

Ethical beginnings: Reflexive questioning in designing child sexuality research.

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Paul is a senior lecturer in counsellor education, and currently engaged in doctoral research about social constructions of children's sexuality in NZ, intending to explore the effects of discursive positionings for children, parents, teachers and counselling practice.

Abstract:

Background: Counselling young children referred for sexualised behaviour can challenge therapists' ideas about childhood and sexuality. This area of practice is complex and sensitive, and calls upon collaboration with a range of significant adults in children's lives.

Purpose: This paper examines a researcher's process of movement from counselling practice into qualitative research practice, and the use of reflexive questioning to explore ethical issues within the study. *Design:* Shaped by social constructionist ideas and discourse theory, ethical questions are outlined within the design stage of a doctoral research project on sexuality in children's lives in Aotearoa New Zealand. *Limitations:* This paper explores ethics in the design of a current study: there are no results or conclusions.

Keywords: child sexuality; discourse; reflexivity; research ethics; sensitive topics.

Introduction

Counsellors and psychotherapists working with young children may be consulted about child sexuality and sexual behaviour. An initial question might be whether children's actions are perceived as exploratory, playful, or possibly problematic. Adult perceptions are important to address in this work, as these can vary widely: some view sexual action by children as indicating abuse; others overlook the action as "kids just being kids". The positioning of pre-pubescent children in therapy requires care, sensitivity and attention to the effects for their understanding of sexuality and their own identity. Progressing from counselling with children about sexual activity, and engagement in small research projects about this subject, I introduce a study exploring the constructions of sexuality in children's lives in New Zealand, including possible effects for professional and therapeutic practice. Research design of this area should carefully account for its complexity and sensitivity. This paper focuses specifically on the movement for me from counselling practice to research, and an exploration of ethical issues in the design of this project.

Locating this study within the wider context of constructions of sexuality in children's lives, I examine literature on childhood sexuality, therapy with children on this area, and social, cultural and political questions within discourses of childhood and sexuality. I then interrogate the ethics of research that focusses on sexuality in childhood, with my intention to interview children aged below twelve years. Practice examples are also included.

Ethical questions in counselling: Germinating research ideas

Adam¹ was permanently excluded from his school as a result of a single event, when 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 (aged 9) in another school because of the 'story' that had developed and was shared around about him.

Brad (aged 8) 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 how to access counselling help.

Practising in child and family focussed agencies I had concern for how children were positioned by adults' reactive responses to sexual activity with other children. Current discourses of sexual abuse strongly dominate family and school practices, so that parents and teachers define children's actions with other children as an effect of sexual abuse, or that one or more children are acting abusively. I do not intend to minimise or ignore the reality and effects of child sexual abuse, but interrogate how children are defined and their identities shaped by particular ideas.

In the stories above I wondered why school principals responded differently, the different ways other adults responded, and where ideas and understanding about children's sexual actions come from. Curiosity emerged from a sense of care and justice for the boys I have been privileged to work alongside, who appear to have been misunderstood and marginalised. This curiosity and concern has developed (Flanagan, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012), culminating in the doctoral project discussed in this paper.

¹ Names have been changed, and identifying information removed from practice stories to protect identities of children, families and schools.

My counselling and research practice is theoretically positioned within social constructionism (see Burr, 2003) with awareness of language and descriptions of problems being located socially and culturally in discourse (see Foucault, 2002), in which there are no taken-for-granted meanings. Narrative approaches to counselling are taken into this research: a process of identity development, using collaborative exploration within a respectful and relational dialogue, attention to the ethics of power relations (see Epston, 2008; White, 2007).

Counselling with children about sexual involvement with other children involved listening for alternative narratives of children's lives, in which they spoke about a range of possible meanings for sexual activity with other children. For some, a story of abuse was one of the narratives of their lives; for others, there were stories of discovery, experiences of pleasure, a sense of playful naughtiness without hurt, and sometimes a response to (either voluntarily or involuntarily) witnessing sexual actions of family members or of others, or on television, movies or the internet. At times a child's local context positioned them differently from the ideas of adults (e.g. teachers or psychologists) speaking into their lives. Calling on 'knowledges' from mainstream research literature sometimes held unethical edges: ideas of epidemiology, assessment and diagnosis drawn from partial stories could impose identities which develop life-affecting descriptions for children within their families and communities, and be unhelpful 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 including children's stories alongside adult's stories, and to trouble dominant or singular-storied adultist notions of children's actions.

Frequently, assessment and diagnosis shaped children's identities in narrow ways – constricting children's worlds. The problem story was often described in language that positioned a family and their child as problematic (re positioning theory, see Davies, 1991; Winslade, 2005). Descriptions of children's actions, and the meanings ascribed to them, often included thin accounts of the event and of them as a family, as in these stories:

Callum was five years old; it was his first day at school. A duty teacher 'found' him urinating on the field of the school playground. Without any space for him to speak, the teacher growled, said he was naughty, dirty, and his parents would be informed. Taken to the principal, Callum explained that urinating on the grass was not a problem – he did that frequently on the farm with his grandfather.

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

Constructions of childhood and sexuality

This section examines the literature on childhood and sexuality, and approaches to therapy.

Childhood is variously conceptualised as a stage in human development. For some, childhood is a biological and psychological developmental stage indicating immaturity, particularly in the domain of sexuality. Children are viewed as 'becoming', innocent and naive within a *natural* childhood (Jenks, 2005). In this concept, children are expected to be non-sexual or latent (see Freud, 1905/2000) in their sexuality. An interruption to this

innocent position is challenged as potentially abusive, robbing of childhood innocence (see Levine, 2002; Postman, 1994).

Others perceive childhood as 'being and becoming' in human development, acknowledging children as social actors and active agents in their own worlds (Uprichard, 2008). This position opens possibilities for sexual interest and exploration, not as an invitation or a response to abuse or promiscuity, but recognition that children explore their own worlds, relationships, and bodies (Hawkes & Egan, 2008). Within this concept, ideas of appropriateness of words and actions are subjected to societal discourses of culture and gender.

One difficulty in sexuality research, particularly around childhood sexuality, is defining *sexuality*, and what precisely is being studied. Definitions of sexuality are largely determined by adultist concepts and are located within cultural, social, and frequently religious contexts. Distinctions have been made about sexuality as social or natural (Seidman, 2003), biological or anthropological (Gründel, 1975), biological or psychological (Carnegy, 1997) – these distinctions provide some usefulness in describing and determining meaning, but are themselves problematic. Creating distinctions tends to favour one over another, producing dominance of meaning taken up as "the truth". My study intends to position a range of perspectives and explore multiple possibilities for truth and meaning-making.

The literature on studies of childhood and sexuality covers an array of positions informed by understandings from history, human development, biology, sociology and sexology. A detailed review is not possible here, but Egan and Hawkes (2007, 2008, 2009) and Hawkes and Egan (2008) concisely present a history of childhood sexuality, stating that

...child[ren]'s sexuality [has been] constructed as the result of a dangerous and socially unacceptable outside stimulus, and as a result, any realization of subjective sexual expression is rendered abhorrent and in need of adult intervention. (Egan & Hawkes, 2009, p.389)

They argue for “a cultural context that fosters sexual agency and in so doing promotes the sexual citizenship of children” (2009, p.389). This argument invites recognition of sexuality within *being human*, which is not simply anatomical or biological (see Carnegy, 1997), but constructed within social, cultural and gendered relationships (Laumann, 2003). Before birth, boys and girls both exhibit physical responses that are described as sexual (DeLamater & Friedrich, 2002), and from birth and through infancy, children explore through individual and social play, learning about themselves and each other (Volbert, 2000), constructing meaning about identity and sexuality.

Distinctions between play and commonly expected activity in childhood, and of ‘problematic’ actions, are categorised by a number of authors (Friedrich, 2007; Johnson, 1999, 2011; National Center on Sexual Behavior of Youth (NSCYB), 2004). Understanding children’s sexual behaviour in these terms may be useful when considering how to analyse and approach counselling with children, and with their parents. (To view a brief example of categories distinguishing developmentally appropriate behaviour from problematic actions for various age groups, see NCSBY, 2004).

A number of practitioners have shared their work with children around sexuality concerns (Flanagan, 2010; Freidrich, 2007; Gilgun, Keskinen, JonesMarti, & Rice, 1999; Johnson, 2002; Lamb, 2006; Ryan, 2000). Each description of practice defines assessment within a contextualised environment: family, friends, school, access to audio-visual means

(especially internet); and exploration of possible social and personal difficulties: family violence (and violence towards animals), bullying, mental health and learning disabilities.

Taking up a qualitative research design allows for specific and personal narratives to contribute to understandings and meanings of sexuality in childhood. These contributions from participants can represent difference and alternatives that may stand in contrast to dominant understandings and meanings of child sexuality in the literature that speak of pathology or dysfunction.

Research: ethical review and reflexivity

This research is sustained by a continuing concern for children where adult responses give little space for children's understandings or positioning within narratives of sexual 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. While the intention is to include children, the study firstly approaches teachers, counsellors and parents.

Concerned how children were responded to within education and social service contexts, I took an ethical position to research how management policies and practices in schools responded to children's sexual actions (Flanagan, 2001, 2009). Disciplinary responses in schools were guided by a range of informants, including government and school policy, and procedural practices of statutory and community social service agencies (Child, Youth & Family, 2011; Johnson, 1998; Ministry of Education, n.d).

Excluding a child invites other risk in their lives: socially, in schools and neighbourhoods, children are isolated from playing or mixing with peers; educationally, children may have their movement restricted within a school environment or be excluded from attending; and developmentally within their family, as parents and siblings potentially position the child through physical and verbal constraints.

Designing ethical research with children

The research project is developed to question discourses of sexuality in childhood using narratives from teachers, counsellors, parents and hopefully children. I plan to involve primary school and counselling agency settings, adult participant focus groups and individual semi-structured interviews with adults and children. The design includes three distinct data gathering phases in the school and counselling agency, to facilitate trust in the researcher and research process. By stepping the data collection over time, firstly with adults - staff, and then parents – followed by children (in the school context: teachers first, then parents followed by children; and in the agency context: counsellors, then parents, followed by children), opportunity is provided for staff and parents to understand the research purpose and process. Parents are also given opportunity to clarify and question, for sufficient information to decide when invited to consent their child's participation.

Aware of discourses of childhood vulnerability, moral panic and institutional risk aversion, the research and ethics proposal was informed by professional practice, codes of ethics, and the research literature. Using social constructionist understandings of children's identities, I locate child sexual activity not only as an individual action or behaviour, but as

occurring within discourses (e.g. childhood, culture, gender, education, sexuality), contextualised within power relations and an understanding of relationships. I want to pay close attention to the particular use of language, and that meaning is not uncritically taken-for-granted.

When consulting principals about 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 more widely the school became referred to as "a school with obesity problems" or "the fat school". It is important to provide safety for participants, and for the school and agency which participate. A school would not deserve a title of "the school with sexuality issues"!

Reflexive thinking during the design of a research project about process, language and possible effects, is an exercise of ethical understanding. Reflexivity is a valuable skill from counselling practice for research practice, and invites careful questions of both the researcher about (him)self as well as the questions asked of participants. 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.

Researcher positioning in this project is taking up an ethical stance as one who questions my own ideas, my cognitive responses, but also my embodied responses – witnessing to self and witnessing to others (Weingarten, 2000). Reflexive ethical practice on research is "...a

personal, everyday, ever-present responsibility” (Horton, 2008, p. 367). I question how I position myself as a researcher and as a male researcher, attentive to power and gender relations.

Subsequently, within the ethics application, and within the stages of consultation and piloting, questions have arisen about research aims, individual research interviews with children, how to recruit child participants, where interviews may take place, and about what processes to include.

Consultation has shaped a design that attends to relations of power within research activity: how this research may have effects for a school community and agency, for the teaching and counselling staff, for relations between teachers/counsellors and parents, and for children. Piloting of the research interviews and focus groups with teachers, counsellors and parents has allowed testing of the methods within a structured and safe process.

There are multiple layers of ethical sensitivity within the project, with the following references linking to ideas from others’ research:

- A sensitive topic, possibly vulnerable participants, and possible effects for the participants (Mudaly & Goddard, 2009)
- Questions about the processes of focus groups (Tolich, 2008) and individual interviews (Fontana & Frey, 2005)
- Researcher vulnerability (Dickson-Swift, et al, 2008; Coles & Mudaly, 2010)
- Managing and responding to ethically challenging moments within the research process. (Horton, 2008; Mudaly & Goddard, 2009).

Two key areas of ethical questions are selected to focus on: research with children, and researcher safety.

Ethical research with children

Planning for interviews with children requires clarity about informed consent and educating about dissenting practices.

Mudaly and Goddard (2009) explored questions of ethics from their research with children who have been sexually abused, noting the usefulness of teaching and encouraging children to freely dissent from participating. When children clearly understood that research is voluntary and involves consent, they should be encouraged to explore ways to dissent and how this might occur: for example, the use of words such as 'no'; or holding up coloured card (e.g. red); or a clear hand signal (open palm indicating 'stop'); may offer possibilities.

Skånfors (2009) recommended that researchers with children use 'ethical radar', sensing when children have discomfort or disinterest, exhibited apart from their verbal or body language. Encouraging children's decision-making about their participation, moment-by-moment and question-by-question, or delaying their response, can support a child's agency in exploring what possibilities they have for choosing 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 design plans for a process in which children can participate freely and fully as active agents that hold some tension of dependence and independence with adults.

Reflexivity in researcher safety

This section explores questions of researcher safety in the contexts of gender, interviewing participants and representation of the research. Reflection upon these questions is sketched in the light of other researchers' stories.

Researcher safety: Gender

Horton has identified that gender has effects within research (Horton, 2001, 2008). No matter how well intentioned he was to grapple with gender in research, there was always difficulty in getting "to the heart of the matter" or "to adequately articulate myself".

...a sense of failure in making sense of the ways in which my positionality, especially my masculinity, matters in my research practice. As a male adult who regularly works with children and young people I am especially, constantly (made) self-aware of my gender (Horton 2001). (Horton, 2008, p.364)

Horton's questioning of gender positioning in research is relevant to this research. Recent attention to New Zealand men's experiences in their relations with children highlight how men can be positioned because of their maleness (de Graaf, 2012; Hodgetts & Rua, 2008). I reflect on a recent experience of how I was positioned by flight cabin crew, when seated on

a plane next to a twelve-year-old boy. He and I spoke together a number of times throughout the 80 minute flight: each time, and frequently on other occasions, one of the female cabin crew would come and speak *across* me, directly to him, and ask “Are you alright?” “Is everything okay?” “Are you okay?” “Are you okay sitting here?” While thinking that this was care by the airline staff for a child travelling alone, I also sat with some unease about how I was being positioned: a focus of suspicion because of gender.

Holding awareness of these gender and power relations questions invites reflexive exploration: how I relate; how I position myself; how I am positioned by others throughout the research. Being male, in researching sexuality in childhood, demands that I am open and accountable to questions, challenges and possible suspicion in conversations at information meetings and interviews, and further in analysing, writing and presenting the research. Sexual abuse and violence on children in our society is perpetrated predominantly by men, and it is understandable in such a study that fear could visit because the researcher is male. One action is to invite transparency through asking participants about my involvement. Awareness calls for action. An ethical position will be to declare my own discomfort and acknowledging the possible discomfort for participants.

Researcher safety: Interviewing participants

Horton (2008) recounted spontaneity of events and responses, some of which can cause moments of panic as a researcher. He described a range of unexpected and ill-prepared events, despite having submitted a clear and thorough ethical application, and received ‘procedural ethics’ approval from a committee. He spoke of “in the moment” ethics in

research, and requiring a reflexive practice in responding to sticky, tricky, messy and every-day moments when researching with children.

Reflexivity has limits. Assumptions and awareness of questioning power relations within interviews are themselves shaped by personal experiences and thinking. Reflexivity in practice demands on-going attention to that which seems insignificant. As Mauthner and Doucet (2003) acknowledge in their questioning of reflexive practices in qualitative data analysis, the examination and understanding of relations and awareness is not necessarily a tidy or complete process. Within qualitative research interviews, can one hope to plan and prepare for what one cannot prepare for?

Development of the research has included consultation with principals, teachers, counsellors and parents. There is support for *researching adults' understandings, narratives and responses to children*. There is doubt about access to child participants – apart from one school. This school views the project as a rich opportunity to inform their community about a tricky, yet important area in the lives of children and how parents and school staff understand and respond. Additionally, they perceive the research as an opportunity for staff and board professional development.

The doubts about access to child participants will not be clear until the invitation is given to parents for their children to participate. It is possible the topic is scary for parents and that they may fear for what might happen to their child within the interview, and following. For some it could be questions about an adult male wanting to talk to children about sexuality. For others, it may be a concern about what their child says about them as parents and as a family, and whether something stated invites wonderings about abuse.

Researcher safety: Representation of research

A further consideration for researcher safety is how the research project and findings may be represented. Media publicity can highlight sensitive research in sensational ways, misrepresenting the research and researcher (see Sikes, 2008). Care for whose interests the research serves also invites caution. Unintended consequences could feed into the 'politics of blame' (Thrupp, 2010) where findings are used in damaging ways for communities or populations that the participants reflect. Research that is sensitive and involving children requires care for the wellbeing and reputation of participants and researcher.

Concluding thoughts

This paper has storied a counsellor's reflection upon an area of practice around sexuality in the lives of children, and how questions from counselling practice have been taken into counselling research. Its focus has been on ethics within the design stage of research.

Counsellors and psychotherapists who work with children may value deconstructing ideas of childhood, and relate this to a range of areas of counselling practice in addition to sexuality issues. Practitioners in relationship and family counselling might appreciate reflecting further upon ideas of sexuality, and the cultural and political discourses that shape and regulate sexual practices within people's lives. Negotiating *sexuality* in conversation, let alone in a therapeutic context, can open possibilities for a range of understandings. My hope is that this paper can invite therapists to reflexively question their own position, its effects for their practice, and their work with those who consult them

around sexuality and childhood. It could also speak to those exploring ideas in their counselling practice and encourage thinking about taking these into research.

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