Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to discuss the problems and potential of conducting ethnographic research among people with ideologies that are opposed by the researcher and the importance of reflexivity in confronting ethical issues at the field site.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper is a reflective account of the author’s ethnographic fieldwork, during which the author studied Chinese fatherhood in Hong Kong. The author chose a men’s center as a primary field site but later found that the men held views on gender and family to which the author was opposed. Neither remaining silent nor confronting the men was an option. The author was concerned that the informants would interpret the silence as agreement with their views and would then accuse the author of deception when they read the later publications.

Findings – Being reflexive of the positionality as a young research student in the research milieu allowed the author to come up with a passively active approach to tackle the situation. The author shared own experiences or stories that the author had heard and asked if a feminist interpretation of an issue would be a better alternative. This approach not only solved the ethical risk of deception but also provided possibilities to acquire data that provided deeper insight.

Originality/value – This paper argues that bureaucratic ethical guidelines are not enough to yield ethical ethnography because ethnographic research involves intense human interactions and complex ethical issues specific to the research milieu. Rather, an ethnographer’s being self-reflexive is the key to an ethical ethnographic research.

Keywords Reflexivity, Fieldwork, Ethnography, Positionality, Deception, Ethical dilemma

Paper type Research paper

Ethnographers have frequently been concerned about the difficult ethical dilemmas arising from their field research. Ethnography involves social interactions that are similar to the normal interaction with a stranger; informants can feel lost and hurt when they believe that they are being used or when they discover that what they said behind closed doors has been made public (Bosk and De Vries, 2004). The feeling of being deceived may arise even though the researcher has no intention to deceive. In addition, as research is a process embedded in social, historical, and political contexts and is dependent on researchers’ backgrounds and experiences (Kirschner, 1987; Sherif, 2001), ethnographers’ personal characteristics and emotions do impact their research dynamics (Pezalla et al., 2012). Their thoughts, values, and self-presentation can yield different social interactions in the field site. Recognizing that ethnography is based on intense human interactions in diverse situations, Sieber (2004, p. 402) suggests that “there is no simple rule or ethical principle” that produces ethical social and behavioral research.
In fact, ethical considerations in research have different focuses. Situational ethics proposes that ethical judgment be determined by the specific social context (Castañeda, 2006). Adopting consequentialist ideas, it weighs the risks and harm to the informants against the benefits the research can bring (Goode, 1996; Holdaway, 1982; Sieber and Tolich, 2013). By contrast, deontology, which considers that the rules and reasons governing morality are universal and it is everyone’s duty to follow those rules (Barnbaum and Byron, 2001), differs from consequentialism and asserts procedural justice, which means that research should adopt non-exploitative and fair methods (Sieber and Tolich, 2013).

Virtue ethics and relational ethics oppose universal ethical rules. According to virtue ethics, an ethical research action cannot be determined by any rule, principle, or set of duties because there are always exceptions; experience and virtue (being ethically trained and conscious of ethical issues) are the most appropriate tools for conducting ethical research (Barnbaum and Byron, 2001). Relational ethics considers morality as a matter of relation and response to others, rather than obedience to rules or rational thought (Barnbaum and Byron, 2001). Adopting feminist ideas, this approach considers that an ethical relation arises out of natural caring (Birsch, 1999). Hence, an ethical researcher should try to feel what his or her informants are feeling and consider their welfare and interests.

However, in the USA, Britain, and Canada, ethnographic research, just like all other qualitative and positivist social research, is required, before the work can begin, to undergo an ethical review by an institutional review board (IRB) (Hammersley, 2006; Johnson and Altheide, 2002; Van den Hoomaard and Tolich, 2014). IRBs’ procedures are based on a biomedical model of research (Bosk and De Vries, 2004), adopting the positivist idea of research as a project-based investigation with clearly defined goals, methods, and schedules; hence they are less readily applied to ethnographic research, which emphasizes “exploration, discovery, and practice” (Spicker, 2011, p. 131). Fieldworkers can only know what they are examining specifically when they have immersed themselves for some time in the field site (Fine and Shulman, 2009). In particular, ethnographers have difficulty in identifying potential harm to the participants, because previously unknown risks can emerge as the research proceeds (Tolich and Fitzgerald, 2006). Similarly, they may encounter specific ethical dilemmas that arise in the particular research setting (Hill et al., 1998). Often, the treatment of each ethical dilemma is different and specific to the field conditions, the researcher’s positionality, and the participants’ backgrounds. Because human interactions involved in fieldwork are too intricate to be handled according to abstract and impersonal bureaucratic formulations (De Laine, 2000; Guillemin and Heggen, 2009), ethnographic researchers have documented that restrictions imposed by research ethics committees make research difficult (Adler and Adler, 2002; Bruner, 2004; Burgess, 1990; Marzano, 2007; Pearce, 2002; Van den Hoomaard, 2002). In response to the requirements of IRBs, professional codes of ethics (e.g. the American Anthropological Association’s Statement on Ethics) highlight two specific ethical issues, namely informed consent and deception. The codes state that ethnographers should obtain informed consent from informants and should never deceive them regarding research goals, methods, expected outcomes, and anticipated impacts (American Anthropological Association, 2012). Researchers have documented the difficulties in fulfilling these requirements (e.g. Burgess, 1989; Denzin and Erikson, 1982; Homan and Bulmer, 1982; Li, 2008; Lugosi, 2006; Marzano, 2007). Debates around covert research have been going on for decades, without any definitive conclusion.
Supporters of covert research, adopting utilitarian reasoning, suggest that the harm of such research can be offset by its contribution (Chadwick et al., 1984; Elms, 1994; Goode, 1996; Holdaway, 1982; Lauder, 2003; Punch, 1986; Reynolds, 1982; Warwick, 1973). Some researchers argue that undisclosed research might not violate ethical principles (Spicker, 2011), because even overt research involves covert elements (Lugosi, 2006). Fielding (1982) notes that researchers adjusting their responses to the informants, may, in their efforts to show empathy, find themselves unwittingly conforming to their subjects’ world views. Peshkin (1984) suggests that deception is sometimes necessary to get frank and honest responses from the informants. He himself pretended to be a Christian to conduct an ethnographic study in a Christian school. Penef (1985) adopted a fictitious identity to approach business owners in Algeria to uncover their illegal activities. These cases show that covert research that can reduce the effect of reactivity (Homan, 1980; Homan and Bulmer, 1982) may be acceptable in some circumstances.

Arguments against covert research state that deliberately misrepresenting one’s identity or research approach is unethical (Erikson, 1967), because it may lead the public to distrust social researchers (Bok, 1978), could put the researchers at risk, and would more widely legitimize betrayal of trust as a practice (Homan, 1991). More importantly, covert research breaches informants’ rights to privacy, anonymity, confidentiality, and autonomy, which some would claim is more important than science (Barnbaum and Byron, 2001; Erikson, 1967). Deception creates a feeling of betrayal among the informants when information intended to be kept private is disclosed in research publications (Reiss, Jr., 1979) and when the researcher’s presentation is revealed to be fraudulent (Chadwick et al., 1984; De Laine, 2000).

Ethnographic researchers have always struggled to be accepted by and to be true and honest to their informants (Herman, 1994; Luff, 1999). This is particularly difficult in critical ethnography, which examines and criticizes the power relations, privilege, oppression, and subordination that are accepted and reproduced in society (Kincheloe and McLaren, 2002), because critical ethnographers “ostensibly view the practices of their informants as problematic” (Springwood and King, 2001, p. 405). By withholding their personal opinions and critical analysis that oppose their informants’ stance, critical ethnographers worry that they are being deceptive and betraying the informants (e.g. Newby, 1977; Weinberg, 2002). Ethnographers can feel uncomfortable if their informants mistake their sympathetic responses, and silent presence as agreement (Herman, 1994; Weinberg, 2002). However, Van Maanen (1983) points out that betrayal of trust and confidence would inevitably arise among some informants, because there are always discrepancies between researchers’ analysis and what the informants say they are or what they have done. Often these kinds of risk cannot be specified before the fieldwork is conducted and the research papers are written. Thus, in view of the complexities of fieldwork, I propose an approach that is based on virtue ethics and relational ethics to tackle this kind of ethical dilemma involving informants’ and researchers’ relations and feelings. I argue that a researcher’s reflexivity regarding his or her position in the research context and on informants’ interests and concerns is more important than a strict ethical code. Reflexivity means “paying attention to oneself as active and involved observer and participant” and helps to reveal natural and taken-for-granted practices as being culturally constructed and historically situated in the field (Townsend, 1999, p. 88). Being reflexive can indeed help the ethnographer review the research procedures or “praxis” that is involved (Cardano, 2009), so as to be more aware of power relationships and to bring more ethical attention to his or her ethnography (Lewin, 2006). As ethnographic research
involves negotiation between the ethnographer and informants, the ethnographer needs to assess informants’ reactions to the ethnographer’s behavior (Gil, 2010; Herzfeld, 2009) and their perception of his or her qualities along various social dimensions. Thus, reflexivity is more than just self-reflection, but involves a continuous engagement in self-analysis and political awareness (Callaway, 1992).

When ethical dilemmas do arise in research, reflexivity can help the fieldworker scrutinize social interactions with regard to the research context, the researcher, and the informants (Fielding, 1982; Guillemin and Gillam, 2004; McGraw et al., 2000), in order to identify potential ethical problems and the possible impact on and harm to participants. In her multi-site research on illegal trafficking of humans and their body parts, Scheper-Hughes (2004) adopted covert methods by pretending to be someone looking to purchase a kidney; her reflexivity helped her to be self-critical in relation to professional ethics, protection of the informants, and the process of knowledge production. In his study of abuses in an institution for the mentally challenged, Taylor (1987) experienced conflicts between the urge of personal morality to report the abuse and the professional ethics demanding observance of confidentiality. The code of ethics was self-contradictory in such an instance; thus Taylor (1987) opposes strict adherence to the code of ethics and instead advocates for reflexivity on the ethical issues arising out of the field situation.

In this paper, I draw on my ethnographic experience to illustrate how reflexivity can facilitate sensitivity to the potential danger of deception and to demonstrate the use of positionality to devise ways to respond to the risk. The names of the men’s center, its discussion groups, and all informants in this paper are pseudonyms to protect the privacy of these entities.

The research and the field context
My PhD project was an ethnographic study examining Chinese fatherhood in relation to the concept of masculinities in the familial context. My dissertation supervisor introduced me to the Love and Help Center (LHC) to meet some potential informants. It is a men’s center promoting the “new good men” notion, which suggests that good men in the “new era” should abandon male chauvinism within the family and break away from gender stereotypes by, for example, showing their feelings, caring for and showing patience when educating their children, taking time off from work when necessary, nurturing the family, being involved in childcare and housework, and showing love and consideration to their wives. Because feminists (e.g. Chodorow, 1978) had proposed this gender equality idea earlier, I was interested to see how it was practiced in the context of Hong Kong families. The “new good men” concept and the LHC therefore became the starting points of my research project.

I primarily participated in two LHC discussion groups, the District Group and Triumph Group. Both groups were self-help discussion groups, the majority of members having encountered marital conflicts or divorce. The LHC aimed at bringing together men with similar backgrounds for mutual emotional and interpersonal support. These men were regarded as a force that supported the “new good men” notion. I first sought the permission from the supervisor of the LHC and then the social workers in charge of the two discussion groups, who obtained members’ agreement to my attendance at their meetings. When I visited the two groups, I introduced myself as a graduate student collecting data on fatherhood and parenting so as to finish my dissertation. Thus, I did not consider myself as conducting covert research at the LHC. I had made clear my purpose, research goals, and outcomes.
Later, I gradually noticed through participant observation in the LHC that gender equality was not their goal; instead, “harmony of the family,” meaning no disagreements and everyone’s observance of the traditional familial order, was a widespread and recognized goal of the members and social workers. I never heard anything about “gender equality.” Although fathers were encouraged to take a more active part in childcare and housework, the notion of the male-headed heterosexual nuclear family remained unchallenged. Some members blamed their ex-wives for proposing divorce and thereby breaking up their families. Some accused their wives of focusing too much on their own happiness and neglecting the family’s welfare. Some even thought that women caused domestic violence and subsequent divorce by belittling men’s self-esteem. These ideas were not challenged in the groups; nor was there acknowledgement of women’s agency and reflection on the gender power structure. Even the center supervisor, admitting that many men still had patriarchal attitudes, declared that gender equality was not an LHC goal because the emphasis on power would only hurt women and men and would deepen their misunderstanding.

As a feminist researcher, I did not agree with the discussion group participants and always felt the urge to argue with the social workers and members about their patriarchal comments and thoughts. However, expressing my views to the group members in the meetings was inappropriate because of the emphasis on harmony. Members of both the District Group and the Triumph Group often shared their parenting experiences and marital conflicts. Other group members sometimes disagreed with the ways these members handled such issues. The group moderator or other senior group members would often terminate the discussion by saying that members should respect each other’s views, avoid arguing, and build a supportive brotherhood. Being a Chinese man added to the difficulty, because I was assumed to share this goal of harmony, which is a widely recognized virtue in Chinese culture. I was aware of the harm that could be caused by the differences between my values and those of my informants. A member of the Triumph Group, who was a police officer, said that he was worried about his adolescent son being effeminate and weak (a “sissy”). He observed that his son was emotionally close to the mother and claimed that fathers had to train their sons to be more masculine (“macho”). I responded that everyone’s personality was different and that being gentle was not a fault. My comments upset him. He said angrily that I was naïve because I had never been a father. This comment made me aware that my views, together with my single, childless status, might negatively affect my relationships with the group members. I could sense that the group members or the social workers might not want me in the group if I continued to express my own views. Providing critical comments on informants’ existing practices and views can be unsettling, threatening, and disempowering to the informants (Watts, 2006). In particular, feminist values and judgments to a group of more powerful male informants who do not share the same opinions could obstruct the establishment of trust between the researcher and the informants (McDowell, 1992). I therefore realized that deteriorating relationships with the groups was a real risk.

Ethnographers often encounter situations that are inconsistent with their personal beliefs and values. They sometimes choose to keep quiet so as to continue to work at the field site. Murray (2003) described a situation in which the manager of a women’s shelter expressed belief in a client’s story when the client was present but then privately expressed disbelief when the client was absent. Murray, who was a volunteer and a participant observer, chose not to acknowledge the contradiction, in order to avoid a confrontation with the manager. In the highly misogynist culture of male rugby
players, Schacht (1997, p. 346) temporarily became a “sylph,” meaning that he would just be present without advocating or arguing against misogyny. This solution is justified as it allows the collection of the field data, which can later be used to help reveal the patriarchal gender structure and to advocate feminism (Schacht, 1997).

The ethical risk of deception

I tried to adopt Schacht’s approach and justification in my own field experience. However, one incident made me aware of the ethical risk of doing so. James, a lawyer and a member of the Triumph Group, invited me to join his newly founded men’s rights group. He told me that it was an LHC group but was totally unrelated to the Triumph Group. The men’s rights group was concerned with the difficulties men, especially those with working-class backgrounds, faced, such as higher unemployment and higher suicide rates than women, discrimination in certain occupations, and unequal social resources to help men. James wanted me to join the group to contribute ideas for the development of arguments for their position and even to help launch some campaigns to influence public and governmental opinion; in return, I could meet men with other backgrounds and hear their stories for my research.

During the meetings, I learned that James and the other members held anti-feminist views. They were antagonistic toward the women’s movement and women’s organizations. The men attributed the high unemployment rate of men to women occupying such blue-collar jobs as cashiers and cleaners. They often cited biased evidence to substantiate their claims that men were subject to discrimination. For example, James insisted that women had achieved higher social status than men, citing as evidence that most of his co-workers were female and more than half of the undergraduates in Hong Kong universities were female. He did not acknowledge that men still dominated the senior positions and earned significantly more than women. Group members also proposed that men were discriminated against within the family by citing cases in which men had been the victims of domestic violence. In reality, more than 80 percent of domestic violence victims are women and 83 percent of the perpetrators are men (Women’s Commission, 2011).

At the beginning, I remained silent as a participant in the meetings. When James asked me later to draft a press release on their group’s mission and vision, I realized that my silence had been interpreted as agreeing with the group’s positions. I spoke to James privately about my opinion. I sensed that he was surprised and challenged. He commented that my educational background, which had raised me to the middle class, had blinded me to the sufferings of working-class men. People often consider mere presence at an event to be an act of support, at least implicitly (Spicker, 2011). Previous researchers collaborating with the LHC on survey research had been supportive of the LHC’s ideas and vision, and it was therefore not surprising that the members considered my participation and involvement in LHC activities as support for their opinions. I wondered if the other LHC group members and social workers had drawn the same conclusion from my silence during the discussion groups and activities.

Because my informants shared their personal stories, true feelings, and sometimes struggles with me, I simply could not deceive them. I was reminded of the similar experience of Van Maanen (1983), who, in this gratitude to two police officers who had welcomed him as an observer in their police car, later refused to testify against them. Relational ethics, which uphold mutual respect and interpersonal bonding between the researcher and informants and demand that a fieldworker be true to him or herself and
bear the consequences of his or her own actions, are important to an ethnographer (Ellis, 2007). I had participated in LHC activities and discussion groups for three years and had befriended and bonded with some of the members. When a researcher develops such empathy with an informant, the understanding and rapport make it hard to manage any disagreement with the informant’s views (Luff, 1999). Ellis (2007) records that her informants were disturbed and angry with her descriptions of them in her published book because they considered her a friend and thought that she would not write anything negative about them. If I had continued to remain silent, such that my informants in the discussion groups mistook this for agreement, they would know, when they later read my published work, that I had actually disagreed with them. I would then risk the accusation that I had deceived and betrayed them, especially those who had shared their innermost feelings and painful stories with me.

The feminist model of mutuality additionally suggests that the researcher should give something back to the informants in return for their stories and views (Watts, 2006). The model does not mean that, as a feminist researcher, I should transform my informants (McRobbie, 1982); rather, that remaining silent or offering irrelevant comments does not meet the feminist objective. However, providing critical comments on informants’ existing practices and views can be unsettling, threatening, and disempowering to the informants (Watts, 2006). I faced the dilemma of remaining silent or honestly presenting my thoughts at the appropriate time.

**Being passively active as a strategy**

Reflexivity helped me recognize my positionality in the discussion groups and prompted me to seek ways to handle this dilemma in the research setting. Making use of the members’ perception of me as a student and as a young Chinese man who had the potential to be a husband and father, I eventually voiced my opinions in a passively active way. I expressed my feminist thoughts through stories and questions as opportunities arose. I shared my own experiences or stories that I had heard and asked if a feminist interpretation of an issue or a feminist solution to a problem would be a better alternative. For example, Daniel, a member of the District Group, said that he had been a dutiful husband by bringing home all of his income and being faithful to his wife, but she still insisted on divorcing him because of her discontent with living with his parents. He blamed her for breaking up the family and harming their two sons. Some members agreed with him and others tried to comfort him and ask if he could take care of himself and his sons after his wife had left. I shared a friend’s divorce experience and his regret for not understanding his wife’s feelings and situation. I asked what Daniel’s wife thought and how she felt. I expressed my view by turning the perspective from seeing the wife as an entity subsumed into the patriarchal family structure to regarding her as an individual, an actor. In the process, I showed that I did not agree with Daniel’s blaming his ex-wife.

I used the same strategy in the District Group discussion about authoritarian fathering. Two men in the group stood firm in their authoritarian approach, commenting that uncontrolled adolescents would go down the wrong road and ruin their futures. When the social worker could not persuade the two main discussants to be less authoritarian, he turned to me and asked for my opinion. I told the group about my own experience as an adolescent when my parents were controlling and strict with me. I said that I disliked my parents so much that I resisted everything they said. This was similar to the rebellious behavior that both discussants had found unacceptable. Then, I asked the group if my relationship with my parents at that time would have been better if
they had discussed the issues with me calmly and respectfully. A guest at the meeting, who was a single mother, then used my point to illustrate her close relationship with her son. She revealed that she listened to him and talked with him as an equal. The two main discussants then stopped insisting on their authoritarian approach and the social worker was able to discuss skills for parenting adolescent children.

This strategy fitted well with my position as a research student, much younger than the mostly middle-aged LHC members, which implied that I, as a researcher, was dependent on my informants to be allowed to enter the group and to understand their lives. This power differential facilitated my adoption of the “soft” way of expressing views. By being passively active, I avoided provoking the men with direct comments that implied that they were wrong. I just suggested alternative interpretations of the situation or alternative ways to approach the situation, which were more acceptable to them.

Sharing stories and asking questions not only solved the ethical risk of deception but also provided possibilities for acquiring data that provided deeper insight. I was able to express my differing values and views honestly by sharing and questioning. As with self-disclosure in an individual in-depth interview, a researcher sharing his or her own experiences and stories can induce more sharing from group participants. Not only could I hear more personal values, practices, and experiences from the informants, but I also adopted some of them as useful data.

Conclusion
Being in a setting characterized by an ideology that is inconsistent with one’s beliefs can cause disappointment and other negative emotions within the researcher (Kleinman and Copp, 1993; Thome, 1979). But it can also provide the researcher with a vantage point that is absent among researchers who integrate well with the group (Schacht, 1997). Reflexivity helped me recognize disagreements between my own political viewpoints and those of the group members. It also allowed me to view situations differently, to be aware of my positionality in the field site, to alter my own behavior and to come up with a new approach accordingly. Being a single, childless young adult researching fatherhood facilitated my adoption of a passively active approach. To avoid being troubled by a feeling of betraying informants’ sentiments (Homan and Bulmer, 1982) and to show that my informants and I were equally respectable (Richardson, 1991), I chose to pose my thoughts as questions to the men’s group. Instead of commenting directly or keeping quiet, I could avoid ruining relationships or misleading members by appearing as a student researcher with an inquisitive mind and a desire to contribute to the group by sharing experiences. I was able to express my views and to get to know their thoughts more deeply without being offensive. Accordingly, some meaningful discussions resulted and illuminating data were obtained.

Interpersonal relationships in fieldwork can be a source of ethical dilemmas (De Laine, 2000), especially when it comes to critical ethnography, which sees informants’ natural practices as problematic. Although the orientation in critical ethnography is not toward individual participants or groups but the situated performance, discourse, and practice (Springwood and King, 2001), these elements being challenged are embodied, and thus can evoke discomfort in both the researcher and the informants in the case of disagreement. Thus “intense self-reflection and interrogation of one’s own positions and agendas” are needed in critical ethnographers’ engagement with informants in order to conduct ethical and effective research to understand, challenge, and ultimately change power structures and relations (Springwood and King, 2001).
Strict adherence to bureaucratic guidelines and codes does not mean that one is conducting ethical research. Ethical codes do not encompass every aspect of research ethics they aim to control, and “there is always an excess which they fail to nail down” (Willmott, 1998, p. 110). Following from the argument of Bauman (1993) that no universal ethical codes can address the ambivalent condition of morality, Ferdinand and colleagues (2007, p. 535) propose that more constructive thought on the ethics of ethnography should be based on analysis of “situated dilemmas,” namely dilemmas “mediated by the specific context in which they arise, that by their very nature are neither reducible nor amenable to universal codified rules.” Academics have the responsibility to be aware of the ethical issues in the field setting and the concerns of their informants, rather than simply relying on ethical codes to guide their every move (Ferdinand et al., 2007).

Unlike positivist research, in which specific hypotheses and procedures are known before the study is conducted, ethnographic research is fluid, and diverse ethical issues and their corresponding solutions are specific to the research context. A fieldworker’s self-reflexivity with regard to his or her position and subjectivity in the specific research context is ultimately the key in ethnography. It allows negotiation and construction of a position that is appropriate for building rapport, facilitating data collection, and resolving ethical dilemmas (Ng, 2011; Soni-Sinha, 2008). Instead of relying on controlling mechanisms such as codes of ethics and IRBs, an environment should be created that enables researchers to develop their ethical reflexivity (Richardson and McMullan, 2007; Seedhouse, 2002). This fits the virtue ethics approach of encouraging ethical dispositions (Richardson and McMullan, 2007). Instead of encountering ethical issues only when they are conducting research or writing about it, graduate students should be provided with training before they start their fieldwork (Malone, 2003). Ethical issues vary from one field site to another; this paper is not to offer a way for all ethnographic researchers to adopt but to reflect on some of the problems I encountered in my field study, which led to a wider issue in research ethics. To conduct ethnographic research that is effective and ethical, the researcher needs to be alert and sensitive to the informants’ responses.

References


In the shadow of deception


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