The ‘ethic of care’: A possible tool in the field when studying elites

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Introduction

Edwards and Mauthner (2012, p. 14) describe research ethics as ‘the moral deliberation, choice and accountability on the part of the researchers throughout the research process’. As such, research ethical codes are designed to provide researchers with guidance on what is ‘morally right or wrong’ when undertaking empirical research (Barnes, 1979, p. 16, as cited in Heath, 2009, p. 23). These codes grew out of instances of a clear disregard for morals when conducting research – for example, during Nazi experiments in concentration camps – which led to the formalisation of such ideas as informed consent and voluntary participation (Mandal et al., 2011). Today, it is the accepted norm that all social science research with humans must adhere to conventions like informed consent, confidentiality and the protection of participants from physical or psychological harm (BERA, 2018). Indeed, adhering to and reflecting on conventional ethical principles is not only critical for gaining approval from university ethics committees, without which one often cannot conduct research, but also considered a hallmark of good quality research (Heath, 2009).

Despite their importance, there is a growing concern that conventional ethical guidelines provided by ethics committees do not sufficiently help researchers navigate what King (2009, p. 8) describes as ‘unanticipated ethical, social and political challenges in the field’. One reason is that when it comes to actually doing research, there is a limit to which ethical quandaries can be anticipated and which appropriate action plans can be created in advance. Another reason – and the one we focus on here – is that some research departs from the typical configuration of researchers being higher in the social hierarchy than their participants and thus, the assumption goes, able to

convince participants to take part in something against their own interests. In elite studies, for example, which investigates those who not only have vast resources but also control both access to and valuations of those resources (Khan, 2012), participants are the ones in positions of power. Elites are at low risk of being taken advantage of in the research process since, typically, they have the resources, confidence and knowledge to advocate for themselves. That, in addition to elites being implicated in the creation and maintenance of inequalities, has led to the suggestion that elite studies scholars should be bound by a different set of ethics, one that aligns not with the interests of participants, but with the interests of society: two sets of interests that, in the case of elite studies, are often at odds with one another (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2015).

A previous paper of ours (Lillie & Ayling, 2021) reflects on the important and not-so-straightforward question of which kinds of ethics are most appropriate when studying elites. We theorised some of the particular ethical challenges we faced in doing this work as well as some of the tensions that arose for us in the field, as a result of having both a strong desire for social justice and a commitment to the rights of our participants, regardless of their socio-economic and political power. In the paper, we acknowledged that current ethical guidelines do not always capture the particularities of the ethical challenges one encounters in elite studies work, but also argued that bending those guidelines or even creating new ones for this subfield of research is not an appropriate way forward. Doing so, we feel, could create hierarchies within the academy, separating those who must follow conventional ethics from those who are excused from doing so, and potentially make it less likely for elites to participate in our research in the future, damaging the long-term health of the field (see, for instance, Gibson, 2019).

As a complement to our first article, then, this chapter reflects on a tool that may be useful in the field when doing elite studies research, when balancing interests in both dismantling inequalities and protecting the rights of participants: the ethic of care. In the first section, we offer a brief, critical description of the 'ethic of care'. In the second section, we draw on our experiences in the field to explain how adopting this ethical principle encourages researchers to be both reflexive about and attentive to relationships in situ, leading to more nuanced understandings of the phenomena we study. We conclude by arguing for this situated ethical approach as one that can be tailored to these complexities, wherein ethical decisions remain committed to the tenet of 'do no harm' and yet simultaneously allow us to pursue social justice ends through our research.

A brief introduction to the 'ethic of care'

Mert (2013, p. 79) describes the ethic of care as an ethical approach which 'takes relationship to be the fundamental unit of moral analysis and prescription'. A moral theory, the ethic of care was developed by Carol Gilligan (1977), feminist and social psychologist, in response to and critique of psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg's 'ethic of justice' (Li & Li, 2021, p. 110). Kohlberg (1969, 1976) had theorised that there are three main transitional stages (preconventional, conventional and postconventional) of moral development and that attainment of the highest stage, that is, the postconventional stage, is contingent on one's ability to apply universal moral principles such as fairness and impartiality 'to abstract features of ethical situations' (Simola, Barling & Turner, 2010, p. 180). However, girls tended to appear deficient in moral reasoning when Kohlberg's theory was applied to them. Gilligan argues that this was because Kohlberg had constructed his moral development stages solely on research with boys, who are often raised and socialised differently to girls. In her subsequent qualitative research, Gilligan found that girls instead often take a different but equally valid approach, one that takes context and interpersonal relationships into account when solving moral dilemmas.

Gilligan thus put forward the 'ethic of care' to highlight this approach – one that sees truth as subjective rather than objective, intertwined with situational nuances and the construction of narratives (Held, 2006). Feminist researchers who have been influenced by this approach thus tend to give due consideration in their work to interpersonal relationships and interactions (McCloskey et al., 2021; Metz; 2013; Simola, Barling & Turner, 2010) – and, more specifically, to 'relations of trust' that are built between researchers and their participants (Held, p. 72, emphasis added) – when addressing ethical dilemmas in the field and in their analyses.

The ethic of care is, of course, not without criticism. For example, Miller (1991) argues that the approach is Western-focused and therefore not necessarily applicable to non-Western contexts (McClosky et al., 2021). Nevertheless, as Held (2006) points out, the significance of Gilligan's ethic of care is in demonstrating that there is an alternative to the 'ethic of justice' perspective that prioritises the application of universal moral principles to ethical issues without consideration for context and relationships.

We would like to put this approach forward as a possible tool for those doing empirical qualitative research on elites, particularly when access and data collection is negotiated through relations of trust with participants, and when analyses take context and subjective experiences into account (Reich, 2021). Adopting the ethic of care means being 'reflexive and deliberate' (Reich, 2021, p. 578) about the power that we, as researchers, hold over how we engage and represent our participants – even as we are simultaneously confronted by their broader social power and role in social inequalities. As Reich (2021) highlights, this reflexivity is especially critical in an age of digital technology, when the information we collect and publish can spread fast and furiously, democratising knowledge, yes, but also opening up new avenues for its misuse.

Positionality and 'relations of trust': Our experiences in the field

In what follows, we reflect on how we used our positionalities in the field in strategic ways to create relations of trust with our participants. We proffer that such a relation of trust forged during fieldwork could not only compel us to look at our dataset from the point of view of our participants but also draw on our 'humanity' as 'necessary for a nuanced portrayal of our participants' (Dunbar, Rodriguez & Parker, 2002, p. 287). This poses the broader question of whether and how using an ethic of care approach could inform a reflexive and trust-based methodological approach, ultimately enhancing our understanding of the nuances at play.

Both of the authors conducted qualitative research with economically elite groups. Ayling examined the consumption of international schooling by Nigerian elite parents and the role that British private boarding schools play in the construction and reproduction of elite identity formation in post-colonial Nigeria (Ayling, 2019). Using semi-structured interviews and questionnaires, she gathered data from Nigerian parents in Nigeria (consisting of 21 elite parents, 4 middle-class parents, and one working-class parent); gatekeepers, namely, teachers and headteachers of British private schools in Nigeria and England; educational agents and consultants; and a British consular official in Lagos, Nigeria. Lillie took a sociological and historical approach to the study of transnational elite class formation at one of the most expensive boarding schools in the world, in Switzerland, arguing that the economically elite young people there were not becoming 'citizens of the world', as the school professed, but rather national citizens in a world economy (Lillie, 2021a, 2021b). Her data drew from observations at the site collected over 15 months, interviews with students and administrators, and analyses of archival data.

As a Nigerian studying elite Nigerian parents, Ayling could be described as a 'cultural insider' (Ganga & Scott, 2006). However, following a couple of unsuccessful interviews in which parent participants were very unfriendly and reticent to explain their reasons for sending their children to private boarding schools in England, Ayling realised how the strategic use of her positionality as a 'British-trained scholar' could change parents' attitudes towards and perceptions of her. After sharing that she had done both her undergraduate and postgraduate studies in England and that she was also a lecturer at a university in the UK, Ayling observed that parents' attitudes towards her changed from snobbish to friendly. Playing up her British-trained scholar identity also resulted in parents changing their initial perception of her as a locally trained academic researcher to a more 'knowledgeable Western[er]' (Herod, 1999, p. 317) worthy of their time, trust and respect. Having gained that trust and respect, Ayling noted how parents became more relaxed and forthcoming with their stories.

On reflection, Ayling conceded that there is a possibility that gaining her participants' trust, even if duplicitously (Morris, 2009), coupled with the fact that she was also a mother of two young children at the time of her fieldwork, may have compelled her to examine these elite parents' decisions to educate their children in private boarding schools in the UK from the perspective of parent-child relationships. This was a significant shift away from a Bourdieusian analysis (which was her main theoretical framework) through which parental school choice decisions

are often framed within class struggles for power and privilege. Examining her data through the lens of parent-child relationship could be seen as Ayling drawing on her ‘humanity’, which then in turn resulted in a more nuanced analysis of her data. For example, findings from her study showed that whilst the desire to reproduce their class position was the prevailing motive, the elite parents were also motivated by notions of parental love, sacrifice and responsibility (concepts that take on specific meanings in societies that are governed by neoliberal principles, such as Nigeria).

Lillie was a professional insider at her field site, where she had worked as a college counsellor, helping students apply for and navigate the transition to higher education, and as a member of the residential staff. She felt very reliant on this positionality in securing interviews with students; she felt that because they knew her, and because she had held a pastoral role at the school, they were willing to ‘return the favour’ by participating in her research. And, of course, she did not want students to complain to the Head of School about the interviews, who had the right to withdraw consent for Lillie to do research there. This led to some uncomfortable moments during interviews, when students expressed ideas that functioned to uphold the social inequalities and constructed hierarchies that they were very much a part of. However, she did not challenge or push them, mostly out of fear of the possible consequences that doing so might hold for her data collection.

In retrospect, Lillie feels it would have been beneficial to have experienced these moments not through the lens of participants stating elitist and ethically-questionable views, but rather through that of young people (aged 17 or 18) working through their understanding of their world, which, to that point, had taken place almost entirely in a ‘bubble of privilege’ (Maxwell & Aggleton, 2010), with someone they trusted. Seen in this way, it becomes a ‘privilege’ that these young people expressed what might have been their still raw and developing ideas of the world, rather than a burden. This might have also changed Lillie’s experience of her data analysis and write-up stages (though, probably not her findings), in which Lillie often struggled to portray her participants as fairly as possible, driven again by fear of reprisal rather than by the nuances that she knew applied to each of them – particularly, as young people.

Concluding thoughts

We are strongly of the view that conventional ethical principles should be applied in all forms of research, even when studying elites. We acknowledge, however, that it is not always easy to find an ethical code that speaks to the complexities of elite studies research. The ‘ethic of care’ may thus be a useful tool in the field, one that helps us navigate between the responsibilities that we have towards our participants and those we feel towards society. This approach not only makes room for situated ethics – meaning, the taking of context into consideration (Heath et al., 2009) – but also places that context, and our positionality in it, front and centre.

While we hope that our reflections in this chapter will be useful to other researchers, our primary goal is to further open a conversation around ethics in elite studies research. There is no one approach, no one right answer. We aim, then, not to offer a blueprint for meeting ethical challenges in the field, but rather to inspire further debate around this fundamental, yet rarely discussed, aspect of doing research.

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