

Ethical beginnings: Reflexive questioning in child sexuality research.

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Ethics is now seen as a *practice* which bridges the gap between anticipation and reflection... In this sense our qualitative research can be ethical right through the research. (Parker, 2005, p.19)

This paper presents my experience of taking up an area from counselling practice into research practice, and exploring a range of ethical questions.

This section describes movement from identity as a counselling practitioner to a researcher identity, specifically noticing moments in which reflexivity in the practice of research have connections to experiences of reflexivity in the practice of counselling. I explain the process of preparing and submitting my doctoral ethics application for approval and feedback. My application noted that, within this area of practice and research, this is a sensitive topic with potentially vulnerable participants, and awareness of my positioning as a male researcher. A foundational value for me in this work has been an ethic of social justice, and a principle that research holds purpose in informing and developing counselling practice. Production of knowledge within this context of sensitive research calls upon a relational ethic of care (ref?) for participants' and researcher's potential vulnerabilities.

Germinating research: Ethical moments in counselling practice

I used to be contacted as a counsellor by social workers, teachers and parents about children (aged twelve years and younger) who had been ~~found~~ in situations with other children acting in sexual ways together. I was interested in the different ways that adults responded to children, and about the sexual actions. I continue to be concerned for children where adult responses give little or no space for children's understanding or positioning within the narratives that developed about these actions. Throughout this paper I will give brief stories of children's experience where adults respond to sexual actions and my interest and concern is raised for the effects for children:

In 1999 I co-facilitated a group for boys who had been referred by social workers (Flanagan & Lamusse, 2000). Each boy participated in the group as a result of their involvement in sexual activity with other children. The boys' experience of adult responses ranged markedly.

Adam had been excluded from school as a result of a single event, in which another boy alleged that Adam had touched his penis in the school toilet. Adam's parents were called in, and told to remove their son. It would take a year before they could enrol Adam in another school because of the 'story' that had developed and was shared around about him.

Brad was supported by his principal when it was alleged he had touched another child: Brad's parents were invited in to talk about what had happened, they were offered support through the school and advised where to access counselling help.

I held some curiosity about why these two principals might respond in such different ways, and where their ideas and understanding about children's sexual actions might come from. My interest took me into research for my Master's degree with primary school principals (Flanagan, 2001; Flanagan, 2009) and writing about professional development opportunities for teachers, social workers and caregivers (Flanagan, 2003, 2010, 2011b).

I found myself asking: what ideas inform how adults respond? What discourses shape how teachers and counsellors and parents respond to children? I was also very aware that the conclusions that adults formed had potential and serious effects for children and their families: among these, for the child's learning, social inclusion, and family relationships. Parents and families could be judged, along with a child, based on a single sexual action. I have written previously, and now quote here, from a counselling practice article which speaks to the journey to my current research:

Too often children and families can be narrowly classified and their profile partially determined by evidence-based processes that take no account of the particularities of experience... While the lives of some families may have frequent and common factors, I fear the way that systems of health, education and social development readily adopt treatment approaches to fit a model, rather than a person or family. ... The political nature of narrative therapy invites questioning and changing school and community values through conversations with families and professionals, informed by conversations with the children.

(Flanagan, 2010, p. 66)

I want to highlight the risk of exclusions in children's lives: socially, in schools and neighbourhoods, where children are isolated from playing or mixing with peers; educationally, when children may be excluded from attending school or having their movement restricted within a school environment; and developmentally within their family, as parents and siblings could potentially position the child through physical and verbal constraints.

Recent stories of children's actions, and teachers' responses, again highlight my concern: over the past few years I have heard similar stories about of a couple of boys who had recently started school.

For Callum, it was his first day: he was five years old. The duty teacher 'caught' him urinating on the field of the school playground. Without any space for him to speak about his action, the teacher growled at him, saying that he was naughty, dirty, and his parents would be informed about his behaviour. Taken to the principal's office, Callum then had an opportunity to explain that he thought urinating on the grass was not a problem – he had done that frequently when he was on the farm with his grandfather.

Deidre was eight years old when she was seen by a teacher kissing Frank at school. Deidre's parents were summoned and told that she would be temporarily stood down, while the school considered its response. Deidre's parents were informed that the school felt that such behaviour could progress to 'more serious sexual offending'.

In developing my research project I was informed by the potential harm of approaches where labelling, and assessment and diagnosis had shaped children's identity in unhelpful and narrow ways – closing and isolating children's worlds.

...the stories that I have heard children tell about their lives, affected by labels of 'engaging in inappropriate sexual behaviour' or 'sex offender' or 'toucher', have opened opportunities for alternative stories of care and respect, fun and playfulness, alongside responsibility and accountability. ... These alternative stories speak of the child's action (sexual activity) as intentionally different and relational in contrast to the 'adult' stories of the child as deviant or criminal (Flanagan, 2011a, p. 8)

When a family was referred or called to 'sort out a child's sexual behaviour', I was attentive to the effects of how the problem story positioned them and their child (re positioning theory, see Davies, 1991; Winslade, 2005). My counselling work was often with children aged 12 years and younger. Frequently, a child's sexual actions were viewed and perceived by adults as holding some meaning of abuse and violence: that the actions were viewed as abusive between children, or it was thought that children had acted in this way as a result of abuse. Within my counselling practice I listened for alternative narratives of children's lives in which they spoke about a range of possible meanings for sexual activity with other children (Flanagan, 2010). For some, a story of abuse was one of the narratives of their lives; for others, there were stories of discovery, a sense of playful naughtiness but without hurt, experiences of pleasure, and sometimes a response to (either voluntarily or involuntarily) witnessing sexual actions of family members or of others, or perhaps on television, movies or the internet. In each child's unique and local context, calling on the 'knowledges' from mainstream research literature repeatedly sustained practices that, for me, held unethical edges: ideas of diagnosis and assessment that imposed identities which morphed into life-affecting descriptions for children within their families and communities, and had unhelpful consequences for their education and social lives (for a description of these unethically-edged practices, see White, 2004). In working ethically towards ethical outcomes I wanted to research discourses of child sexuality which included children's stories alongside adult's stories, with a purpose to trouble singular or mono-storied adultist notions of children's actions. Uprichard (2010) argues for children's inclusion in research to explore, describe and encourage understandings of children, constructions of childhood, and children's positioning or positionality in research).

Proposing research: Ethical review and reflexivity

My research project will interrogate discourses of sexuality in childhood using narratives of teachers, counsellors, parents and hopefully children. I will use focus groups with adult participants, and semi-structured interviews with adults and children. I want to support children's understandings to be voiced within a process that includes adults. I want a process in which adults have comfort with me as a researcher and what I am doing in this research, so that they will give consent for children to be involved.

In a social and moral climate where any reference to 'child' and 'sexual' within the same sentence is likely to produce a level of panic, how wise is it to propose researching childhood sexuality? Aware of discourses of childhood vulnerability, moral panic and institutional risk aversion, I shaped a research and ethics proposal that was informed by professional practice, my profession's code of

ethics, and the research literature relating to (amongst others) child development, children's geographies, sexual development, child sexual behaviour and research ethics. Using social constructionist understandings of children's identities, I locate child sexual activity not as an individual action or behaviour, but as occurring within discourses (e.g. childhood, culture, gender, education, sexuality), and contextualised within power relations and an understanding of relationships (see Flanagan, 2011a).

In particular I want to pay close attention to the use of language, and how language can be taken-for-granted and uncritically understood to mean ideas that are not intended. This is particularly important for participants and how they are positioned in this study, as the language of this research may position them with authority, or indifference, or possibly with unease and at some risk. While consulting some principals about the ideas of this research, one warned of how the project could be spoken about by others. He recalled a school's involvement in developing a health-funded obesity-prevention pilot programme, in which the school was invited to trial a series of activities. As the pilot became known to others the school became referred to as "a school with obesity problems" or "the fat school". In undertaking this research, it is important to provide safety for participants, and for the school and agency which participate. A school would not appreciate, nor deserve, a title of "the school with sexuality issues"!

Furthermore, I'm aware of how the print and news media can distort stories related to children and sexuality. I have studied media news reports over the past ten years and have seen how news items of children's sexual actions in schools have been misrepresented in both the reporting of stories, and particularly in the headlines attributed to these stories.

A valuable skill from counselling practice for research practice is reflexivity. Reflexivity invites careful questions of both the researcher about (him)self as well as the questions asked of participants. I am positioning myself in this research project, and in seeking ethical approval of this study (see Flanagan, 2011b), as one who questions my own ideas, my cognitive responses, but also my embodied responses – witnessing to self and witnessing to others (Weingarten, 2000). Guillemin and Gillam (2004, pp. 262-263) describe reflexivity as having

...not previously been seen as an ethical notion. ...reflexivity is a helpful conceptual tool for understanding both the nature of ethics in qualitative research and how ethical practice in research can be achieved.

Judith Butler (as cited in Olson & Worsham, 2000) considers reflexivity as being initiated by a question of accountability, and John Horton (2008, p. 367) writes about reflexive ethical practice on research as "...a personal, everyday, ever-present responsibility".

So within my ethics application, and within the stages of consultation and piloting, I am asking myself questions about the research aims, individual research interviews with children, how to recruit child participants, where interviews may take place, and about what processes to include. I am interested in how this will position me as a researcher and as male.

Shaping both the proposal and ethics application I was attentive to the audiences of these documents and those I intended to invite as participants – while reflexively holding the experiences with children and families, school teachers and counsellors from my practice as counsellor,

supervisor and consultant. Considering for the university's and ethics committee's concern about risk, I deliberately chose to include a consultation stage related to the project within the project's ethical application. Usually, consultation related to research occurs prior to ethical review. In my thinking, there were advantages to potential participants, the university, the study, and me, by having consultation within a transparent process alongside the official support of the ethics committee. In doing so, I was hoping to shape research that attends to the relations of power within research activity: how such research may have effects for a school community, for the school's teaching staff, for relations between teachers and parents, and for children in relationship to parents, teachers and peers.

There are layers of ethical sensitivity within the project:

A sensitive topic of sexuality, and possibly vulnerable participant groups including children (Mudaly & Goddard, 2009)

Processes of focus groups (no guarantee of confidentiality) and individual interviews (managing the safety of this interview, and any disclosure) (Tolich, 2008)

Effects for participants (school/agency confidentiality, safety of school and agency reputation, how focus group participants take up invitation for confidentiality) (refs)

Researcher vulnerability (male researcher, effects from presentation/publication) (Coles & Mudaly, 2010)

And thinking about the possibilities of managing/responding to ethically challenging moments within the research process. (see Flanagan, 2011b; Horton, 2008; Mudaly & Goddard, 2009).

Qualitative research methods of semi-structured focus groups and individual interviews for teachers, parents, counsellors and children are planned for data generation, leading toward analysis of discourse and positioning within narratives (Foucault, 1972).

I now select here two key areas of ethical questions to focus on: research with children, and researcher safety.

Ethical research with children

There are questions within the literature on research with children about the welfare of children in contrast to the rights of children. De Luca (2004/2006), among others, writes about the tension between ideas of care for children and preventing exposure to potentially harmful studies as opposed to ideas of children having rights to participate in research processes that contribute to knowledge(s) that provides benefit to children and society in general. In my study I am questioning where I might explore risk of harm in relation to risk of exclusion.

Horton (2008) describes a range of unexpected and ill-prepared events within research with children, yet having submitted a clear and thorough ethical application, and received 'procedural ethics' approval from a committee. He speaks of "in the moment" ethics in research, and a researcher's requirement for reflexive practice in responding to sticky, tricky, messy and every-day moments when researching children. I hope to invite openness within my research that attends to power relations, offering speaking spaces for children within respectful and safe contexts of venue, language and relationship.

Mudaly and Goddard (2009) express questions of ethics from their research with children who have been sexually abused, noting, in particular, the usefulness of processes in which children are taught and encouraged to dissent. When children have a clear understanding that research is voluntary and involves consent, they should be encouraged to explore ways to dissent and of how this might occur. The use of words such as 'no' or coloured card (e.g. red) or a hand signal (open palm indicating 'stop') may offer possibilities. An important feature in planning interviews with children was exploring how to inform children clearly about consent and educating about dissenting practices. Citing McGee (2000, in Mudaly and Goddard, 2009) ideas are proposed to,

... empower [children] to be able to dissent. She incorporated exercises for children to practice how to dissent. This approach would address children's vulnerabilities and their susceptibility to coercion and manipulation, a technique we believe is worthy of consideration. However, at what point in the research design would this technique be most appropriate and who should conduct it ... are issues that need to be considered (p. 277).

Skånfors (2009) goes further by recommending that researcher's with children use a sense of 'ethical radar', sensing when children have discomfort or disinterest that is exhibited apart from their verbal or body language. I will support children's involvement in deciding their own participation, but also their moment-by-moment choice of participating about each question, or delaying their response, or exploring what possibilities they may have for partial inclusion in the study.

Consideration for and awareness of safety for children within research needs to include children's own understandings and ideas, and ultimately their own informed consent: parental consent, while a legal requirement, is insufficient for ethical research. Parental consent allows for research *on* children: children's legal assent and ethical consent provides for research *with* children. This research hopes for a process and outcome in which children can participate freely and fully as active agents that hold some tension of dependence and independence with adults: a relation of social interdependence in which they have personal agency.

Reflexivity in researcher safety (fill out further)

There are dimensions of safety for me to consider as a researcher in this study.

How I am seen by others

Viewed by teachers and parents

Children (see Horton, 2001)

Gender (see Hodgetts & Rua, 2008)

Media (see Sikes, 2008)

The ethics committee, when I submitted my application, responded with an acknowledgement that I had taken care in crafting an application and design that attended to a number of questions about care for participants, but significantly asked me to think about my own safety within this study.

Concluding thoughts

From the beginning of this research idea, as a counsellor in practice working with understanding and exploring discursive positioning in the lives of children and families, as well as my own positioning within discourse within counselling practice, I am drawn into reflexive questioning about how I am multiply positioned: counsellor, male, researcher, father, partner, counsellor educator, university academic, and more. In each discursive position I am called (see Drewery, 2005) into ways of thinking and acting that are possibly supported, discouraged, or indifferent in terms of those people I am with. As a counsellor I was sometimes viewed in the position of child protection counsellor – called into discourses of legal and dominant social practices of taking up what is meant by notions of appropriate child behaviour vis-à-vis sexuality – that children should not be sexual, and therefore sexualisation equates with abuse. From this position counselling can be expected to heal a damaged child and rehabilitate the child to behave appropriately. One intention of this research is to expose stories of difference from adults and children that may bring forth understandings of sexuality in childhood that do not sustain binary positions of childhood: such as childhood equals innocence versus sexuality/sexual actions understood as meaning adulthood; or a view of the ‘evil sexual child’ versus ‘the innocent abused child’. Horton (2001) identifies such an approach as “confronting head on the unpleasant nitty gritty of ‘child protection’ literatures and practices” (p. 164).

In a researcher position such inquiry can be easily misconstrued so that I have planned for processes to support information sharing, participant inquiry, checking clarity of purpose and information for consenting and dissenting.

In addition to the consultation stage being encompassed within the ethically approved project I have planned to pilot the processes of meeting potential participants, sharing information, and exploring the ways in which pilot participants and I negotiate the structure of the process, the information shared, gaining and receiving consent, and trialling the focus group and interviews.

Again I want to attend to the ethics of how this process occurs in addition to what is spoken in preparation to anything that participants might then contribute. I see these two stages of consultation and piloting setting up not only some robustness to the way I share and gather information and data, but primarily as a way to support safety for both participants and me as researcher: in that I recognise within the shift from counsellor to researcher I want to take care with how I position myself within the project and in relation to participants.

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