‘Becoming Participant’
Problematizing ‘Informed Consent’ in Participatory Research with Young People in Care

Emma Renold, Sally Holland, Nicola J. Ross and Alexandra Hillman
Cardiff University, UK

ABSTRACT
This article problematizes the slippery notion of ‘informed consent’ and its negotiation in participatory longitudinal ethnographic research with children and young people. It does so within the context of new ethical bureaucracies (Boden et al., in press; Hammersley, 2006). Drawing upon an Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) funded methodological research project exploring the everyday lives and identities of eight children and young people in care, the article reinvigorates the intersubjective, situated and negotiated approach to research ethics as ongoing dialogue in everyday fieldwork relations. We consider the concept of ‘becoming participant’ to foreground the micro-ethical moments of complex and ambivalent engagements and disengagements within the research process. The notion of ‘becoming participant’, we suggest, may provide a conceptual language of description to analyse the complex terrain of consent, as always-in-process and unfinished. Drawing upon episodes of recorded fieldwork relations, we apply this notion to explore what it means to undertake participatory

KEY WORDS: children and young people, ethics, ethnography, identities in care, informed consent, ‘looked after’, participatory research, reflexivity
research where consent is ‘iterative and uncertain . . . and open to revision and questioning’ (Economic and Social Research Council [ESRC], 2005: 24). We do not aim to resolve this dilemma, but instead aim to invite and reinvite questioning of what it means to negotiate informed consent in participatory research with young people.

INTRODUCTION: BEYOND REGULATORY ETHICS

Keely (age 13):\(^1\) (commenting on the editing of her video diary) I don’t know what I’ve done. I don’t care what I’m saying . . .

ER: Are you alright for me to listen to this?

Keely: Yeah. I guess (sounds unsure).

(later)

ER: So what have you recorded over? Did you watch it through and then think, ‘right, I want to record over that bit and that bit and that bit’?

Keely: Yeah.

(later)

Keely: Look! That’s me asleep (pause). Just me sleeping. Can you – yeah, I can delete whatever I want can’t I?

ER: Absolutely.

The scenario above is taken from a multimedia participatory research project exploring the everyday lives and relationship cultures of young people in care. The interactive negotiation between Keely (participant) and Emma (researcher) of participant-generated ‘data’ is saturated with the micro-ethical complexities surrounding the ambivalence of ‘informed consent’ at the level of fieldwork relations. Such practices are often absent in discussions of consent in the institutionalized procedural ethics of professional guidelines and codes. This scenario is one of many in Keely’s journey of, what we are calling, ‘becoming participant’ in a longitudinal research project that draws upon participatory and ethno-graphic methods. Indeed, this conceptualization of research ‘ethics-in-practice’ (Guillemim and Gillam, 2004) is markedly different from the regulatory framework of ethical review boards and committees. Ethical codes and committees have been established, recognizing the necessity of safeguarding the protection and rights of research participants from fundamental forms of harm and exploitation, often in the form of checklists that encourage researchers to consider a range of potential risks, tensions and legal requirements in their research. This, however, is often unhelpfully framed within a discourse of knowable ethical ‘outcomes’. Although the procedural process may alert
researchers to potential ethical concerns, some argue that once completed and institutionally approved, ethics committees rarely assist the researcher’s negotiations of ‘ethics-in-practice’ – that is, the actual ethical conduct of the research project:

There is no direct or necessary relationship between ethics committee approval of a research project and what actually happens when the research is undertaken. The committee does not have direct control over what the researcher actually does. Ultimately, responsibility falls back to the researchers’ themselves – they are the ones on whom the conduct of ethical research depends. (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004: 269)

This article continues the dialogue of how critical reflexivity offers a way of both theorizing and practising the complex micro-ethical issues that saturate research practice. It foregrounds the intersubjective (i.e. relational) and dynamic (i.e. always in process) nature of ethics at the level of everyday practice. This article does not provide an overview of current issues and debates relating to informed consent in contemporary social research (for an excellent critical appraisal, see Wiles et al., 2005). The central aim of this article is to deconstruct the slippery notion of ‘informed consent’. This notion is often conceived in terms of fixity in both its discursive representation (e.g. a non-ambiguous ‘permission’) and singular practice (e.g. signing of forms or recorded verbal agreement, usually at the beginning of a project) (see Bhattacharya, 2007; Marzano, 2007; Spicker, 2007). We argue that this imposes quite a rigid power hierarchy between researcher (taking: active) and participant (giving: passive). Even the concepts of ‘renewed’ or ‘ongoing’ consent in longitudinal ethnographic research (Thorne, 1980) suggest a series of ‘permissions’ that do little to rupture the dynamic and fluid relationship that participants can occupy in the research process. Working at the level of ‘ethics-in-practice’, we would like to put forward an alternative discourse to the singularity of ‘consent’ as it is represented through procedural ethics and in law. Rather, we consider the concept of ‘becoming participant’, which foregrounds the dynamic, complex and shifting nature of the ways in which ‘participants’ are positioned and position themselves within the research process. To begin this dialogue, and to situate our reflections and representations of the critical reflexive strategies and working practices of the ‘(Extra)Ordinary Lives’ research project, we first locate our own approach to ethics, as one of reflexive praxis.

**RESEARCH ETHICS AS REFLEXIVE PRAXIS**

Our project is directly informed by and in dialogue with a long feminist history of ethics and long standing ethical debates within critical ethnographic practices that foreground critical reflexivity as embedded in research practice. We
conceptualize our own orientation to research ethics as that which attends to the complex and shifting social and cultural power relations inside and outside the research process. Thus, we conceive ethics:

- **as situated** (i.e. locally negotiated within each individual research project and thus contextually contingent, historically specific and always in-process);
- **as dialogic** (i.e. embedded in the intersubjective relations through which the personal is acknowledged, not denied);
- **as political** (i.e. always informed by our own individual and collective political aims, see MacNaughton and Smith, 2005)

Our approach is one that moves beyond procedural ethics (outlined above) and ethics-in-practice as a series of resolvable ‘dilemmas’, towards a critical reflexivity that scrutinizes the production of knowledge. This approach demands what Lorraine Code (1995) refers to as ‘epistemic responsibility’, that is, what it means to ‘know well’ and ‘know responsibly’. Doucet and Mauthner (2002: 125), drawing on Code, suggest that problematizing how we come to ‘know’, demands a much wider concept of ‘forward reflexivity’ – one that moves beyond the field and incorporates our intentions, our analysies, our relationships within and beyond the duration of the research project (from ‘funders’, ‘partners’, ‘users’, ‘consumers’).

We very much support Doucet and Mauthner’s notion of ‘forward reflexivity’, although acknowledging, as they do, that it is not always possible to identify the multiplicity of influences on the research process. Critically exploring the complex interrelationship of the ways in which theory meets and mediates practice (i.e. multiple research experiences), we have conceptualized our own ethical stance as one of *reflexive praxis*. Perceiving ethics as reflexive praxis involves engaging in a critical dialogue of the ways in which different knowledges are produced (and indeed silenced) in our everyday relations within and beyond the research process. This approach to reflexivity thus extends beyond access or actual fieldwork relations and goes some way to challenge the positivist view that ‘the social relations being researched are left unaltered by the research process, and that findings merely represent or reflect the world neutrally’ (Doucet and Mauthner, 2002: 49).

Consequently, at the outset of the ExtraOrdinary Lives project, we made explicit our ethico-political intentions, which were substantively and methodologically driven (Renold and Holland, 2006). Substantively, we were keen to generate a counter-discourse embedded within a critical social work framework (see Denzin, 2002) to the prevalent outcomes-based research of children in public care, which consistently represents them in terms of their social problems (DfES, 2006; Garrett, 1999). Methodologically, we were aware that there were very few research projects within the social work field that utilize critical and
participatory ethnographic methods in research about the experiences of children and young people in care. However, we were also mindful of the long and fraught history of youth research that is often unproblematically underpinned by ‘a fascination for and fetishization of the Other’ (see Walkerdine, 1997). We were thus keen, as Lesley Roman (1996: 20) articulates, to create ‘alternative ways of speaking [about children in care] that did not invoke them as spectacle’. Substantively, this involved challenging those deficit discourses and fantasies that reify Otherness in ways that naturalize the spectacle of children-in-care either as always already ‘failed subjects’ or abject subjects (see Garrett, 1999; Sharland, 2006). Methodologically, our response was to draw on a participatory and ethnographic approach, which aimed to enable participants to actively generate research encounters and opportunities.

RESEARCHING EXTRAORDINARY LIVES

The central methodological aim for the ‘ExtraOrdinary Lives’ project was to develop a research environment in which a small number of children and young people (aged between 10 to 20) could choose their own level of involvement. They could also choose their own methods to record and represent aspects of their lives and identities (e.g. visually, textually, orally and aurally). From October 2006 to July 2007 we ran what we called the ‘Me, Myself and I’ project where the research team met fortnightly with eight young people at a local voluntary agency site. As a research team of four, we tended to primarily generate ‘data’ with young people individually although within a group session (details follow) for up to seven hours (with young people spending between two and four hours there each time). We also conducted a range of research activities, from guided tours around their local areas, road trips to previous foster placements and conducted ethnographic conversations in their homes, in cafés, at the university and while transporting some of the young people to and from the sessions. As stated earlier, the research had both methodological and substantive aims and the ‘data’ include both the works that the children produced (if they chose to share it with us), ethnographic ‘data’ (our field notes, recorded conversations with young people, etc.) and a further ethnographic account reflecting specifically upon what it means to undertake a participatory project of this kind – particularly in relation to ethics.

Acutely aware of the ethics of generating ever more surveillance on an increasingly ‘over-surveilled’ social group, our participatory approach specifically set out to foreground ethics-in-practise with young people throughout the research process and thus develop methodological techniques that could continuously disrupt the researcher gaze by generating genuinely reflexive research practices. Moreover, as Beverley Skeggs (2004) carefully documents in
her chapter on ‘the methods that make classed selves’ we were also all aware of how historically marginalized groups have been forced to narrate their lives and how ‘telling the self’ and ‘speaking emotion’ (Skeggs, 2004: 125) is highly gendered and classed. This is perhaps doubly complicated and troubling given how children in care are frequently called upon to reflect on their lives (e.g. in planning and assessment meetings, social worker/support worker visits, etc.) with almost every aspect of their lives ‘in care’ subject to public scrutiny. Traditional ‘interview’ techniques, such as direct questions (e.g. what do you think about . . . ?), broad questions on ‘emotion’ (e.g. how do you feel about that?) or ‘active listening’ by repeating statements back at participants (e.g. ‘so, you say don’t want to go to school?’) are deeply embedded within social work practice. Attending specifically to children’s own cultures of participation was also thus high on our agenda. Thus, for some children and young people who are looked-after, their own histories and relationships to participatory discourses and practices will shape their level of engagement with and expectation of the research project and research team (from enthusiasm to cynicism).

Consequently, we tried to generate methodological techniques and strategies that might disrupt both the social work gaze and the researcher gaze through making available a range of methods. These included a range of autoethnographic and activity based techniques such as film-making, photographic diaries, music productions, visual/textual diaries, scrap-books/collages, audio and visual guided tours and, unexpectedly, car conversations. These research activities, combined with our critical reflexive participatory approach have proven to be quite productive in generating a rich and diverse assemblage of multi-modal representations of everyday lives (pasts, presents and futures). These activities were akin to what Code (1995) terms ‘vigilant methods’, that is methods specifically aimed to cultivate more equitable and ethical field-relations/hips through demystifying the research process and rupturing the researcher gaze. Our methodology was one that we hoped would maximize children and young people’s agency in the research process through techniques that encouraged young people to actively consider and reconsider their participatory status. The rest of the article goes some way to reflexively explore the ways in which some of the young people engaged and disengaged with the project and how a non-linear notion of ‘becoming participant’ makes salient the complex ethical terrain of ‘informed consent’ as a relational dynamic and always in-negotiation.

FROM FIXITY TO FLUIDITY: ‘INFORMED CONSENT’ AS RELATIONAL DYNAMIC AND ALWAYS IN-NEGOTIATION

To critically explore our participatory approach and overtly disrupt the ‘forced telling’ (Skeggs, 2004) of marginalized lives, the research team set up a potentially risky strategy whereby children and young people could be involved
in the research as little or as much as they wanted. A critical approach to participation that makes transparent the power relations in the research process and subjects a range of ethical issues and practices to critical scrutiny, however, necessitates a range of components. Indeed, this project required a research team, a funding council, a university ethics committee and a local authority that could support a flexible and wandering research design and strategy intended to engage children and young people at the outset and if desired (and feasible), throughout the research process. Despite recent critiques on the hyper-regulatory nature of university ethics committees (e.g. Boser, 2007; Halse and Honey, 2007; Hammersley, 2006) and ethical codes published by professional organizations, we found support in the ESRC’s own Research Ethics Framework which explicitly recognizes diverse methodologies, the ‘practice of ethics-based social science research’ and the ongoing, open-ended process of participatory methodologies:

In the case of participatory social sciences research, consent to participate is seen as an ongoing and open-ended process. Consent here is not simply resolved through the formal signing of a consent document at the start of research. Instead it is continually open to revision and questioning. Highly formalized or bureaucratic ways of securing consent should be avoided in favour of fostering relationships in which ongoing ethical regard for participants is to be sustained, even after the study itself as been completed. Review mechanisms will need to enable this where appropriate. (ESRC, 2005: 24, para. 3.2.2)

Although it is by no means clear how such ‘review mechanisms’ will operate effectively, this acknowledgement of the ‘open-ended’ nature of participatory approaches was particularly pertinent to our own project. Thus, children’s ‘consent’ forms (requested by the university ethics committee) were purposively constructed as open-ended, partial and provisional, ensuring that children and young people could choose how to engage in a research project. Our overall aim was to use a language that framed their participation as always negotiable. For example, they could choose whether or not they wished to sign the consent form and a designated part of the leaflet was formed in which they could outline their own expectations or desires about the project and our own role as researchers. As the section below explores in some detail, our approach to engage in an ongoing dialogue from the outset, which involved developing personalized ethical protocols ‘in the moment’ with children and young people, was fully supported by the university ethics committee. In sum, we were thus very fortunate, to have the economic and institutional support and ‘approval’ of a range key ‘gate-keepers’ which, although not the subject of this article, involved a series of power struggles and, arguably, manipulations to reach our ethico-political starting point outlined earlier.
Social research is essentially about the production of knowledge. When the production of ‘knowledge’ is collaboratively generated over time using participatory ethnographic methods (i.e. when purpose, aims, method and representation are up for negotiation) the ethics of how we come to ‘know’ and ‘know well’ are particularly complex (Code, 1995). Rupturing the surveillance of the social welfare gaze was a key ethical priority for us for all the reasons outlined earlier. From the outset, we made a strategic decision not to read any of the children’s case files and thus had no prior knowledge of their ‘care’ histories. This decision, on reflection, seems to have enabled young people to protect their histories from further scrutiny and interpretation and to facilitate a discursive space to represent their pasts in the ways they wanted to. However, while our approach initially seemed to successfully rupture the professional education-welfare gaze, and to enable young people to generate their own ‘data’ on what they deemed significant about their everyday lives, some aspects were more problematic. The ways in which some of the young people began to refer to the research as ‘a club’ and the slippage between our own research activities in the fortnightly sessions and the activities of a regular youth club raised a significant ‘ethical speedbump’ (Weiss and Fine, 2000). It immediately drew our attention to the fluid nature of the different ways in which young people engaged and disengaged with the project-as-research and the project-as-social-event. Our struggles to communicate the aims and purposes of the activities in the session as social research were ongoing. Indeed, engaging young people to reflect upon their participation in the research, not unexpectedly, often fell flat (particularly with younger participants) if we directly sought their reflections. Adopting a ‘responsive’ mode in which ‘ethical talk’ (e.g. on what gets constituted as ‘data’, or what remains private and confidential) became embedded in the everyday practices of the research environment proved much more successful. The following analysis traces our journey of attempting to embed ‘ethical talk’ throughout the research process, and the ebb and flow over time of the micro-moments of engagement and disengagement from withdrawals to renegotiations of what constitutes research ‘data’.

‘You could catch someone out proper with that couldn’t you’:
Transparency and/in Surveillance
An evolving strategy utilized throughout the fieldwork was regular referrals to the production and sharing of different media through which data was generated. This was particularly the case in relation to the ethnographic data in which
we were learning a lot about their everyday lives, from the session-talk, in which
they might reflect further upon the scrap-books or visual footage they were
producing, to the car conversations we had with them when travelling to and
from each session. We thus negotiated with each young person the method and
process of digitally recording the car conversations and the session talk. Three
of the young people (Angel, age 11/12; Keely, age 13/14; and Nevaeh 17/18)
were happy to have their talk recorded (with the youngest, Angel, age 11, talking
for half the journey and listening to the recording for the other half). Neither
of the two boys in the project were keen to have the car journeys digitally
recorded, and the rest of the participants travelled by other means. Michael (age
14) discussed with Nicola that while he was happy for field notes to be written
he did not like their conversations to be digitally recorded. Recording session
talk, however, was sometimes (unintentionally) more covert, with the digital
technology not always in full view (hidden inadvertently under or behind other
equipment or materials). On spotting the small hand held recorder in one session,
Keely wittily draws attention to the parallels between the ‘surveillance’ of our
recording technologies and the police interview:

Hello, hello? (speaking into recorder). It’s cool. You could catch someone out
proper with that couldn’t you. Like yeah, I know you. ‘For the benefit of the
tape, please speak now’.

We thus made a concerted effort to place the recorder in full view and without
interrupting the flow of conversation too much, referred to the fact that, ‘it’s
still recording’ in a long conversation, or explicitly reminding young people
joining in a conversation that ‘the recorder is on’ and re-engaging their consent
with comments like, ‘is it OK to press record’?. To push for further transparency,
and to seriously engage with the ethical implications of covert recording directly
implied in Keely’s observation, we offered some of the young people the chance
to read the transcription of one of these recordings, thus enabling them further
insight into the research process. However, this generated mixed responses. As
the following extracts illustrate, Keely shrieks with delight as she recalls the car
conversation and pokes fun at a particular phrase Emma frequently uses:

I bring out a transcript of the car conversation to show Keely what happens to
our recorded conversations in the car. She leaps up (with excitement?) takes it
from me, almost before I’ve got it out of my bag, and begins to read. ‘Oh, I
remember this one’ she says laughing and continues to read (the section on being
in a band at school). She then begins to tease me and says, ‘Oh you’re always
saying that’ (laughing) referring to some phrase that I overuse when I try and
follow up something she’s said. She then goes on to read more from the tran-
script about being in the band and writing song lyrics. ‘Oh I’d love to see some
of those’, I say in the transcription. On reading this Keely looks up from the
page after reading her own negative response (‘no that’s private’) to my curiosity and repeats to me, ‘some things are just private though’. ‘Absolutely Keely’, I reply, ‘which is why I keep going on about what you’re happy for us to know and record and what you’re not’. (extract from field notes)

Nevaeh (age 17), in contrast, shrieks with horror at being confronted with her words staring back at her in a personification of ‘Vicky Pollard’ as she reads an early transcript from an unplanned one and a half hour conversation/narrative interview, which Emma encourages Nevaeh to reflect further upon:

Nevaeh: (reading the transcript) Oh, I sound like Vicky Pollard!
ER: No, but yeah, but –
Nevaeh: (ex-foster carer) calls me Vicky Pollard when I’m speaking to her (laughs) yeah but, no but, yeah, but (laughs)

[20 second pause, still reading]
Nevaeh: Oh I say that a lot don’t I? like like like like like
ER: Yeah. Is it weird? How does it feel reading your words back?
Nevaeh: Yes. It doesn’t sound like me. I didn’t think I’d say that
(reads more)
Nevaeh: That is nuts. I’ll have to read through all this (laughs).
ER: Would you like to take it away?
Nevaeh: Yeah.

While there is not space to fully explore the multiple meanings embedded in each interaction, both episodes are illustrative of key ethical moments which generated further discussion on the representation of our ‘talk’ as research data and issues of privacy and what constitutes research ‘data’ – a process that we needed to make even more transparent in the writing up of field notes, as the next section explores.

**Participant-non-participant: Problematizing the ‘Right to Withdraw’**
Throughout the fieldwork, we frequently referred to our own and each other’s field notes with young people to illustrate that we are sharing the ethnographic conversations that we have with them outside the session. Halfway through the fieldwork, we also spent a significant portion of the session time to discuss the use of pseudonyms with the young people, encouraging them to choose a fictitious name for themselves, their friends and families. While this also generated some interesting data on the relationships between the name chosen and what we had come to learn about that young person, it also offered up another
opportunity to foreground our sessions and the conversations we have as ‘data’ and thus their participation in a ‘research project’. It was during this session that it became clear that one of the boys, Andy, clearly did not think that he was involved in a research project, as Emma’s following field note extract illustrates in a car conversation with Andy reflecting on the sessions he’s been coming to:

I make a concerted effort on the journey home to engage Andy further into what he thinks the project is about. He says that he calls it ‘the club’ and sees it in many ways as a kind of ‘youth club’ for kids in care. I talk about and reiterate that it’s more than this, that it’s a research project and that we hope to learn more about their everyday lives as children in foster care like himself. ‘Is everyone in foster care?’ he asks. ‘Some are’, I say, ‘and some are in kinship care which is when grandparents or aunties and uncles look after children’. He nods and I go on to say that I hope that while we are learning more about them and their lives, we (along with the others) also get something out of the project. ‘Yeah’, he replies, ‘I run about a lot so it keeps me fit and I like all the food’.

To push the research element a bit further, I continue to talk more explicitly about what I have learned about him from talking with him in the car on the way to the session. I look over and he’s nodding. ‘And when I go home I have a notebook where I write this all down – unless you tell me otherwise that you don’t want me to write it down’. ‘OK’ he says and I am thinking, is that ‘OK I have heard what you do’ or ‘OK I’m fine with that’. I continue. ‘Sometimes, I have the recorder that fits on the bit of plasticine in the car so I don’t have to write down everything when I get home’. I suggest that perhaps we use this next time. Silence.

We’re merging with a busy build up of traffic and I can’t turn round to see his reaction. He neither seems to agree or disagree. What I am learning fast, is that he doesn’t seem to either realize or is interested in what it is that we do. I try and make more explicit the aims of the project and talk about being located at the university, about writing books and reports and while he seems to be listening (nods now and then), he doesn’t seem too bothered and am wondering all the time the extent to which he understands he’s part of a research project. I then direct the conversation to the filming that we’ve been doing and Andy now seems to re-engage and tells me how he’s still very keen on being filmed at the park.

The nodding and affirmative ‘OKs’ in previous car and session conversations to our explanation of the project (and signing of the original consent form) had, it seemed, been a strategy through that Andy had drawn upon to continue coming to the project and participating in the activities on offer there. However, while Andy’s ‘OK’ and silence in response to Emma’s further attempts to engage his understanding of his role in a ‘research project’ seem to suggest perhaps a failure to communicate the aims and purposes of the research, it succeeds,
perhaps in highlighting the ambivalence and fluidity of participation (including non-participation). Indeed, the ways in which Emma here, and the rest of the research team, embedded ‘ethical’ talk reflexively engaging and rupturing conversations to foreground the sessions (and out of session activities) as ‘research’ enabled others (some from the beginning, some part way through) to actively and critically think through which aspects of their lives they are happy to talk about and represent. It was also thus a strategy to actively facilitate and foreground ethical issues as always ‘in negotiation’ (while adhering to law and local and national child protection guidance) particularly in relation to ‘data’ ownership, consent, confidentiality, anonymity and notions of privacy, intimacy, safety and harm – issues that are particularly sensitive to the always already public lives of many of these children and young people. The next two sections reflect further on this more active negotiation of ‘becoming participant’.

The fluid ways in which the young people moved between participant and non-participant, facilitated by the ways in which we conceptualized their participation as already in-negotiation, was, over time, fully exploited by many of the young people, in significant macro and micro ‘ethical moments’. For example, Andy’s ambivalent participation with his full engagement in the project’s social activities (to ‘run around, have fun and eat’), his on-off engagement with the research activities (e.g. filming) and his disengagement with our research focus, tested our participatory ethos to its limits and fully problematized the notion advocated by many Research Ethics Committees (RECs) of ensuring young people’s ‘right to withdraw’ from the research at any stage. The extent to which we can share our analysis of Andy’s film and what we have learned from Andy in our conversations with him over the nine months with the wider research community, given the ways in which Andy takes-up the activities on offer to renegotiate his continued participation in ‘the club’, is debatable and we have discussed this with him.12

In contrast, foregrounding the micro-ethical moments of the ways that participation is a constant process of engagement and disengagement, the following extracts go some way to illustrate how some of the young people (in this case Keely) fully embraced our own reflexive ethical approach to the research by negotiating what she shares and overtly collaborating in the recording process:

ER: Can I copy the pages in the camera, or not, or do you want to keep it for, just for you?

Keely: What you on about now?

Emma: This (showing Keely the scrap book she has produced)

Keely: You can do that. Yeah, whatever. You can take it from the camera if you want to (referring to the original images, rather than the printed images pasted into scrapbook)
Emma: Is that – yeah. But I like the what you’ve written by the side of the pages (Keely has annotated each photo with a caption). (pause). I’ve brought my camera with me. Have you used my camera? It’s quite groovy.

[we look at my camera]

Keely: So you’re going to take pictures of my pages?

Emma: [I nod]. So what I can get then, you see is . . . it’s up to you

Keely: Hey, we should have put the camcorder on and recorded us doing this!


Keely: No – but I did!

The next two extracts illustrate further how our participatory ethos of encouraging young people to generate their own data, enabled some explicit editing and re-editing, before showing and during the showing and storing of, in this case, visual data:

Keely: There she is (referring to visual footage of her dog playing that she has captured on film). These two are old. Tag’s a puppy. That one’ the oldest. He’s 15, 16. He is!! He’s a nutter dog. Pictures of him are stunning. I must know this off by heart, literally.

Emma: You’ve watched it many times?

Keely: Yeah

[ . . . ]

Emma: Are these your brothers?

Keely: Yeah. That’s at my mum’s house. Now he’s (youngest brother) is trying to eat it. He’s just (inaudible). My sister Claire. She’s pregnant.

[ . . . ] I’m going to stop it just a minute, just in case. Right (long pause while Keely fast forwards the tape).

[watching footage of Keely’s mums’ dog]

Emma: (I notice another jump in the tape). So did you do a bit and then rewind it back and go over it?

Keely: I probably went over it where . . .

ER: You didn’t want us to/

Keely: My mum and Claire were mucking around and (inaudible)

ER: You didn’t want that on the tape?

Keely: No.
In the first extract, Keely seems to take pleasure in re-viewing the footage of her and her foster brother playing with the dogs in the back garden and her knowledge of the footage (‘I love this bit coming up’). The second extract highlights Keely re-viewing the visual data of her birth family both in the previous editing before showing the footage in the session (‘I probably went over it where . . . my mum and Claire were mucking around’) and in further editing during the session in which Keely forward winds the tape and later deletes sections she does not want to share with the research team. Both extracts illustrate the careful and complex negotiation of Keely’s desire to share and keep or edit and delete the data she has generated to speak to the theme of everyday lives.

Indeed, much of the ways in which Keely was ‘becoming participant’ involved our own critical reflexivity of learning to pick up on the many verbal and physical cues in which she disengaged from the research process, from overt embodied disengagements (leaving a conversation to get snacks or drinks in the kitchen) to not responding to follow up questions around particular topics. For example, our methodology of offering young people the chance to re-view and edit video footage not only generated frequent discussions regarding who and what had been recorded, when and why, but also provided a means with which participants directed the flow and focus of the conversation.

**Time after Time: Renegotiating what Counts and what remains ‘Data’**

The longitudinal nature of the research permitted research relationships to develop over time, meaning that there were multiple opportunities for participants to address issues or return to conversations previously cut short or interest in data generated previously dismissed (see Hillman et al., 2008). During the fieldwork we developed personalized ethical protocols responsive to the different becomings of young people’s participation. One example of such a protocol was not to delete visual material generated by Andy immediately after a session (responding to Andy’s confirmation that he does not want to ‘keep it’) when it became clear that he often wanted to return to the material at a later session. Rather, we would store but not share or analyse the material until this had been discussed further with Andy. As such, Andy’s participation counters ‘informed consent’ as either a fixed state, or an achievable final position. We developed a range of personalized micro-ethical protocols that shifted and changed with the ebb and flow of his participation in the project’s activities. We hope that we thus enabled perhaps a more nuanced, dialogic and thus responsive approach to his often ambivalent engagement with different elements of our methodology.

The research activities generated social interactions littered with interruptions and disruptions, lost, paused and repeated exchanges. It was thus a research environment that enabled some participants greater opportunity and flexibility over how, when and to whom they communicated and represented their everyday lives and identities (see also Hillman et al., 2008). A research
context that allows for relationships between researchers and participants to build over time and across a number of different settings and contexts certainly seemed to play a significant role in developing our understandings of the everyday lives of young people in care. The examples we have presented in this article, are not, however, offered up as moments of ‘failed consent’ or ‘failed participation’ where answers to questions are avoided, or our attempts to engage research participants are rejected. They are included to show the negotiated process of ‘becoming participant’ and how participatory research that invites and creates multiple research environments (from group sessions to car conversations) perhaps increase the possibilities for moments of negotiation. Through this young people are able to reflect upon and engage with the focus of the research when (and with whom) they choose. Indeed, the informality and spatial flexibility of, and movement within and outside the sessions in particular, enabled the ebb and flow of participant-non-participant. These are moments we would conceptualize more fluidly as ‘becoming participant’ and routes that are perhaps more visible and thus less accessible in more formalized, immobile research environments.

**BREACHING ETHICS?: FOREGROUNDING THE MICRO-ETHICS OF ‘BECOMING PARTICIPANT’**

The movements of breaching are those that keep the nature of any location, object, or method permanently mobile, and that maintain a dynamic and constitute relations between such locations (Braidotti, 2002: 201).

Methodologies based on participatory approaches and action oriented techniques also raise questions about the practice of ethics-based social science, especially where there is a strong commitment to qualitative research. Ethics review of qualitative research needs to attend to the iterative and uncertain character of this research process (ESRC, 2005: 28, para. 4.2.2.2).

‘Informed consent’ is one of the central regulatory norms that all research ethics review boards or committees demand researchers seek out and gain or prove. This article has attempted to move beyond yet recognize the ways in which informed consent is conceptualized through linear and often fixed (and traditional hierarchical) binaries of active-researcher (taking)/passive-researched (giving). Rather, we take-up a more dialogic approach to ethics-in-practice that is ‘committed and patterned but is flexible, transformative and emergent’ (Guillemim and Gillam, 2004). Drawing on Braidotti’s (2002) appropriation of Derrida’s notion of ‘breaching’, this paper perhaps constitutes a breaching of what Canella and Lincoln (2007) term the ‘predatory’ governance of research ethics through reconceptualizing ‘informed consent’ as practices always in-process. This processual and negotiated approach to consent ruptures the top-down regulatory framework of new ethical bureaucracies that reinforce
inflexible binaries. These construct research participants as innocent and defenceless and researchers as potentially immoral and dangerous – discourses perhaps intensified in research with ‘marginalized’ children and young people. Focusing on the micro-ethics of fieldwork relations this article reinvigorates the intersubjective, situated and negotiated approach to research ethics (i.e. beyond universal regulations). It reconceptualizes informed consent as a constant state of becoming, never fully realized or achieved.

Our starting point was one in which critical reflexive praxis took centre stage before, during and beyond our fieldwork. While we experienced this practice as incredibly labour-intensive (yielding a mass of field notes and qualitative recordings), it was, nevertheless, a highly productive method, sensitizing the research team to the micro-ethics of research practice, all of which called for an ongoing identification of ethical issues and tensions as they arose in-the-moment. As Canella and Lincoln outline:

By mandating ongoing attention to ethical concerns, ethical reflexivity reminds researchers that few research projects proceed as expected; many ethical issues are unforeseen in advance; participants have their own concerns regarding ethical behavior which cannot be predicted by institutional review boards; ethics, as a general concern, reside in specific situations with the complex histories of individuals (Canella and Lincoln, 2007: 327).

There is nothing new or innovative perhaps in sharing micro-ethical moments or foregrounding the young people’s participation in research as complex process that demands a degree of critical reflexivity. However, notions of reflexivity are not often framed in terms of ethics (although see Doucet and Mauthner, 2002), particularly in relation to research with children and young people, where discourses of protection and safety override informed consent. This article is about critically examining the potential of participatory research as ethical enterprise through conceptualizing ethics as: reflexive praxis, as relational, as political and as dialogic. Our methodology, devised specifically to explore participation as always in-negotiation, afforded us the opportunity to critically explore diverse cultures of participation, through re-presenting key fieldwork moments from participants selected for their contrasting engagements with the participatory ethos of the project. Some of the techniques and practices in our journey of reflexively exploring the notion of ‘becoming participant’ might productively, although by no means exhaustively, be outlined as follows:

- Rendering participation visible throughout (embedding ‘ethical talk’ in everyday fieldwork relations)
- Always in-negotiation (recognizing that participation is a traveling concept and demands a blurring of the hierarchical binary of consent as give (active) and take (passive).
Responsive and directive (considering the constraints and possibilities of the ways in which ‘ethical talk/behaviour’ is directly sought or responded to ‘in the moment’)

Developing personalized ethical protocols (working out and working with individualized cultures of participation and communication)

Beyond linearity (resisting the singularity of informed consent as one-off or renewed practice towards the ebb and flow of participation-non-participation)

Reflexive mapping of ethical speed bumps (cyclical and reflexive ethics-in-practice before, during and beyond fieldwork period)

The article thus attempts to move beyond conceptualizing ethics solely in terms of multiple negotiated dilemmas. Rather it addresses ethics as ongoing dialogue in the micro-complexities inherent in everyday fieldwork relations. It stretches the meaning and practice of ‘informed consent’ beyond a series of renewals (Thorne, 1980) to a process of constant becoming and thus the fluid and dialogic nature of ‘becoming participant’. In doing so, we hope that we have gone some way, through reflective illustration of our own fieldwork relations to respond to the complexities of the iterative and uncertain character of consent in participatory approaches acknowledged by the UK’s Economic and Social Research Council. We hope we have done so in ways that might incite further critical dialogue within and beyond qualitative research communities.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to the young people who participated in this study and to the charity Tros Gynnal and an anonymous local authority for their partnership in the project.

Notes

1 All names of participants are pseudonyms, chosen by the young people.

2 The (Extra)ordinary Lives research project is a demonstrator project within the Qualiti node of the ESRC National Centre for Research Methods. Qualiti is based in the School of Social sciences in Cardiff University. The (Extra)ordinary Lives project team is: Sally Holland, Emma Renold, Nicola Ross and Alex Hillman. See: http://www.cardiff.ac.uk/socsi/qualiti/ for contact details and further information.

3 In this case, influenced by feminist poststructuralist approaches, we aim to deconstruct power relations, with an effort to transform, oppressive and inequitable knowledge and power structures shaping women and children’s lives.

4 The young people are aged between 10 and 20. All are white and of Welsh backgrounds. There are six girls and two boys, and all are living in a range of situations: kinship care (3), foster care (4) and post-care independent living (1). (A ninth young person, a girl in foster care, was involved for a shorter period). Two of the young people have previously spent time in residential settings.

5 For example, ‘identity’ is a category of assessment in young people’s planning meetings, see Holland (2006).

6 This is perhaps in stark contrast to the ways in which some contexts, such as schools, where recognition of children’s ‘voice’, ‘rights’ and notions of ‘empowerment’ are
relatively weak and where participatory approaches are often perceived as novel and exciting (although not without challenge, see Neale, 2004).

7 Of particular significance here, is how this project was enabled to fully explore the affordances and challenges of participatory research as a UK Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) funded project of the National Centre for Research Methods.

8 Ethical practices such as: inclusivity, collaboration, reciprocity, rapport, emotionality, accountability, responsibility, care, protection, consent, confidentiality, etc.

9 However, as many researchers embarking on participatory research with a view to disrupting rigid structural generational hierarchies (or what Pole et al. [1999] term lack of ‘age capital’) children have noted, participatory ethos is frequently compromised in the first stages of access via a range of adult gatekeepers. Our own project was no exception with its own multiple hierarchies of access (although we did manage to informally discuss our initial research ideas to a group of young people directly via only one set of adult gatekeepers).

10 We have also met up with each young person individually to explore with them not only what we have come to ‘know’ about their lives from the ‘data’ they have generated and from our observations and talk with them, but also our initial analysis of some of the emerging themes that we would like to write about and represent.

11 Vicky Pollard is a character on the BBC comedy sketch show ‘Little Britain’. She is described on the BBC website as ‘Vicky Pollard is your common-or-garden teenage delinquent . . . Whether nicking stuff from the supermarket or swapping her baby for a Westlife CD, Vicky reacts to any accusation with indignant outrage, while filling you in on ‘this fing wot you know nuffin about’ (http://www.bbc.co.uk/comedy/littlebritain/characters/vicky.shtml).

12 Eight months after the fieldwork is completed and project sessions end, Andy is happy for us to comment upon his participation in the project, but does not wish us to analyse or portray what we have come to learn about his everyday life.

References


Emma Renold is a senior lecturer in Childhood Studies at Cardiff University. She is the author of Girls, Boys and Junior Sexualities (Routledge, 2005) and co-author of Peer Violence in Children’s Residential Care (Palgrave, 2004). Her research has explored issues of gender, sexuality and violence using ethnographic and participatory methods with children and people across diverse institutional sites and spaces. Her next research project foregrounds space, bodies, femininity and movement in a participative ethnography of girls’ negotiations of their local outdoors. Address: Cardiff School of Social Sciences, Cardiff University, Glamorgan Building, King Edward VII Avenue, Cardiff CF10 3WT, Wales, UK. [email: Renold@cf.ac.uk]

Sally Holland is a senior lecturer in Cardiff University and Course Director of the MA Social work. She has just completed a participatory research project with looked after young people within the qualitative research node of the ESRC National Centre for Research Methods. She is the author of Child and Family Assessment in Social Work Practice (SAGE, 2004). Her previous research has focused on assessment of parenting, family group conferences, family support, child protection and children’s national identities. She has worked as a social worker with children in local authority and voluntary sector settings. Address: Cardiff School of Social Sciences, Cardiff University, Glamorgan Building, King Edward VII Avenue, Cardiff CF10 3WT, Wales, UK. [email: HollandS1@cf.ac.uk]

Nicola Ross is a Research Associate, based in the School of Social Sciences at Cardiff University. As part of ESRC funded QUALITI centre, she conducted participatory research with looked after children and young people involved in a multi-media research project. She has worked in academic and voluntary sectors for a number of years conducting research with children, young people and families. She specializes in the use of visual and mobile research methods and her doctoral research focused on children’s negotiations of their localities (see Children's Geographies 2007, 5[4]: 373–91). Address: Research Associate, Cardiff School of Social Sciences, Cardiff University, Glamorgan Building, King Edward VII Avenue, Cardiff CF10 3WT, Wales, UK. [email: RossN1@cf.ac.uk]
Alex Hillman is a research associate based in the medical school at Cardiff University. She is currently working on a project exploring the social and ethical implications of future developments in telemedicine and telehealth. Previously, she worked for the qualitative research node of the ESRC National Centre for Research Methods undertaking participatory, ethnographic research with young people in care. Alex’s main area of interest is medical sociology and her doctoral work involved an ethnographic study of emergency medicine. Address: Department of Primary Care and Public Health, Cardiff University, Clinical Epidemiology Interdisciplinary Research Group, School of Medicine, Neuadd Meirionnydd, Heath Park, Cardiff CF14 4XN, Wales, UK. [email: HillmanAE1@cf.ac.uk]