraints, and with this come new ethical challenges that the ethnographer must negotiate both in situ and beyond. Ethnographers build relationships with people to understand cultures, and consequently experience a level of intimacy and unpredictability that is unique to ethnography as a methodological process and product (Russell & Barley, 2020). Based on a variety of international perspectives, this volume brings together methodological, empirical and epistemological debates regarding the current management of ethics, ethnography and education, considering too in some chapters the recent increase in Eurocentric ethical shifts.

This introduction sets the scene by outlining the premises of ethical regulation and the challenges it poses to ethnographers working on a longitudinal and intimate basis, often adopting participatory research methods with different demographic groups across varying social sites of investigation.

## Everyday Ethics in Changing Times

Historically, much of the literature regarding ethics deals with the management of ethical review boards (Dennis, 2009). More recently discussions have shifted to acknowledge that while it may be relatively easy to slip into a stance of cynicism when it comes to the institutionalisation of ethical processes (Ledermann, 2007), we must as ethnographers find ways to more actively change review systems so that they develop and improve with time (Dilger, 2017; Hunter, 2018; Tolich, 2016). Most ethnographers agree that ethnography should not escape ethical scrutiny; rather, we need to re-think ethics in educational ethnography and ensure

it is better subjected to more appropriate and realistic standards (Delamont & Atkinson, 2018; Dennis, 2018). This book takes a reflective view on how ethics works in situ and beyond in relation to working with a variety of groups such as professionals, children and young people, across a number of different virtual and face-to-face platforms using multiple and often participatory research methods both pre and in the advent of Covid-19 times. Ethics and their need to be managed in situ, while simultaneously recognising the participant's voice, are acknowledged. The need to challenge conventional, European/Western forms of informed consent and look at how data ownership works in practice for ethnographers is contextualised within the backlash against the increasing global shift regarding the dominance of the hegemonic approach to research, more recently epitomised by data analytics, that tends to objectify its participants as passive subjects, rather than as active participants within the research process with inherent power, rights and needs – something which is commonly critiqued within indigenous ethic paradigms (Kara, 2018).

A main purpose of this book is to contribute to the ongoing and now long-standing discussion regarding the distinction Smette (2019) makes between Silverman's (2003) notion of 'everyday ethics' and Strathern's (2000) notion of 'formalised ethics'. Everyday ethics is about building trust and field relationships that actively try and reduce power relationships between the ethnographer(s) and participant(s) while formalised ethics is concerned with institutional ethical procedures undertaken before fieldwork commences. The focus of this book is on how the ethnographer manages the 'everyday ethics'. Ethics here is regarded as connected to all dimensions of the research process and shaped by the unpredictable and messiness that ensues from the interactions between the ethnographer and participants. It is about what awkward decisions ethnographers make and how they walk fine lines of judgements within and beyond the field. In ethnography ethical research requires an ongoing and active engagement with people and the culture from which they form a part (Marcus & Lerman, 2018). This book argues that research cannot be rendered ethical by completing a one-off administrative task (Busher & Fox, 2019; Kara, 2018); rather, it requires a move towards a social justice approach to ethics that accounts for the contexts and people with which ethnographers work with and views the ethnographer as an autonomous expert. Silverman (2003) eloquently defines 'everyday ethics' and the relation this may have with the researcher and the researched positionalities, alongside the idea that ethics is about making awkward decision that may not always satisfy all related parties' interests equally:

> Everyday ethics is about crafting a persona and identity that will mutually engage both the researcher and the people, without doing damage to either. Then, it is about the continual need for choices, each day. It is about ambiguity, conflicting interests, fine lines, judgment calls and, therefore, about awkward decisions.
>
> (Silverman, 2003, pp. 127–128)

Tensions often arise regarding how the ethnographer experiences managing ethics in the field (and beyond) with participants and then how ethics is construed in more formalised arenas within academic institutions, places of social site investigation and via the implementation of policy and formal institutional, disciplinary and funding regulation guidelines, such as the implementation of the EU regulation on data protection put in place in the EU from 2018 (the General Data Protection Regulation, GDPR) or development of the British Educational Research Association Ethical Guidelines in 2018. The main gatekeepers to whether or not a study is approved to proceed are variously called research ethics committees (REC's) or institutional review boards (IRBs), seemingly defined as such dependant upon which side of the Atlantic you live (Busher & Fox, 2019). Both of these reinforce the formalisation of the management of ethics, informed consent procedures and stipulate data protection processes including use and storage of data. Such developments have particular consequences for ethnography and opinion is divided, with some arguing that ethical guidelines and regulations act to renew and improve our practice (Fluehr-Lobban, 2003; Hunter, 2018) and others stating that such stringencies have the potential to quash academic freedom and contribute to predetermined ideals about how fieldwork is conducted, and research relationships ensue in ways which sometimes presuppose opposing rather than joint interests (Banks, 2013; Lederman, 2006). It matters who we do our research with. For example, if research is conducted with the vulnerable, marginalised and young, a different set of considerations may need to ensue whereby a one-size-fits-all approach may not be deemed appropriate and may even be viewed as damaging (Albon & Barley, 2021; Pollock, 2012). The inter-related question of how we do our research also matters, with many ethnographers having to negate Covid-19 safe virtual research methods of late that change the very nature of interaction and rapport developed between the researcher and the researched. The requirement to socially distance during the pandemic in order to protect the ethnographer and participants is arguably at odds with the intimacy and need to gain rapport and spend time 'hanging around' in the field – something which lies at the heart of many ethnographers' idea of engaging with ethically sound research.

The advent of Covid-19 has illustrated the need for a flexible approach to ethics, one which shifts according to who we are working with, how and when. Ethical and equity considerations related to issues of representation and inclusion have been once again brought to the forefront, alongside the need for stable internet connection, the recognition of information technology poverty and the shifting power dynamics and positionalities between participants and the ethnographer. Our understanding of working in an ethically sound way has shifted with many questioning their own ethical practices, re-verifying necessary changes with funders and institutions to work in Covid-19 safe ways across different countries that operate different social distancing and wider ethical guideline practices. Indeed, the opportunity to work across different countries has arguably increased of late, but with this comes the need for the ethnographer to manage different countries, as well as different institutional and funding bodies ethical guidelines. Arguably power relations have been up-ended during the

Covid-19 pandemic, whereby children and young people have felt more at ease meeting in less formal spaces, have had more power to disengage by disconnecting, turning their cameras off in virtual interviews and observations and having greater power to choose when and how they partake in research. However, challenges around who is invited to take part in research and how have been noted (Lomax et al., 2021), with gatekeeper access pathways being altered by the pandemic, facilitating the re-production of adult/child power relations with researchers setting research agendas and having the control to mute participants with the press of a button, alongside the concern that lots of children and young people struggled to find 'privacy' in their own home or place of being, with parents and adults interrupting data collection and speaking for rather than with children and young people. Such ethical issues around representation and inclusion occur in situated moments. This book illustrates how some of the procedural ethical guidelines are too rigid and consequently fail to take account of the nuances experienced in practice.

Different countries operate with different yet sometimes overlapping ethical review processes, with some being carried out at the level of the individual institution and handled at national institutions (such as in the UK and Norway) whereas others start at the national level before even considering an individual social site of investigation (such as in New South Wales in Australia). So, ethics is managed differently across different regions, cultures and moments in time at a formalized, institutional level. This needs to be considered even before one delves into the messiness of 'everyday ethics' and how specific ethnographers working within particular organisations, social sites and places with different individuals, groups and cultures manage ethics in often intimate, prolonged (and as a consequence often shifting) circumstances. It is thus important to consider how ethics is implemented in educational ethnography in relation to gaining truly informed consent for those involved with participant observation on a partial and full participating collective, data ownership, power dynamics between the researched, the researcher and amongst the participants themselves and how such processes of data collection may shape the writings and dissemination of ethnography and the implications this may have for the representation of ethnography in past, present and future forms of dissemination (Russell, 2018).

## About This Book

This book therefore looks in-depth at very different educational based settings and offers a reflective and truthful account of how experienced ethnographers managed their 'everyday ethics' in the field and beyond to show the nuances involved when managing ethics in situ and beyond. After reflecting upon the crucial question, 'is this ethical?' within the introduction here, the remainder of the book outline is as follows.

In chapter two, Jonathan Tummons (Durham University, UK) draws on the philosophical anthropology of Bruno Latour to construct an account of the work of research ethics. Through a consideration of the trope of the research

ethics framework as text, he explores the ways in which any such text needs to be accompanied – by people, by processes, by other voices or other texts – in order to become meaningful and then impactful for the ethnographer of education and argues that the symbolic world of research ethics relies on the imaginary as much as the statutory or the political. Research ethics are thus positioned as the technological outcome of a dialogue between politics (the ethical approval process, the guidelines, ethics handbooks, committees and so forth) and imagination (the hypothesised impact of the researcher on the researched, the imagined outcomes of the research for the participant) that are prone to misunderstanding and misinterpretation, notwithstanding the strictures of the processes and policies that increasingly seek to codify the work that ethnographers do in the field.

Chapter 3 outlines how ethnographers experience managing ethics in situ when working with children and young people. Lisa Russell (The University of Huddersfield, England) and Ruth Barley (Sheffield Hallam University, England) reflect on how ethics works in situ by exploring their own education ethnographers' work with children and young people. This chapter argues that education ethnographers need to be reflexive in their consideration of ethics, especially when considering the variable fields of investigation, the closeness, proximity to children and young people over a longitudinal basis and the potential use of a plethora of research methodologies. Ethnography can be varied and unpredictable and as such have key unprecedented consequences for the use of ethics when working with children and young people.

Chapter 4 discusses research ethics in relation to child participation. Poonam Sharma (Tata Institute of Social Sciences, India) reflects on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in a town close to Delhi, India. The research focused on the schooling experiences of children from communities traditionally considered under privileged. It reflects on the ethnographer's experiences of researching with children and the ways in which child participation and research ethics emerged and shifted during the year of fieldwork. The idea of 'child participation' in the research process in the Indian context is explored. Within this context, discourse around ethics seems to be primarily concerned with ideas of consent, gatekeeping and respecting children's rights. This chapter discusses the importance of the cultural contexts of the field in shaping the research ethics and developing what 'child participation' meant for children and their parents within this specific cultural context. It does so by elaborating on contradictions that existed between the way the ethnographer positioned the child and the way children are positioned in families and schools, where children's participation, opinions and consent are often presumed by the parents much more so than in a Euro American context. Within the study, children are viewed as active agents, knowledgeable about their own positions in the research process in conflict with wider views on children and childhood emanating from the cultural context.

Chapter 5 explores ethics from an ethnographic study conducted with Higher Education students located within the Basque Country. Elizabeth Pérez-Izaguirre, Jose Miguel Correa Gorospe and Eider Chaves Gallastegui (University of the Basque Country) consider researcher and participant positionality, alongside the

importance of considering the local ethical regulations for personal data protection. Nowadays most research funders require research projects to be evaluated by an ethical review board, which involves the drafting of an informed consent form that needs to be signed by research participants. Paradoxically, this raises ethical concerns related to participants' position within the field, as they are too often objectified as 'data providers' who do not own the discourse developed alongside them. This chapter argues that ethics should be practised as a collaborative approach whereby knowledge is co-constructed in a research relationship where participants are agents and co-owners of the discourse created around them.

Matilda Ståhl (Åbo Akademi University, Finland) and Fredrik Rusk (Åbo Akademi University, Finland and Nord University, Norway) explore how ethics works in online environments in Chapter 6. Doing ethnography online, partially or entirely, offers tools to better understand aspects of contemporary society in general but also how these online contexts are connected to education (see, e.g., Rusk, 2019; Ståhl & Kaihovirta, 2019). As society evolves, however, new challenges arise for ethnography to claim its position as a methodology for understanding human sociality. The definition of fieldwork is blurred when the ethnographer has constant access to the field from their computer and reaching an emic understanding is more complex when there is no or limited face-to-face interaction with the respondents (Shumar & Madison, 2013). This chapter discusses some of the challenges the authors faced during the process of an ethnographic study within the online multiplayer video game Counter Strike: Global Offensive within an educational context. The struggle to protect the participants' personal information while simultaneously conducting the analysis in a transparent manner is discussed, thus contributing to discussions around how to conduct ethnography online in an ethically sustainable manner.

Chapter 7 derives findings from an ongoing ethnography that aims to explore how people partake in Scottish country dancing in Edinburgh (Scotland) and Lyon (France). Yang Zhao (The University of Edinburgh) explores the differences between online and face-to-face ethnography in the aftermath of Covid-19 when working across different countries inclusive of native and non-native settings. Zhao argues that ethics needs to be managed in situ and issues cannot always be anticipated in advance of data collection: indeed, many projects (including this one) have needed to adapt in the advent of Covid-19. This chapter offers a reflective account of how Zhao managed these changes within the complexities of virtual and face-to-face, as well as across local and international ethnographic fields.

Chapter 8 explores ethical dilemmas and reflections in a collaborative study with children during the pandemic. Diana Milstein (Universidad Nacional del Comahue, Argentina) and Regina Coeli Machado Da Silva (Universidade Estadual do Oeste do Paraná) reflect on how a group of eight researchers from different geographical locations in the Americas understood how, in times of a pandemic, children recognise social spaces related to school, home and virtual activities; how informed consent was managed via the varying use of oral, written,

recorded, drawn, photographed and audio-visual raw data among Latin American children during the pandemic whereby the children's experiences of social isolation in different locations were explored, reflected upon and problematised. These intense exchanges spurred the addition of other methodological strategies for developing virtual encounters in which there was active dialogue between the researchers and children. This strategy, consistent with the context of social isolation and with a transnational scope of the project, generated ethical concerns centred, at first, on the paradoxical coexistence that articulated the proximity of personal interactions with social and geographical distance. Important ethical implications considered within this chapter include the risks of forcing children's collaboration, conditioned by pre-established relationships (of friendship and family); contradictions regarding the 'negative' implications surrounding internet use by children and concerns regarding utilising letters and virtual encounters as ethnographic documents.

Jonathan Tummons (Durham University, UK) concludes the volume with an essay that draws together the themes outlined in the preceding chapters. In this conclusion, he focuses on those aspects of methodological debate that pertain to the ethical conduct of research that are symptomatic of the shifts in ethnography that have characterised the field during the last 20 years: the emergence of online and virtual ethnographies; the foregrounding of the voice of the researched and the decolonisation of the academy; the proliferation of codes of practice and audit cultures within educational research more widely and the subsequent impact on research governance; and the impact of notions of care within the research field. In the conclusions, Jonathan proposes a characterisation of this ethical turn as simultaneously enriching and impoverishing the lived experience of researchers, within a moment that affords new opportunities for ethnography whilst at the same time regulating the work of the ethnographer ever more closely.

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