

Note

Ethical considerations

Putting such personal accounts of *living inquiry* into the public domain poses significant ethical dilemmas for the writer. Unlike biomedical or conventional behavioural research, there are no generally accepted ethical guidelines specifically designed for participative or self-study research. Nevertheless, the overarching principles of Beneficence, Justice and Respect for Persons, established by *The Belmont Report*¹ in 1979 provide a broad ethical framework within which to conduct any form of human inquiry.

The principle of Beneficence expresses the idea that human research should be conducted with the intention of benefiting (and avoiding harming) others.

The principle of Justice requires that the benefits and burdens of human research be equitably distributed.

The principle of Respect for Persons tells us that autonomous people should be allowed to make informed and voluntary choices about participating in human research and that people who are unable to make such choices need to be protected.

Few would contest these principles but interpreting them in practice can be difficult. In particular, the convention of avoiding harm to others by maintaining the anonymity of human research subjects breaks down when their close relationship to the author makes them readily identifiable. Furthermore, any form of self-study inevitably involves others, some of whom may neither wish, nor be in a position to give their informed consent to “participate” in such research. Using pseudonyms for my ex-wife Sara, my lover Alison, my children Nicky, Jamie, Georgie and Tom would not afford them any protection. One could also question whether they were given the opportunity to make informed and voluntary choices to appear in this text. Yet, how could I have explored my conduct in loving relationships in any meaningful way without referring to them?

¹ *Ethical Principles and Guidelines for the Protection of Human Subjects of Research* produced by the United States National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioural Research (<http://orhp.osophs.dhhs.gov/humansubjects/guidance/belmont.htm>)

In writing these narratives of *living inquiry* I have been very conscious of making different ethical choices about these issues in respect of different people and groups of people. Least problematic was the treatment of professional colleagues involved as co-inquirers in educational action research. Here (as in the various educational action research inquiries described in *Reshaping my Professional Identity*) I disguised the origin of all personal material by the use of pseudonyms and/or by avoiding the use of names. When, as with the *Developing Ourselves as Leaders* project, an activity was clearly identifiable as research, participants gave their voluntary and informed consent and were invited to check and comment on my interpretations of the group's work. Occasionally, as a matter of courtesy, I have identified close professional colleagues when referring to interactions with them, which I judge to be neither damaging nor contentious.

With my professional colleagues I think I can claim with reasonable confidence to have complied with the British Educational Research Association's (BERA's) ethical guidelines for educational research² - specifically the following two guidelines:

7. Participants in a research study have the right to be informed about the aims, purposes and likely publication of findings involved in the research and of potential consequences for participants, and to give their informed consent before participating in research.

13. Informants and participants have a right to remain anonymous. This right should be respected when no clear understanding to the contrary has been reached. Researchers are responsible for taking appropriate precautions to protect the confidentiality of both participants and data. However, participants should also be made aware that in certain situations anonymity cannot be achieved.

The deeper I move into personal territory however, the further away from conventional research I get and the more difficult it is to apply such guidelines. With close friends such as Peter Neall and Chris Cole (and with my lover Alison) I have shown them what I have written about them and asked for feedback. They have given their permission for its publication and to be named in the thesis. Colleagues at CARPP have similarly given explicit permission to be named and for emails, correspondence, dialogues and other material to be included.

² First published in 1992 and now available on the internet at www.bera.ac.uk/guidelines.html

In regard to my ex-wife Sara and our children, I judged that asking them to comment on what I had written so close to our separation and divorce would only add to their distress. Instead, I have been very conscious of the need to work the “edge” around personal stories with awareness and sensitivity to my own and other’s vulnerability. As I say in *Interlude II: The space between*: “Some stories are simply not mine to tell and some that are have no place in this thesis”. I have focused on telling my story – rather than theirs – and where they figure I have taken great care to include them respectfully. They all know that I have written about the breakdown and renewal of our relationships in the thesis. Nicky (26) and Georgie (19), our two daughters have said that they would like to read it sometime after its publication.

Faced with similar dilemmas, other researchers – for good reasons – may well have made different choices. I include this brief note to acknowledge the tensions and difficulties around the ethics of participatory and self-study research, and to demonstrate that I have approached the issues thoughtfully, rather than to argue that I made the “right” choices.