

Real Life Ethics

University of Manchester

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Researching Children in Distressing Circumstances

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The research projects

- 1996, Nuffield Foundation, 'Post-divorce Childhoods: Perspectives from Children' with Bren Neale
- 1996, ESRC Childhood Initiative, 'New Childhoods? Children and Co-Parenting after Divorce'. with Bren Neale and Amanda Wade
- 1999, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 'Supporting Young Children at Times of Family Transition' with Amanda Wade
- 2000, ESRC, 'Enduring Families? Children's long term reflections on post-divorce family life'. With Bren Neale (PI), Jennifer Flowerdew and Amanda Wade

Ethics as a process

- The first study was in 1996 and so ethical decisions made then might be different in 2007
- With any study, decisions on how to deal with ethical issues may change over the course of the study
- How ethical issues are resolved may depend on personnel too

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Team working

- The research team
- The advisory committee
- Formal ethics approval committees
- Legal v moral issues

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Who are ethics for?

- Resolving own/team's dilemmas
- Attentiveness to the children involved in the study
- Attentiveness to children in general
- Attentiveness to the research profession/University

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Consent

- Whose consent?
- Age and issue of meaningful consent
- Assumed consent?
- Oral or written consent?
- Consent to what (e.g. photos, publication of quotations)
- Control over secondary bodies (e.g. campaigning organisations)

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Where to conduct interviews

- Children's choice?
- Privacy or more public space?
- Neutral place v familiar place?
- Police vetting issue

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Dealing with distress

- Moving on
- Terminating interview or tape
- Allowing child to avoid difficult topics
- Why mustn't children cry?
- The feelings of researchers too

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The problem of abuse

- What is included: sexual abuse, physical abuse, emotional abuse, bullying at school?
- The Childline approach
<http://www.childline.org.uk/>
- Legal duties: who to inform, child's consent, age of child

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The realities of children's lives

- Everydayness of physical violence
- Everydayness of unhappiness
- The problem of mistaking the interview for an insight into the totality

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Interpreting feelings

- **Interviewer:** What about birthdays and Christmas, does dad remember that at all?
Jenny (aged 15): He remembered the first one, and that were it.
Interviewer: How do you feel about that?
Jenny: *I'm not bothered.*
- **What right do we have to read more into this?**
- **Ethics as part of the analysis and not just the research focus and research procedures**

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What can we ask children?

Some of our decisions:

- Not about the divorce process
- Difficult topics: Hitting
- Open questions rather than direct ones e.g. a wish for the future?
- Vignettes rather than direct questions

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The Vignette method

- **Lizzie (10):** [The child in the story] just goes and lays on his bed and sleeps until morning. 'Cos I feel better when I wake up, forget about it.
- **Joely (9):** I don't care about him any more because [of] everything he's promised; he lets me down all the time.

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Dealing with what children reveal

- Inadvertent revelations about family life
- Manipulations by parents
- When children's accounts are different to those provided by adults

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A minor example

- **Miriam** (aged 10): I used to stuff myself with chocolate ... to forget about it [parents' arguments] and watch TV 'til about three o'clock in the morning.

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Confidentiality

- Choosing names/changing names
- Changing gender/ other details?
- Feedback and publications
- Checking transcripts
- The concerned parent
- The problem of talking to other relatives too

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How we managed some of the problems

- Took legal advice on specific issue
- Relied heavily on a robust advisory committee and wider academic community
- Drew on own experiences, e.g. Amanda had been a Principal Social Worker
- On some issues we had to respect the response of the person at the coal face

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Oversensitivity to ethical issues?

- Taken to extremes it may become impossible to include children in research
- Or we may only access 'happy' children
- Do we have an ethical commitment to bringing children into research?
- If so, are the risks worth it?

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