

Ethical issues in guaranteeing anonymity

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Having decided to write “Teresa’s Tale”, a narrative case study of one student’s journey through a Mathematics Enhancement Course, it was apparent that it would be impossible to retain anonymity due to the nature of the events to be described. This paper attempts to explore and resolve some of the ethical issues and conflicts encountered. In medical research, there is strict adherence to anonymity and clear guidance as to when this not only could, but also should, be breached. The situation is less clear in qualitative research scenarios, as it is not possible to guarantee anonymity totally in the first place and the situation is more complex as one moves towards narrative research where it is often the case that the research participant wishes to be identified in telling their story.

Keywords: ethics; anonymity; confidentiality.

Introduction/background

The purpose of my research is to explore how students on one Mathematics Enhancement Course (MEC), a six-month mathematics course designed to provide participants with relevant subject knowledge prior to training as secondary mathematics teachers, perceive assessment. What influences affect their perceptions? How do their perceptions affect their engagement with assessment tasks?

My research is based within an enactivist framework (Reid, 1996) that forms both my philosophy and methodology. My data consists of course documentation such as assessment feedback and students’ responses to this, reflective logs and course evaluations. In addition, I am using an open response questionnaire at the start and end of the course in order to compare responses and identify changes in perceptions relating to assessments that have occurred during the course. The data will be analysed in two ways, firstly, using thematic analysis by cohort (Rapley, 2011) and, secondly, using narrative critical event analysis in which a critical event “reveals a change of understanding or worldview of the storyteller” (Webster & Mertova, 2007, p.73) for case studies. These two perspectives will act as the warp and weft of a fabric in that I anticipate that patterns will emerge in the way individual cases are contrasted with the cohort analysis to weave a complex cloth.

One case study - Teresa’s Tale

In this paper, I am exploring the ethical considerations involved in writing a particular case study, Teresa’s Tale, of one student, whom I have given the pseudonym Teresa.

Yin suggests five reasons for choosing a particular case study. These are: the ‘critical’ case where a single case can “represent the critical test of a significant theory” (2009, p.48); an ‘extreme’ or ‘unique’ case, which would be selected if it illustrates a rare situation; an ‘average’ case, which can illustrate a ‘typical’ situation; a ‘revelatory’ case, which allows the researcher access to some new situation; or a

'longitudinal' case, where some cases are studied at different points in time to look for changes. In my opinion, these are not mutually exclusive categories. For example, I am gathering data across the duration of the course with the potential for interviews beyond that point. At the same time, I intend to select case studies that give differing perspectives on the students' assessment perceptions.

Teresa's experience of the MEC was definitely not 'average' and could be considered as 'extreme' or even 'unique'. She had a long daily journey to attend the MEC. Additionally, several significant events occurred concurrently in her personal life, which meant that time available to her for study was extremely limited. During the course of the MEC, her personal circumstances became more restrictive before finally easing off somewhat towards the end of the course. She had anticipated some of the problems but not all, certainly not the severity of their impact on her. With hindsight, she may have been better off starting the course a year later when she could have anticipated that most of her issues would have been resolved, as indeed they were.

It is these issues that make Teresa an interesting case study. As the pressure on her increased and her study time became squeezed, Teresa became less and less engaged with the assessment tasks to the extent that she did not engage with the final project, a piece of mathematics undertaken by the student on a topic of their choice, which most students find hard to stop working on once they have started.

Another reason that makes this case of interest to me is that Teresa did not tell me about events that were overtaking her, or if she did she did not reveal their severity. I often found out by chance later on with another student mentioning Teresa's issues when she had begun to resolve the situation. I want to examine Teresa's changing perceptions of assessment through narrative critical event analysis, partly because she was attempting to keep critical events to herself at the time they were occurring.

It was only when I began to write the case study that I became aware that simply anonymising the data was insufficient. If I were to share Teresa's Tale in full, anyone who knew her would be able to identify her through the context and the events described as they are completely unique even though I have changed the name. Attempting to write Teresa's Tale starkly showed my naïve view of ethical behaviour, paying lip service to ethics rather than fully considering the implications of each aspect. What follows is an attempt to partially redress this by paying particular attention to issues around anonymity/identification and confidentiality.

Anonymity and confidentiality

Wiles (2012) points out that confidentiality and anonymity are often conflated, which is exactly what I had done until realising that Teresa's identity would be exposed despite anonymity. According to Clark,

Anonymity is the process of not disclosing the identity of a research participant, or the author of a particular view or opinion. Confidentiality is the process of not disclosing to other parties opinions or information gathered in the research process (2006, p.4).

There are differing views about whether or not anonymity is desirable. Wiles, Crow, Heath & Charles (2008) report that for some researchers anonymisation is a core belief but over recent years there has been an increasing debate about whether anonymity is always the right approach. For example, Yin (2009) reckons that

identities should be disclosed as long as care has been taken to protect the participant from any harm.

Clark (2006) lists 3 reasons for anonymising data: firstly, to 'protect' the participant, which is important when the information is sensitive, illegal or confidential, or when the disclosure could cause distress to the participant if the information becomes known; secondly, to disguise the research location in order to further protect the participants e.g., if researching anti-social behaviour for example; and thirdly, the data protection act requires the protection of personal information and participants' identities.

Clark's (2006) reasons are linked with the idea of protecting the participant from possible harm, and probably do so in large-scale research. When working with case studies the participant could be identified despite anonymisation in which case anonymisation is not an effective route to maintain confidentiality and protect from harm. Moreover, Clark (2006) adds that some participants may wish to be identified, an idea backed up by Wiles et al. (2008) who say that perhaps anonymity is only appropriate or desirable in some sorts of research. According to Clark (2006), the process of anonymisation is not 'one size fits all', but must be approached ethically with an open mind. Clark's view is that the best approach is to share the concerns with the participant that, despite anonymisation of data, it may still be possible to identify them. Indeed, in narrative research, participants are often identified. Rather than using anonymity, Smythe & Murray (2010) say that it must be clear to the participant how confidentiality will be ensured and steps should be taken to avoid harm to the participant over and above a minimal level of that which they could reasonably expect in everyday life.

Overall though, it appears that not only does anonymity not guarantee confidentiality it may also be impossible to achieve complete anonymity (Clark, 2006). This leaves two questions. What are the boundaries of confidentiality? When is it ethical to breach confidentiality and when is it not?

Breaching confidentiality

Confidentiality can be breached accidentally or deliberately. Wiles (2012) describes how accidental breaches can occur when, despite not naming a participant, the information provided by the research identifies the individual. I could claim that my dilemma falls into this category, however, since I am aware of this it would no longer be accidental and would become a deception on my part.

Whilst it seems to be universally agreed that the researcher should plan to avoid accidental breaches as far as possible, it is not always possible to anticipate what might occur. Clark (2006) says that situations have to be dealt with as they occur and that accidental breaches may be impossible to avoid. Indeed, in Wiles et al.'s (2008) study, which involved researchers and PhD students, many researchers reported accidentally breaking confidentiality despite intending to behave ethically.

For deliberate breaches, there is clear guidance available on situations when confidentiality not only may be breached but also should be. For example, cases in medical research, when breaking confidence is less harmful than not doing so. Or, where there is risk to the public (Royal College of Nursing, 2009). Various other professionals, such as teachers, social workers and researchers working in similar fields, operate under various legal requirements such as the 1989/2004 Children's Act (NSPCC, 2014). They are required to report disclosures of, for example, sexual abuse.

Wiles et al. (2008) found most people felt duty bound to break confidentiality if the participant was at risk of harm, but not where there was involvement in crime or other illegal activity. Moreover, they found that the literature reflects a level of uncertainty relating to disclosure, regarding both illegal activities and the risk of harm to the participant. The decisions researchers made sometimes appear to be made on moral rather than legal grounds. This leads me to wonder if there is a difference between ethical and moral behaviour.

Ethical or moral behaviour?

Wiles (2012) defines ethics as the philosophy of morality, going on to say that the words ethics and morals can often be interchanged. In these terms, ethical behaviour and moral behaviour are the same. However, Kimmel (1988) considers an act ethical if it conforms to a code of practice or a set of principles, and points out that it is possible to follow totally the relevant guidance and still be left with a sense of unease arising from personal morals.

According to Munro & Bragaglia (2012), both interpretation of the guidelines and the point at which one's personal morality comes to bear will differ for each individual and raise the question of who decides what is ethical in the first place – I will not debate this here. They describe a project where there was great difficulty getting an individual to speak on the record only later to leave out that particular case study as it was the only woman, despite being the one that really brought alive the findings of the study. The researchers later found the case reported in the Guardian with the person's real name. The researchers, whilst wishing they had included the case study, still felt that morally leaving it out was the right decision to have taken at the time.

Hammersley & Traianou (2011) warn against 'overdoing' morality in research e.g., if researching criminals, the criminal activity will be discussed and if every criminal act were reported then the criminals would not engage with the research in the first place. Indeed, as discussed above, researchers tend not to report criminal activity in such cases, i.e., ethical behaviour is not black and white. There is a grey area where the researcher must balance the good the research could do against possible harm to individual participants and society at large.

Overall, it seems that ethical guidance is needed, but personal morality must play a significant part, especially when working with individual case studies. Although, according to Smythe & Murray, "It is widely agreed by now among narrative researchers that traditional ethical principles in research offer insufficient guidance" (2010, p.318), which links with Wiles et al.'s (2008) finding of the need for a wider debate over recent years. Smythe & Murray (2010) believe that in narrative research more emphasis should be on the discretion of the researcher. Moreover, as one never knows what might occur in a narrative interview, there is always a risk of finding one has suddenly stepped beyond that anticipated and into areas that could be harmful to the participant. From an enactivist perspective, Varela (1999) believes we respond to such events using 'immediate coping', i.e., we take decisions in the moment rather than through rational debate. Therefore it is important that the researcher is secure in their ethical intentions prior to interacting with the participants.

The onus is on the researcher to have a constant awareness of what the participant has consented to, as well as to possible harm. As a result, informed consent can no longer be seen as a one-off event at the start of the research process,

but an on-going negotiation involving both parties, which must be initiated by the researcher at all stages (Wiles, 2008; Smythe & Murray, 2010).

Reflecting

I started this process with a naïve view that a one-off informed consent form was meeting ethical requirements of me. My form detailed the items I wished to use; promised anonymity through use of pseudonyms and the right to withdraw, whilst saying that I would report results at conferences, in research reports and in my final thesis. I am now aware that is far from sufficient as an ethical grounding to my research. Through focussing on anonymity, I have become aware that the real issue was not how to ensure anonymity, rather that anonymity is one means of ensuring that no harm should come to Teresa, in particular through breaching confidentiality. Moreover, it is not actually possible totally to guarantee anonymity.

Now I also need to consider that pseudonyms are insufficient to guarantee anonymity. Wiles et al. (2008) suggests other means of anonymising data such as omitting or disguising aspects of the data. Wiles (2012) says that there is little discussion in the literature on how identities can be disguised beyond pseudonyms. Where this is discussed it becomes apparent that there is a difficulty in balancing disguise and distortion with truth and the extent to which data can be changed without affecting the nature of the research, which becomes an ethical issue in its own right since the participants themselves often see it as lying (Corden & Sainsbury, 2005).

Some researchers discuss with participants in what ways to change their identity, or what aspects of the data can be included (Wiles et al., 2008), although there is no accepted guidance of the level to which participants should be included (Smythe & Murray, 2010). In the case of Teresa, it would be difficult to disguise the facts without losing the strength of the story. It is the events that occurred that would identify her, the very events I need if I am to perform narrative critical event analysis. Hence, I will need to discuss with Teresa what aspects of the story I may use.

Having promised anonymity, I had not made it clear to the participants that it is impossible to ensure total anonymity (Clark, 2006; Wiles et al., 2008), nor had I considered that some participants may wish to be identified and even expect to be so (BERA, 2011). Through a discussion a few days ago, I have also become aware anonymity/confidentiality may be breached by someone other than the researcher. For example, a participant revealing that they took part in a particular research project could mean that other participants become identifiable. It seems to me that the impact of this happening would be lessened if the participants' identities were already in the public domain. Consequently, information shared by each participant would be attributed to that participant from the outset. Without being able to rely on anonymity as a safety net, great care would have to be taken to consider what would constitute harm to that participant as an individual and ensure that confidentiality is maintained.

Rather than proceed directly with writing Teresa's Tale, I now understand that my next step must be to readdress how I deal with informed consent. The consent form I have is only the start of what must become an ongoing reflexive process. I will begin by meeting with Teresa to discuss identification and how a case study would be published.

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