Application and Development of an Ethical Framework in the Context of Ethnographic Research at a Government Primary School in Ethiopia

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Contribution

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This article reviews the authors’ engagement with a research ethics framework (Stutchbury & Fox 2009) through the course of an ethnographic case study of the agendas, participation and influence of stakeholders at a government primary school in Ethiopia (Mitchell forthcoming). Fieldwork took place over an eight-month period in 2014, and involved participant observation in lessons and meetings, informant-led interviews, and the collection of institutional documents. Data collection focused on the meetings of various bodies, and the activities of a single class in Grades 6 and 7. As other research approaches involving fieldwork, ethnography requires negotiating ethical principles and power relations expressed in different texts and contexts: university ethics committees, professional codes, legal systems, and the social world of the research site. Universities are often privileged in these interactions, positioned in a paternalistic, gatekeeper role in relation to those in the research site. Yet the codified ethical policies of universities and professional bodies can provide a rather limited, Western and legalistic reading of social research ethics (Hammersley & Traianou 2012). The framework is a tool for making visible the ethical dimensions of research activities from the perspective of different ethical principles (deontological, consequential) and at different scales of social context (relational, ecological). It encourages thinking beyond mere compliance with institutional guidelines, promoting the kind of awareness and sensitivity which ethical cross-cultural research demands. The framework supports ethical analysis and decision-making across all stages of the research process, however the present discussion focuses on the planning and ethical approval stage. In the UK context, burgeoning ethical regulation based on psychological and biomedical research models can pose a challenge to researchers seeking approval for
ethnographic research (Hammersley 2006; Hammersley & Atkinson 2007). Using the Ethiopian study as an example, the authors illustrate how the use of the framework for comprehensive ethical analysis helped to strengthen the proposal for ethnographic research.

References

Hammersley, M. (2006) 'Are ethics committees ethical?', Qualitative Researcher 2, Spring. Available at: http://www.cardiff.ac.uk/socsi/qualiti/QualitativeResearcher/QR_Issue2_06.pdf (Accessed 08/01/17)

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