The ethics of researching something dear to my heart with others 'like me'

Yvonne Downs

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter I revisit some of the incidents, concerns and pre-occupations that arose for me while doing research for my PhD and which I see as arising precisely because of what I was researching, how I was going about it and why I had started it in the first place.

For many years prior to starting my research, I had become increasingly concerned about the absence of a lexicon (Reay 2005) with which to articulate my graduate story, the nature of the enduring influence of higher education in my life, and what this contributed to analyses of the value of higher education. I was hearing little that resonated with my own experience, either in policy rhetoric, or in conversations with friends and family who were not graduates and who had not experienced any form of higher education. Once I began my own research, I also found that academic research on graduates focuses mainly on employment issues, earnings potential or social mobility. Research on those who had been graduates for a decade or more was rare. I thought that talking to longstanding graduates about all aspects of a life, and not just a working life for example, would be a good way of finessing and fragmenting the meaning of value in the context of higher education and that a longer time span would focus attention not only on the enduring but also the changing nature of the experience, how it plays itself out over a lifetime, and how this can be articulated in

terms of value. Consequently I enlisted the help of eight other women 'like me' -

graduates from white working class backgrounds who had gone from school to English

universities in the 1970s - in order to hear their stories. Therefore my research was

intensely personal in that I wanted to make sense of the unruly mess that constituted

my feelings about whether going to university had been a positive move for me. My

hope was to hear counter-narratives to those dominant stories that made little sense

of my experience. But it was also sociological in the broadest sense of the word, in that

it offered a way to challenge a decontextualized concept of 'the' value of higher

education, one which seems able to preserve the appearance of unvarying uniformity

and general acceptability while simultaneously being open to a range of definitions. I

now critically review the ethical basis and conduct of this research.

Although the main purpose of this chapter is to consider some of the ethical issues of

doing research with a personal agenda involving personal relationships, I have also

reflected on the evolution of my understanding of praxis, or 'philosophy becoming

practical' (Lather 1991: 11), and my claim to do feminist research with an underlying

moral purpose and a commitment to critical reflexivity. Praxis in my view is always in

process and is informed not only by experience but also, crucially, by the

circumstances in which that experience is located. If I were a journalist rather than an

academic researcher, say, I have no doubt that my understandings about and approach

to research ethics would not be what they are now. The contextual nature of what

follows cannot be ignored.

I have organized this chapter into two broad sections. In the first I begin by outlining each of three kinds of ethics – procedural, situational and relational – and I layer that with a consideration of the fact that my research was both dear to my heart and purported to involve others' like me'. Transitioning to the next section I then set out what I mean by feminist research as feminist praxis and how each kind of ethics both informed and created tensions for this praxis. The second section involves the analysis of two vignettes through the lens of this feminist praxis and with the critical distance afforded by the passing of time, focusing specifically on the inflections of power and ethics in relationships. Because it connects most closely to the particular issues I am highlighting here, I will focus most strongly on relational ethics in this section. But this should not be taken for its privileging. My argument is that reliance on any one framework is unwise (Sikes and Piper 2010). Although it seems to be the case that procedural ethics are institutionally privileged, and I have found that there are particular instances in the conduct of research in which one or the other concept of ethics might be to the fore, it is by no means the case that any of them can ever be discounted.

WHAT KIND OF ETHICS?

There tends to be an assumption of shared understandings about what 'ethics' means and a sense in which research ethics is seen as a bounded body of knowledge, a way of conducting oneself in research situations that is broadly understood and agreed. This is, however, a very particular view, although it corresponds closely to the notion of procedural ethics, the kind of ethics enshrined in and fostered by Ethics Review

protocols for example[1]. Those whose work brings them into contact with humans (or human tissue) will require 'ethical clearance' by their institutions. This means that (some, and certain) ethical considerations are brought to the forefront of our minds at the very start of the process. This will necessarily lend procedural ethics a dominant air.

But my own experience led me to conclude that what ethics is, what it is supposed to do, and expectations about both, are not as consistent as the protocols associated with ethics review might suggest. There are a number of ethical frameworks on which we might draw and this will influence how we go about our business and, in turn, what it is we share with the world. Sikes (2010: 14) makes this clear when she sets out her 'bricolage' approach to research ethics and Hendry (2013) demonstrates that judgements about what might be deemed ethical in relation to practices in the world of finance are not static but dependent on whether one is taking a virtue, utilitarian or Kantian contractualist or consensus ethics framework. In short, what we mean by 'ethics' influences what we give prominence to, how we set limits and draw boundaries, how we chose the questions we ask, how we articulate those questions and how we analyse, evaluate and interpret research. I am focusing on only three particular constructs of ethics here because they resonated with, and created tensions in, my desire that the conduct of my research should realize my feminist praxis.

---

[1] Academic research in the UK, with which I am familiar, that involves humans or human tissue is reviewed for its ethicality before it is allowed to proceed. There are similar review processes and protocols in other countries, such as the IRB in the US.

Procedural ethics

The term 'procedural ethics' was used by Guillemin & Gillam (2004), primarily to distinguish it from 'situational ethics'. It corresponds to the kind of ethics conceptualized in, for example, the ethics review process or the IRB. A distinguishing feature of procedural ethics is the assumption that certain situations and challenges can be anticipated and met ethically even before research begins. I am not dismissive of the requirement to think in advance about some of the ethical challenges that might occur (Tolich 2010), or about how to translate the ethical intentions of feminist praxis into ethical acts. However, my view of procedural ethics was coloured by my first attempt at doing life history research when I interviewed my sister about her experiences at school for a Masters in Educational Research which I was doing at the University of Sheffield in the UK. I thought I had anticipated the ethical issues this would entail but only days before our scheduled interview, our mother suffered a stroke from which she would not recover. My research went ahead as planned, because my sister said it would be a welcome distraction for her. However, I was also aware that my ready acceptance of her assurances were silencing a nagging voice urging me to give my sister more time to think things through.

It is not the specificity of this situation that is most important here, and subsequent conversations with my sister lead me to believe she would not have changed her mind, and I certainly did her no harm. Nor does it reveal in a more general way the tensions created when the exigencies of research are brought into the arena of human interaction. It highlights instead that bridging the gap between ethical intention and ethical action asks much of the *researcher* as a human being in interaction with other

human and non-human beings. The review process, however, seems to have less to do with creating the conditions for the development of 'ethical wisdom' Sikes and Piper (2010: 176) and more to do with adherence to protocols. Moreover, these very protocols and the apparent rigour of the process can create a false sense of security. I found it 'very painful to fall down the gap between professed intention and action, between what I thought I was doing and what I was actually doing, without even realising it and despite my best intentions.' (Downs 2007: 73). I was more than mindful to find a way to avoid this experience in future.

Situational ethics

When I began my PhD I was therefore already aware that 'vigilance in practice and duty to those I research is infinite and relentless' (Downs 2007: 73). It is this need for constant vigilance that sits at the heart of situational ethics. Situational ethics encapsulates the idea that research, certainly qualitative research involving other people as well as the researcher, is a dynamic process that is shaped and re-shaped, and that shapes and re-shapes itself, in the course of its execution. The researcher must be equally alive to the way in which 'ethics explodes anew in every circumstance, demands a specific re-inscription, and hounds praxis unmercifully' (St. Pierre 1997: 176). It is therefore an ethics in practice and differs from the notion of ethics as fixed set of challenges against which one can take action or which can be mitigated in advance. It is the ethics of that which does not fit the form. In my own research on the value of higher education it came into play through my methodological decision to work at the interface of autoethnography and auto/biography (Stanley 1992). Such a relationship does not signify a particularly innovative approach. Gubrium and Holstein

(2009: 22) highlight the linkages between narrative and ethnography and in fact use the term 'narrative ethnography' for example. Nevertheless the prominence of temporality in auto/biographical research and of situation in autoethnographic research created the need to look in different directions and from different perspectives simultaneously, and to be alive to the ethical aspects created by those dynamics.

Relational Ethics

The fact that my research involved both my own story and that of other women who were 'like me' demanded a third way of thinking about ethics, one that Ellis (2007) calls relational. Ellis (2007: 4) states that 'relational ethics requires researchers to act from our hearts and minds, to acknowledge our interpersonal bonds to others, and initiate and maintain conversations' and to 'deal with the reality and practice of changing relationships over time'. If procedural ethics is about imparting a sense of sure-footedness, relational ethics is about keeping you on your toes. The question 'what should I do now? goes with the territory ' (Bergum 1998, quoted in Ellis 2007: 4). Ellis (2007: 4-5) asks 'If our participants become our friends, what are our ethical responsibilities toward them?' and this was particularly pertinent to my own research, where there were pre-existing friendships and friendships that developed because of it. While this question can in theory be anticipated and addressed as part of ethics review this is only to some extent because the subtle, complex and evolving interplay between humans by its very nature eludes articulation in language (Buber 2000).

RESEARCH 'DEAR TO MY HEART'

A major contextualising factor in this critical review of the ethical basis of my research was that that it was motivated by a personal agenda. It might reasonably be argued that all research is motivated by a personal agenda, whether that is for instrumental reasons such as furthering one's career, or altruistic reasons such as a commitment to social justice for example. Indeed, viewed from another angle, what kind of research would it be if the researcher had no personal investment in it? When I say personal agenda here, however, I mean research on topics and in areas that have a deeply personal resonance in the life of the researcher, when you would not have started it unless it answered questions about something you care about in your own life. In this sense I would say that a personal agenda is a pre-requisite of auto/biographical and autoethnographic research. Furthermore, all research, even that which is not required to gain 'ethical clearance', is suffused with the need to consider issues of an ethical nature. The ethics of research is not necessarily greater in research such as mine where the personal agenda was to a great degree explicit (but not entirely explicit – that would require a degree of self-awareness few possess, and certainly not I) but they are of a different order and they are often amplified, which to my mind is all to the good.

I designate my research as dear to my heart because it was designed to answer questions that were important to me personally. I had been seeking answers to them for a while and this reached a crescendo while I was working as Aimhigher co-ordinator in a college of further education. Aimhigher, an initiative by the then Labour government in the UK, aimed to encourage students from groups under-represented

in higher education to apply to institutions of higher education and to continue their education at that level. A much overlooked fact about this policy initiative is that the definition of higher education and higher education institutions was broader than doing a full degree at university. This differentiated nature of the educational offer did not penetrate popular consciousness to any extent, but it was one reason that I was conflicted for much of the time in this role. It also led me to question the value of higher education in my own life. At the time the fact I had been to university didn't seem to have done me much good, either financially, or in other ways such as in my personal relationships. Indeed I recall one moment of clarity when I realized my situation and the 'choices' I faced looked little different to that of my mother who had left school aged 16 in 1942. At the same time, and even with the benefit of hindsight, I knew I would make the same decision again because there was something about my university experience that was irreplaceable in my life. So there was a personal agenda here inasmuch as I wanted to understand what that was.

Nevertheless, this kind of research, particularly when it is realized through autoethnographic approaches seems to invoke some trenchant, not to say virulent, critiques. Delamont (2007) for example calls it 'lazy research', going so far as to question its legitimacy and referring for example to 'the narcissistic substitution of autoethnography for research' (2009: 51). Skeggs (2002: 349) challenges the ethicality of narrative genres generally in her contention that that '(t)he techniques of telling also rely on accruing the stories of others in order to make them property for oneself'. In her critique of reflexivity as 'confession, catharsis or cure' Pillow (2003) has also addressed issues which are pertinent to research in general and to auto/biographical

and autoethnographic research in particular. Needless to say I disagree with Delamont, Skeggs and Pillow, although I value their critiques as a clear starting point for a critical and ethical engagement with my own views. That notwithstanding, I think the most fundamental issue here is not the prima facie legitimacy of any particular way of researching, or the criteria by which we judge research quality. Important as these debates are, the fundamental issue here pivots on the purpose of the research.

Academic research with a personal agenda that has salience only for oneself is difficult to justify, even unjustifiable, perhaps unethical. Even if it is not wasteful of the resources that we as academic researchers have at our disposal, is it a good use of them? Goodson (1999) posits the idea of the researcher as public intellectual, and as fraught as this notion may be in the current political climate, this would seem a more appropriate use of public funds. But while my research had a personal agenda, it was not done simply for the purpose of satisfying personal curiosity. Saying that my research had a personal agenda and was motivated by questions I had about my own life is not synonymous with saying it was only relevant to me. If graduates like me were almost entirely absent from the academic literature, it reflects the fact that we are *actually* missing from higher education. Official statistics, imperfect as they may be, confirm that white working class men and women are still the most under-represented group in higher education in England (Ebdon, 2013; National audit Office 2008) Combined with my Aimhigher experience I suspected that the questions I had were relevant to me because they were relevant to others. My personal concerns implicated policy (why have a decade of initiatives failed to have an impact?) and the politics of

research (why are long-standing graduates and particularly graduates like me being ignored?)

Stanley's (2000) argument that emphasis on the self leads to the social collapsing into interior processes seems to have less salience here than the early feminist insight that the personal is political. I was deeply troubled by the lack of nuance in the stories about participation in higher education. Aimhigher presented it as an unmitigated good, some popular storylines cast the presence of 'non-traditional' students in higher education as contaminating, some people told themselves stories about higher education being 'not for the likes of me', others still saw it as a measure of a person's worth and so on. None of these stories made sense to me, at least not entirely. If I could make sense of my own experience, I reasoned, I would be better able to engage with and challenge those accounts that were failing to help me understand more about the complex, changing *and* enduring meanings of higher education as I went through the course of my life.

RESEARCH WITH 'WOMEN LIKE ME'

Because I wanted to explore resonances and dissonances in our stories I wanted to speak to women who shared some of the structuring variables of my life – white women from working class backgrounds who, in the 1970s, went to university straight from school or almost straight from school (and hence followed the same trajectory as their middle class peers). This decision of course creates methodological issues, but this is not my concern here. My concern is with the ethical issues that arise when

emphasis is placed on the commonalities or perceived commonalities between researcher and participants.

There are several arguments against the inclusion of the researcher's story. Martin Tolich 2010: 1608) contends that '(t)he word *auto* is a misnomer because '(t)he self might be the focus of research, but the self is porous, leaking to the other without due ethical consideration'. Whilst I would take issue with Tolich about the degree of ethical consideration that is usually exercised by those of us doing such research, his point about leakage is an important one and was further complicated in my case by the fact that my story was so proximate to those of other women 'like me'. Although she was by her own admission being deliberately provocative, one of Delamont's six arguments against autoethnography is that it 'abrogates our duty to go out and collect data' and another is that 'we are not interesting enough to write about in journals, to teach about, to expect attention from others'(2007: 3). Delamont expresses here a widely held view that research is about other people and other people's lives. Although my research might satisfy Delamont to some extent, the presence of my own story not only raised the issue of 'leakage' but linking the research to an explicitly personal agenda and then bringing this into proximity with persons other than myself immediately and forcefully raised other ethical challenges. These are, particularly, the potential for exploitation and the horror of what both Reinharz (1979) and Lather (1986) call 'rape research'; the privileging of the researcher's story above others; the imposition of a 'shared narrative'; ventriloquism; the smoothing out of difference and an enforced homogeneity.

PRINCIPLES OF FEMINIST PRAXIS

It is apparent from this last point that my research involved the interplay of ethical issues with issues of power. This is a challenging dynamic with which to engage and my way of doing so was through the underpinning principles of what I refer to as feminist praxis. My understanding has been shaped with reference, rather than adherence, to Bhavnani's (1993) engagement with Haraway's (1988) discussion of what 'feminist objectivity' might mean. There are three things to add to my own engagement with Bhavnani. First, she may not acknowledge any similarity with the original in my interpretation (although I do believe I have stayed faithful to that). Second, although the application of criteria such as these can become a mere tick-box exercise, thinking through how principles may be realized or jeopardized in practice was a useful rubric in making ethics review more than simply procedural. Finally, I use the term feminist praxis here but I would say these principles are applicable to notions of praxis in general, regardless of its incarnation.

The first principle that guided my feminist praxis concerns responsibility to participants. It is vital that what you do, and the way you go about it, does not re-inscribe participants into prevailing representations. For example, some narratives of higher education represent the presence and inclusion of working class students in higher education in terms of excess and as contaminating the academic ideal and undermining the prestige of having a degree. This is not without precedence. (Skeggs 2004: 99) states that 'the working class have a long history of being represented by excess'. She further maintains that the dynamics of race and gender are serving to cast white working class women as 'the abject of the nation' (2004: 23). This is an

important issue for procedural ethics because to my mind ethics review has a hand in the re-inscription process. A major raison d'être of ethics review, it might be argued, is to protect research participants from unethical researchers and research practices. But it also assumes researchers, or more accurately the academic institution in which researchers are located, need protection from participants should they become litigious. This means that both researchers and participants are represented as simultaneously devious *and* infantile and naive. Quite apart from the tension this creates, it is precisely the juxtaposition of seemingly incompatible traits which Said (2003) identified as a powerful mechanism in the process of 'othering'. Taking account of this principle alerted me to the need for something more than the procedural. Another aspect of one's responsibility to participants is that representations of participants should not minimize the presence of structural factors but nor should they valorize or romanticize participants. This was a major consideration when crafting participant stories, which were used in the research, but it also came into play when I was face to face with the co-participants, as I referred to them, as I will illustrate shortly.

A second principle requires that research should be cognizant of the macro political context in which it is carried out. In my study on the value of higher education, this included factors such as the marketisation of education, the politics of academic research and widening participation policy rhetoric. Reference to the macro political context also necessitates awareness of the historical moments in which research is located. My co-participants and I were talking in the 21st century about events and experiences that had happened decades before. It would be erroneous to have seen

this only as something to be addressed methodologically. Revisiting our younger selves at a time when the position of women was in some respects unlike that of today, and in others unchanged, is in many ways an ethical issue inasmuch as it forces a confrontation with identity at the point where 'private troubles' and 'public issues' collide (Mills 1959). None of us, on the day we were born, could have anticipated the trajectory our lives would take. Our educational life histories represent 'border crossings' which have in turn necessitated an ongoing engagement with our personal 'life politics' (Goodson 2011) and this process is imbued with deep emotional undercurrents, the depths of which can be estimated only partially in advance.

The third principle, that research should account explicitly for difference speaks directly to, and makes usefully problematic, the 'like me' in my title. There are two aspects to the notion of difference here. Ontologically there are of course commonalities and divergences in our biographies. But there is also an epistemological aspect. Although we might have shared an experience, the knowledge and sense making frameworks and traditions on which we were drawing, thirty years and more later, were not shared. The fact that this was 'my' research from which only I would benefit concretely and directly, and the fact that the contribution of the co-participants in analysis, interpretation and sense-making was entirely at my discretion, cannot be addressed through methodology alone. Indeed it is methodology itself that disguises here the strength and extent of the epistemological warrant on which the research proceeded. The word 'co' is no match for 'auto' in this instance.

It is for this reason that I consider the final principal, which insists on transparency around the micro-political processes of research, to have been paramount in this study. It is apparent from the above that everything we do as we go about doing research, from our broad methodological allegiances to the minutiae of its day to day conduct is implicated in a broader political agenda, whether we intend it to be or not. But quite apart from this, seemingly small acts have a political significance of their own, inasmuch as they echo broader power relations.

Having now talked in broad and general terms, in the next section of this chapter I will animate these points through the use of two conversational vignettes, brief composites of some of the things that happened when I went to interview women for my research. They are conceits – they have been composed by me to make or bring to the fore certain points but the incidents contained within them are not fictitious, even though they have been condensed and fictionalized. Likewise the 'participants' in the vignettes are composite representations, but they are each drawn from two actual participants – different ones in each vignette.

FEMINIST PRAXIS IN RESEARCH

For Bhavnani the micro-politics of research are most clearly to the fore in the research interview, because you are literally being brought face to face with them. She says of her own experience, as a woman of colour working with younger people from diverse ethnic backgrounds, that 'the interviewees and myself were inscribed within multi-faceted power relations which had structural domination *and* structural subordination in play on both sides' (Bhavnani 1993: 101, original emphasis). But these processes of

domination and subordination are not easy to explicate. Firstly, both researcher and

participants are multi-dimensional in their own right and the complexities of this are

compounded in their interactions with each other. The locus and nature of power, and

how it becomes manifest, also shift and change. This means that grappling with ethical

issues needs to be sensitive not only to individuals but to the dynamics between

individuals and to the context in which these interactions take place. As unsatisfactory

as this would be considered in a 'how to do ethical research' textbook, the best I could

achieve sometimes was to take a call, do the best I knew how, and to own the

consequences of that.

First vignette: When private troubles and public issues collide

The context for this first vignette is that I arrive early to interview a co-participant. I

ring the bell and no-one comes. I am standing there, nervous, wondering what to do

when the door is opened. The participant speaks first.

- Sorry about that I was on the phone

- No problem I'm early

- I've made lunch. We won't concentrate if we're starving and I've done a cake to
  have with our tea later. You did say you drink tea?

- That sounds great. Thank you. You shouldn't have gone to any trouble.

- My mother would never forgive me if I let you go away hungry

- She sounds like my mam

- Is yours still alive?

- No she died a year ago.

- Mine died last month

- Oh I am so sorry for your loss.

She bursts into tears. I fumble for tissues and pass her one. She speaks:

- How embarrassing. I bet you feel like running off.

- Not at all. It will get easier in time.

My purpose here, apart from animating the concept of relational ethics, is to show how power dynamics are imported into research settings *and* evolve in the conduct of research. I found this demanded a more nuanced approach to ethics than adherence to any one framework might suggest. Although I had initiated the relationship I was on this woman's territory and she was the one who determined the start of the encounter. Moreover, despite creating a particular role for her, namely co-participant, she did not simply acquiesce in its occupation. She foregrounded other roles for herself, those of 'hostess' and 'daughter' for example, she had views on the optimal conditions for research interviews that did not entirely accord with my own, and she considered herself at least my equal in creating those conditions. Moreover, she saw in the face to face encounter with another woman 'like her' the chance to articulate her grief. But the attempt to subvert my research agenda was not, and could never be, all encompassing. Ultimately I had not only the power but also her permission, thanks to the participant consent form, to steer things in my direction. But I did not feel so

secure in this. Two questions fought it out in my mind. 'What kind of person would simply ignore the suffering of someone standing in front of them?' 'And what kind of researcher would allow themselves to be put in a position where they might do more harm than good?' because at this point I had no way of knowing whether I was being cast as therapist. Was this woman crying simply because of the perceived commonalities between us or did she see the interview as having some therapeutic value?

Ellis & Bochner (2000: 757) maintain that stories *should* have a therapeutic purpose but, where the creation of those stories involves others, the ethical implications are complex. In particular it demands a relationship with the participant that the researcher may not be willing or able to maintain beyond the interview and it fixes researcher and participant into a particular power relationship – with the participant in an arguably subservient role. It has, in short, great potential to fall foul of the principle not to re-inscribe participants into prevailing representations. As a researcher I had already set a particular relationship in play that would inevitably compromise any other. I re-iterate that I am not reading this situation through a methodological lens but through an ethical one. Given that I was neither willing nor felt able to enter into a therapeutic relationship I asked if she wanted to continue participation in the research. I had specified in the participant consent form that participants could withdraw from the research at any time but finding myself in a position where this could become a reality was no small matter for me as my research population was already limited (very few working class girls were in higher education in the 1970s). I had found it hard to find women to talk to and I was worried about losing anyone having found them. The

fact that I did 'the only honest thing' (Delamont: 2009) speaks to the power of relational ethics as much as it does to my personal integrity. It is illuminating that I addressed this diversion of my own agenda by re-imposing my own. I am not unsympathetic but distance myself, reject the role of fellow traveller on grief's road and, in the offer of a tissue, redirect the flow of power. This speaks eloquently to the way in which ethics and antecedent power politics are manifested in particular research situations.

Second vignette: Friendship and research

I interviewed each of my co-participants twice and the following conversation is one that begins after completion of a second interview. The participant here is not the same as in the first vignette, in the sense that she is drawn from two different, but still actual, co-participants. She speaks first.

- I can't believe three hours have gone by.

- I am so sorry – I know I said it would take about two.

- Before you go I have tickets for a Damien Hirst retrospective. I think it would be right up your street. Do you want to come?

The purpose of this vignette is to highlight issues around friendship in research. Goodson and Sikes (2001) advise caution in working with friends but I was left with little choice because of difficulties in finding participants. Furthermore, friendship is not a unitary concept – it takes different forms and can change in nature. Two of the women I worked with were already friends of mine. Friendships also developed in the

course of research, and of these two have endured. And I was certainly friendly with them all. Although I am concentrating on ethical issues here there are of course methodological challenges attaching to researching with friends and becoming friends with research participants, and it is not always easy or wise to see these as separate. For example, it was talking to a friend about the difficulties I was having that led her to suggest her own participation. I initially intended to use this interview as a 'pilot' but changed my mind because I felt to do so would be too dismissive of her contribution.

Despite differences in their form, there are certain characteristics that friendships share and these highlight some of the issues attaching to relational ethics. One of the key elements of friendship is trust and this will either be imported or will develop in the research setting. Finch (1984) has highlighted the fact this may make the research setting feel safer, but it also increases the potential for exploitation, primarily of the participant by the researcher but also of the researcher by the participant. I was very conscious about the times the research interview went off track – or I when I was led off track. It was difficult for me to deal with this. On the one hand it would have felt too clinical to say 'That isn't relevant for my research so I won't respond'. On the other when interviews took longer than I had allowed for on the participant information sheet I felt conflicted. It was one thing for it to take up more of my time – after all that was my research. But everyone I interviewed had full and busy lives. Less altruistically, sometimes the most trenchant points were made through these digressions and I didn't want to interrupt this. Particularly when interviewing friends that I had before doing the research, and therefore where I might have felt less inhibited about interrupting, I often didn't for reasons of 'getting good data'. Hence behaving ethically

as a friend and doing the best I could in terms of the research were not entirely and not always compatible.

This dilemma also played itself out when someone cried as I interviewed them. It is apparent in the first vignette that these were times when I (re)took command. I was not unmoved in the face of their distress, but I didn't cry with them, although I cried later while I was transcribing interviews and crafting their stories. I am still not sure how and why I held myself in check. Perhaps I didn't consider it appropriate researcher behaviour, or perhaps it was previous training in 'holding safe' those in anguish. Whilst this was laudable on the one hand, on the other it set up a power relation in which I as researcher remained in control.

A further issue concerning friendship in research is that I did worry about how the participants would react to what I wrote about them. All the participants read their own transcripts and were able to amend and edit and redact what they had said. My analysis was done through the crafting of stories about their lives as graduates and they also read these. All gave permission to share their stories with other participants and most read, and commented on, all the other participant stories. It therefore wasn't so much on their behalf that I was worried. I felt I had ample assurance that they were satisfied I was not out to misrepresent them. It was on my own behalf that I was troubled. I was worried that what I wrote would damage existing or burgeoning friendships. Although it did not ultimately influence the decisions I made, it did cause me some sleepless nights.

CONCLUSION

Re-visiting how I went about my research and certain in the knowledge that no-one

has sued me, or contacted me to express regret at their participation or the way in

which I represented that, and staying in contact with half of the women who took part,

has given me the confidence to look with a more critical eye at the ethical conduct of

my research than I might have done had any of these things occurred. Although the

requirement of procedural ethics to anticipate ethical issues prior to beginning

research was useful in some respects, I was wise on this occasion not to let it lull me

into a false sense of security. I was also wise to the ways in which it might run counter

to the principles of my feminist praxis. This time I was aware of the constant vigilance

required by situational ethics and the necessity of attending to relational ethics.

And yet, in terms of my ethical conduct, doing the right thing as a researcher was

sometimes the very thing that made me behave in ways that I would not have done

otherwise. My own view, formulated over time and informed by my particular

experiences, is that it is wise to see research as a human enterprise, one that is

integrated with a range of researcher and participant identities and activities. This

does not obviate the need to attend to the fine grain of specific research acts and

situations and to set these in congress with particular ethical rubrics. But I would argue

that the primary function of such protocols is not the protection of research

participants, including researchers, but the mitigation of the consequences of

unethical breaches for the pockets and reputation of their institutions. Even with the

benefit of hindsight, I still feel that research that proceeds from a deep involvement

with other people, regardless of the form that takes, can never be other than

challenging and uncomfortable and require versatility and sensitivity in its realisation. And this might equally be applied to life in general.

REFERENCES

Bhavnani, K.-K. (1993) 'Tracing the contours: feminist research and feminist objectivity', *Women's Studies International Forum*, 16: 95-104.

Buber, M. (2000) *I and thou,* New York: Scribner.

Delamont, S. (2007) 'Arguments against autoethnography', *Qualitative Researcher* 4: 2-4.

Delamont, S. (2009) 'The only honest thing: autoethnography, reflexivity and small crises in fieldwork', *Ethnography and Education,* 4: 51-63.

Downs, Y. (2007) 'An evaluation of the experience of doing life history research: a case study', unpublished Masters thesis, University of Sheffield.

Ebdon, L. (2013) *UCAS 2013 end of cycle report: good progress on access but gaps still too wide, says OFFA*. Online. Available: http://www.offa.org.uk/press-releases/ucas-2013-end-of-cycle-report-good-progress-on-access-but-gaps-still-too-wide-says-offa/ (accessed 8 January 2015).

Ellis, C. (2007) 'Telling secrets, revealing lives: relational ethics in research with intimate others', *Qualtative Inquiry,* 13: 3-29.

Ellis, C. and Bochner, A. (2000) 'Auto-ethnography, personal narrative, reflexivity:

    researcher as subject', in N. Denzin and Y. Lincoln (eds) *The Sage handbook of*

    qualitative research, 2nd edn, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Finch, J. (1984) ''It's great to have someone to talk to.' The ethics and politics of

    interviewing women', in C. Bell and H. Roberts (eds) *Social researching: politics,*

    problems, practices, London: Routledge and Keegan Paul.

Goodson, I. (1999) 'The educational researcher as a public intellectual', *British*

    Educational Research Journal, 25: 277–297.

Goodson, I. and Sikes, P. 2001. *Doing life history in educational settings: learning from*

    lives, Buckingham: Open University Press.

Guillemin, M. and Gillam, L. (2004) 'Ethics, reflexivity and 'ethically important

    moments' in research', *Qualitative Inquiry,* 10:261-280.

Gubrium, J. & Holstein, J. (2009) *Analyzing narrative reality*, Los Angeles: Sage.

Haraway, D. (1988) 'Situated knowledges: the science question in feminism and the

    privilege of partial perspective', *Feminist Studies*, 14: 575-599.

Hendry, J. (2013) *Ethics and finance,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Lather, P. (1986) 'Research as praxis', *Harvard Educational Review*, 56: 257-277.

Lather, P. 1991. *Getting smart: feminist research and pedagogy with/in the*

    postmodern, London: Routledge.

Pillow, W. (2003) 'Confession, catharsis or cure? Rethinking the uses of reflexivity as methodological power in qualitative research', *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 15: 175-196.

Reay, D. (2005) 'Beyond consciousness: the psychic landscape of social class', *Sociology*, 39: 911-928.

Reinharz, S. (1979) *On becoming a social scientist,* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Said, E. (2003) *Orientalism,* 25th anniversary edn, London: Penguin.

Sikes, P. (2010) 'The ethics of writing life histories and narratives in educational research', in A.-M. Bathmaker and P. Harnett (eds) *Exploring learning, identity and power through life history and narrative research,* Abingdon: Routledege.

Sikes, P. & Piper, H. (2010). 'Ethical research, academic freedom and the role of ethics committees and review procedures in educational research', *International Journal of Research and Method in Education,* 33: 205-213.

Skeggs, B. (2002) 'Techniques for telling the reflexive self', in T. May (ed.) *Qualitative research in action*, London: Sage.

Skeggs, B. (2004) *Class, self, culture*, London: Routledge.

Stanley, L. (1992) *The auto/biographical I: the theory and practice of feminist auto/biography*, Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Stanley, L. (2000) 'From 'self-made woman' to 'women's made selves''? Audit selves, simulation and surveillance in the rise of public woman, in T Cosslett, C. Lury and P. Summerfield (eds) *Feminism and autobiography: texts, theories, methods,* London: Routledge.

St. Pierre, E. (1997) 'Methodology in the fold and the irruption of transgressive data', *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 10: 175-189.

Tolich, M. (2010) 'A critique of current practice: Ten foundational guidelines for autoethnographers', *Qualitative Health Research,* 20: 1599-1610.