

Chapter 15: Developing Phrónēsis: Challenges and opportunities

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Abstract

This final chapter examines the authors' reflections, learning and practical adaptations made in response to the four questions which authors were asked to address:

1. What values prompted you to do your research and how did you share these with participants?
2. What were the ethical considerations raised beforehand and how were these tackled in terms of meeting obligations (including to Ethical Review Bodies (ERBs)), maximising benefits and dealing with issues arising during the study and through to publication/dissemination?
3. What does 'empowerment' and 'voice' mean to you, as a researcher, and how did you express this to the participants?
4. In what ways were the participants given opportunities to be empowered in or through your study?

Comparisons and contrasts are made between the learning by the authors when undertaking ethically and critically defensible qualitative research for education.

Introduction

This chapter considers the main themes that emerged as the authors of the different chapters reflected on how they tackled or resolved the dilemmas they faced in their research projects. By drawing together the commonalities and contradictions of ethical research practice, we aspire to develop phrónēsis (Traianou, 2019) for ourselves and others involved in research, whether as researchers, research supervisors or members of ERBs. Traianou describes phronesis as the ability to make 'situationally appropriate decision-making that takes account of all relevant, and only relevant, considerations' (Traianou, 2019, p. 21). Through time and reflection on practice, we can grow a more sophisticated understanding of the challenges and opportunities we face as researchers in different contexts when conducting research ethically. This benefits participants and the consumers of research outcomes alike by acknowledging justly participants' perspectives on social processes and institutional and social contexts.

Before inviting authors to contribute a chapter to this book, we developed a series of questions, as discussed in Chapter 1, to guide their reflections and discussions and provide coherence within the book. These were:

1. What values prompted you to do your research and how did you share these with participants?
2. What were the ethical considerations raised beforehand and how were these tackled in terms of meeting obligations (including to ERBs), maximising benefits and dealing with issues arising during the study and the publication of it?
3. What does 'empowerment' and 'voice' mean to you as a researcher and how did you express this to the participants in your study?
4. In what ways were the participants given opportunities to be empowered in or through your study?

The following sections show the threads that have emerged from the chapters in this book and how they might be woven together.

Of values

In their chapters, the contributors to this book clearly articulate the inclusive values that underpin their methodological and ethical approaches. In chapters by Busher; Capewell; Emke; Hanna; and Jack these values emerged in practice by the researchers' choosing to include the participants as researchers in their studies. In chapters by Chamberlain, Buckler and Mkwanzani; Fox, Sida-Nicholls and Loe; and O'Siorain, McGuckin and Carr-Fanning inclusive values emerged through the researchers trying to make sure that the participants understood the purposes and practices of research. Busher and James; Emke; Fox, Sida-Nicholls and Loe; Hanna; and Stutchbury used both approaches to create collaborative approaches to research with both participants and gatekeepers.

The contexts of power in which studies were embedded and how they affected the ethics of researchers' practice concerned authors in several chapters. Chamberlain, Buckler and Mkwanzani addressed the power relationships between researchers and participants, while Busher identified the micro-political processes in participants' institutions or social contexts. Taken for granted interpretations of participants' experiences in a learning situation, a form of disempowerment, perturbed Christensen because she found that powerful others' interpretations were different from what participants said they experienced. Fox, Sida-Nicholls and Loe; McGregor and Frodsham; O'Siorain, McGuckin and Carr-Fanning also articulated how contexts of power affected their studies. They tried to support end-users of their studies to understand the nature of the research, enabling them to work more effectively with the children or adults for whom they were responsible.

Of ethical considerations

The authors of the chapters explored a variety of ethical concerns that had confronted them during the course of their research. Jack talked about the problems of gaining ethical approval from her ERB because, she realised, it lacked experience and possibly competence around the particular needs of the participants in the research setting of her study. She calls for ERBs to encourage and support researchers in finding ways to include participants and their communities in informing what is considered ethical and appropriate, rather than expecting this to be documented before research is allowed to take place. The one-time ethical approval process of their ERBs was also insufficient for the studies of Busher and James; O'Siorain, McGuckin and Carr-Fanning; Stutchbury.

The narrow definitions of ethical research practice used by some ERBs potentially limits researchers from developing their positionality during the research process. Christensen explained she employed the concept of 'ethos' to broaden these definitions. 'Ethos' is an obligation for researchers to rethink their own role and what they are doing with their actions

(Foucault, 1994). She argues this might lead to a more ethical approach to research which more strongly empowers participants. Jack points out that it is only through engaging with participants in their own context that it is possible to know how to show respect to them and offer appropriate ways to include their voice in research which is for, not about them. Busher and James were concerned, as researchers, to demonstrate a duty of care for their participants which they enacted by developing a collaborative approach to research alongside the more formal processes of ethical permissions. O'Siorain, McGuckin and Carr-Fanning explained that their reference point for ethical practice was showing compliance with a code of professional conduct. However, they recognised the need for co-construction with participants and negotiating the messiness of the research process.

Concerns with the limitations of current practice by ERBs in Global North research institutions is reflected in a wider literature. Busher and Fox (2020) suggest that other, less restrictive models are possible that will benefit researchers and institutions alike. Beach and Eriksson (2010) report that institutional ethical approval processes used in some Scandinavian countries allows researchers to access supportive conversations throughout the lives of their research projects in ways which help to address ethical dilemmas as they emerge. Capewell; Emke; Hanna; O'Siorain, McGuckin and Carr-Fanning; Stutchbury; and Jack reflected on the need to re-visit the ethical basis of their research practice through on-going conversations either with their participants and gatekeepers or with their peers or experienced members of an ERB.

The language used by ERBs needs to be moderated to ensure that vulnerable groups are not 'othered' at the start of the research design and ethical appraisal process (Halilovich, 2013). Dialogic (Mustajoki and Mustajoki, 2017) or Responsive (Amundsen and Msoroka, 2019) approaches to ethics need to be accepted by ERBs as a means of developing the research community through creating a 'research ethics space' (Amundsen and Msoroka, 2019, p. 5). This would bring together institutional, participant and researcher values and codes in order to negotiate on behalf of any project.

Models of collaborative ethical guidance frameworks are being developed with local communities both in the Global North and South, for example Lairumbi et al. (2008) in Canada and Seehawer (2018) in Sub-Saharan Africa. A more radical approach to ensuring culturally appropriate research ethics was taken by the San Tribe in Africa (Callaway, 2017). They became the first indigenous community to develop and publish an ethics code because they had become so disenfranchised by their experiences of being researched. All researchers intending to engage with them are required to gain community approval. This suggests that, as an ethical strategy (Harvey, 2003), researchers should find ways to become guests rather than strangers in the communities they seek to study, as Jack and Chamberlain, Buckler and Mkwanzani demonstrate.

Of methodological concerns

Methodological and ethical decision-making are closely entwined (Stevenson et al., 2015). Paradigmatic views of ontology overtly affected several authors views of their epistemological decisions when carrying out their studies: ethnography (Christensen), participatory (Chamberlain, Buckler and Mkwanzani), critical realist (Stutchbury), Deleuzian-Guattarian rhizomatic (Emke). Whilst the choice of a particular paradigm for research is one aspect of ethical decision-making, each paradigm brings with it further ethical implications. For example, as she developed her project, Stutchbury became aware of needing to minimise the potential for harm to both researchers and participants when working within a paradigm that required researchers to go beyond description and analysis in order to seek for explanations. Fox, Sida-Nicholls and Loe report how their project team changed their approach to recruitment and gathering consent as well as data use through within-study ethical and methodological decision-making.

The ways data were collected and recorded also raised ethical questions for several of the researchers. McGregor and Frodsham thought that recording children's creative actions and utterances without invading their privacy required careful and thoughtful handling of visual and verbal data, a view shared by Busher. For Hanna, the main ethical risk came through her method of using a storybook to encourage participants to tell their stories. In doing so the participants often empathised with some of the characters, possibly revealing more than they might have wished about their backgrounds. This risked opening up sensitive conversations that she sometimes felt ill-prepared to deal with. Emke worried that online research methods posed ethical problems as participants, including herself, could ignore the complex and dynamic human-non-human entanglements entailed within human practices that are exercised on Twitter. She thought that ignoring these dynamics could lead to researchers underestimating the challenges of carrying out online research in an ethical manner, a view also put forward in an earlier work by James and Busher (2009).

Choosing to focus on a particular aspect of education, such as inclusive education, also raised ethical questions. Capewell thought it was imperative for researchers to develop the means and circumstances in which children can be active participants and decision-makers because they are more aware of their circumstances than adults often believe them to be. Chamberlain, Buckler and Mkwanzani raised political and ethical questions about how values associated with inclusive education are negotiated and made explicit. O'Siorain, McGuckin and Carr-Fanning similarly were aware of the need to be aware of informed consent and issues around who owns the data generated long with limitations on its use.

Of understanding 'empowerment' and empowering

There was a commitment by authors to overcome power imbalances in the studies represented in this book, but different authors offered different approaches to how 'empowerment' might be enacted within research. Given the political, economic and social constraints that socio-political and institutional contexts exert on any study, researcher accounts speak more of being vehicles to counter rather than to further compound marginalisation. Researchers hoped that their studies would be experienced as empowering even if empowerment was unachievable.

Reflective awareness to minimise the imposition of the study on participants by choosing respectful ways of engaging with them was exemplified by McGregor and Frodsham through the ways they ensured the data from their research project was collected and presented without distressing participants and avoiding teachers feeling uncomfortable. Chamberlain, Buckler and Mkwanzani, whose study of their 5-day workshop with unmarried mothers in Zimbabwe, recognised that values had to be negotiated, made explicit and upheld through the design and implementation of research principles and processes. Buser's study built in opportunities to hear the voices of the disadvantaged. By listening to students' voices, pupils and teachers can explore their relationships and the efficacy of different approaches to learning, which may empower students as members of a school community. O'Siorain, McGuckin and Carr-Fanning explored issues of vulnerability and how perceptions about neurodiverse individuals can lead to limiting their opportunity to participate in research to protect them from harm. Older learners can also be vulnerable. Buser and James focused on those who wished to gain entry to university to pursue professional careers but were economically and socially marginalised and had poor formal qualifications. They helped to empower their study's participants to make their voices heard through using visual methods to complement other qualitative data collection.

Whilst there may be a moral satisfaction in a researcher contributing to the 'good life' (Traianou, 2019) in finding methods that empower participants to share their voice, authors in this book note how this can also raise ethical risks. To allow voices to be heard, attention needs to be given to practical ways of respecting the rights of the vulnerable. O'Siorain, McGuckin and Carr-Fanning developed a process of self-questioning regarding the way in which they asked questions, whether the questions being asked were in accessible language and who decides what are the right questions. Capewell positioned children a central role in data generation whereby they choose how many diary entries to make, when and where they recorded their perceptions. They interpreted the impact different locations had on their ability to understand what a targeted speaker said to them so children as young as three years old demonstrated sophisticated analytical and evaluation skills.

However, there are limits to what a researcher can do with the voices revealed within their studies. Stutchbury, who worked closely with five teacher educators in an African University to investigate their agency with respect to pedagogic change, shows how and why pedagogic change for this professional group would continue to be challenging. While the study offered many interesting insights, it left those living in the context of their political, professional and social norms to find ways of exercising agency and overcoming disempowerment. At the end of her study, Christensen is uncertain whether the participants were directly empowered by her research and even whether she had given them a voice. Fox, Sida-Nicholls and Loe eventually decided to reconceptualise the trainee teachers' representations of their personal networks through socio-maps as a practical tool to help them understand their social capital in practice settings, rather than as data for a broader audience. By sharing these socio-maps with those responsible for the trainee teachers' development, the researchers allowed an otherwise invisible aspect of participants' needs and support to help them build relational resilience and

a sense of belonging to the profession. Emke offers an innovative view of the empowerment that can occur within research, negating a narrow, instrumental understanding of ‘self-empowerment’. Her study makes a contribution to thinking about language teachers’ self-empowered professional development through engagement in educational Twitter chats (moderated tweet conversations under a unique hashtag).

The chapters in this book exemplify how participants and researchers gain a measure of empowerment when they have freedom to think and act by engaging with alternative perspectives in a ‘fluid research space between ERB ethics, researcher ethics and participant ethics’ (Amundsen and Msoroka, 2019, p. 2). Conversely, ERBs’ ethical frameworks are often rigid. For example, describing vulnerable populations as being in need of protection is often used to justify paternalistic approaches to research with all participants who are classified in this way. Such a stance, questionable within the societies and communities of which researchers and ERBs form part, can only be perceived as imperialist or colonial when applied to communities beyond the cultures and traditions of a researcher’s institution. Jack’s research with displaced people in the Global South highlights how a failure to prioritise input from local communities asserted a disempowering Global North world view for participants in her study. Further, it prevented the development of methodologies for construing knowledge and value systems that differ from those of the Global North. The need to decolonise the approaches of Global North Universities to their processes of ethical oversight and support for research equally applies to other aspects of their curriculum and governance (Bhambra, Gebrial and Nişancioğlu, 2018; Seehawer, 2018).

Conclusion

The authors for this book agreed, when writing their chapters, to reflect critically on their studies to reveal the challenges they had experienced and opportunities they had taken. Through their accounts, the authors have become more skilful at integrating ethical principles into the various stages of their research decision-making. This required the development of their social, cognitive and physical skills over time to create wiser practice, or *phronesis*. The last focuses on practical moral reasoning in particular contexts to create more thoughtful actions that reflect a coherent and balanced moral framework, according to Aristotle (Carr, 2004; Traianou, 2019).

The researchers in this book have explicated how they became conscious of applying their values and growing understandings of their responsibilities and responses to social negotiations with those involved in and affected by their studies to guide their behaviours and actions. In doing so, they reflected how their emerging thoughtfulness affected the research designs they enacted, their interactions with ERBs and local stakeholders, their relationship-building with participants and the communities from which they were drawn, or with their peers within research teams. This led them to discuss how they were guided by moral drivers in their work which extend beyond applying technical reasoning (Carr, 2004). The authors have wrestled with how to show compliance to their legal, professional and moral obligations

(deontologically), build trust with and show respect for the various people associated with their study (ecologically and relationally) and dealt with the tensions which arise between the possible ways of meeting these expectations to maximise the positive and minimise the negative consequences (consequentially) of their research.

We hope readers can benefit from this very public reflection by researchers of their processes, not least through encouraging readers to engage in the same scrupulously honest way with their own research processes.

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