

This case study examines the construction of narratives by researchers to ensure that our work remains ethical, despite data potentially suggesting otherwise. Our experiences, developed while working on a doctoral research project as student (Mahoney) and supervisor (Kearon) illustrate these challenges. We argue that rigidly following Ethics Review Board guidelines, encapsulated within the passage below, would likely have led to the subsequent disclosure of a research transcript to relevant authorities, however to do so and embrace such a risk averse approach is problematic and risks causing more harm than it mitigates. In line with ERB stipulations all participants received the same information sheet, which included the following statement:

*'I do however have to work within the confines of current legislation over such matters as privacy and confidentiality, data protection and human rights and so offers of confidentiality may sometimes be overridden by law. For example in circumstances whereby I am made aware of future criminal activity, harm or abuse either to yourself or another (i.e. child or sexual abuse) or suicidal tendencies I must pass this information to the relevant authorities.'*

This was discussed with participants to ensure that they were aware of the ramifications of certain disclosures (something particularly important given the low literacy levels of some). Despite this Spanish Omelette, a 26 year-old man living in a hostel in Stoke-on-Trent, made several such statements:

*Say like [location] Hospital yeah?...something happened between us and a rival gang and one of our members was dying basically, near enough dead with two gunshot wounds, one in his stomach and one in his shoulder and we did the same to the rival gang member and we both ended up in the same hospital and as we was visiting each other obviously it went off, using old people as bullet shields, we was shooting at each other in the middle of the hospital, ya know. A few of us got arrested. I was one of the lucky people that didn't because they, because I was higher up, they'll take the blame for me, they'll do prison for me, a long time ya know.*

And then later:

*Stabbing forks in people's legs while they're tied to a chair and hooking them up to a car battery and watching them bite their own tongue off over three hundred quid. Or cutting someone's arm off with a machete. It got stuck in his fuckin'*

*bone. I had to pull it out and hit him again and I missed and it got stuck and I had to hit him again so I had to get the lads to hold his arm out and I chopped and his arm come off, blood pissing everywhere and that. That was over drugs and all. I've got a lot more to tell you. Is that still recording? (Spanish)*

Significant harm is evident in both of these statements. The hospital incident received national coverage and several people received prison sentences because of their involvement. The second extract indicates physical harm being inflicted, and an awareness of the possible risk of repercussions following such a disclosure. Spanish was repeatedly warned of the possibility of disclosures of harm being passed on and his final statement 'is that thing still on?' was made at the end of the interview as we moved towards the debrief, potentially belying concern over what may happen next. Following transcription this information was not passed on to any other authorities in spite of ERB stipulations and the process of rationalisation undertaken is examined throughout the remainder of this case study.

Concerns surrounding harm and the ethicality of the narrative were, perhaps crucially, considered in the context of the narrative as a whole. Narratives are rarely consistent and often conflicted and the manner in which they are formulated is of vital significance. On the one hand Spanish sought to perform his masculinity (see Butler 1990; Anderson and Umberson 2001; Brickell, 2005). His physical prowess and reputation for violence, which played a significant role in the hypermasculine environments which his past experiences are rooted (*field notes*), is apparent and he has disclosed significant harm to others. On the other hand, his narrative belies a desire for change as he sought to 'knife off' (Maruna, 2001) from his criminogenic past and forge a new desistant identity. He moved to a hostel in Stoke-on-Trent from a Northern English city, leaving a mutually destructive relationship and his criminogenic influences behind. Moreover, he had disposed of his phone and deactivated social media accounts to remove himself from previous networks. Moreover, elsewhere in his narrative, Spanish made numerous references to his desire to turn his back on a life of crime:

*I want to start afresh and earn that money. Not in a crime way, in an actual educational way. I want to be a youth worker to stop kids turning out like I did. That's what I want to do now. I don't want kids to be banging guns and selling drugs.*

He also discussed his motivations for this, providing vital context upon which our own ethical narrative was constructed:

*SO: I've had like three heart attacks and been stabbed and me kidneys failed and I've got a thing called acute coronary syndrome and I can drop dead at any time. You'll know because I just go proper blue in the face and drop down on the floor.*

*IM: How many times has that happened?*

*SO: Three times. If the ambulance can get to me in half an hour, otherwise I'm gone. They have to put paddles on you like the do on tele; Clear! <doomph> and I have to have a shot of adrenaline straight to the heart. Then I wake up then*

*IM: What's that like, knowing that that could happen at any time?*

*I know I won't live past forty. So I wanna do right. I don't want my kids growing up thinking "my dad was a right knobhead selling drugs and was a bad person". I want them to go, "yeah he might have been bad in his past but he sorted his life out" ...cos this is more than halfway through my life cos I know I'm gonna be dead by the time I'm forty.*

In light of this, passing on this information risked undermining both the research relationship and posing significant setbacks to his formulation of a desistant identity (an ongoing process but which had been reduced from violent gang and drug related crime to small scale shoplifting (*field notes*)), undermining his health and the relationship with his children in the process.

A further consideration was that Spanish lived in close proximity to other participants and divulging his disclosures could have actively prevented the research from continuing there as a result of a lack of trust between the other residents and staff at the location in question. Hostels provide a 'safe' environment for those living there, the vast majority of whom have suffered family breakdown, isolation and, in many cases addiction. The harm caused by the passing on of details from a participant to 'appropriate authorities' therefore risked affect not just the individual in question but others within the same community, undermining their own trust in the researcher, research process and support workers at what is, for many, a vital time. It emerges that negotiating potential ethical dilemmas is a minefield which requires considerable thought and consideration throughout.

As researchers we have not just the integrity of the discipline and institution to consider but also the potential harms that our actions can carry. This case study has sought to deconstruct the rationalisation process undertaken by researchers and to the tensions between ERB requirements and the practical realities of empirical research. We aim to shed light on the

formulation of ethical narratives so as to ensure that the broader conceptualisation of ethics – that of minimising harm at all stages of the research – is central to ongoing and future projects and that moral concerns are central to our enquiries; something which ERBs and professional codes of conduct have limited capacity to account for (Alderson, 1999). We must ensure that we fulfil our moral ethical obligation to avoid causing undue harm to our participants and not misrepresent or undermine people’s stories and experiences, continually addressing the underlying question of ‘whose interests are served?’ (Alderson, 1999: 65-66). To achieve this it is vital to consider and respect both the ongoing and historic actions of the individual and to pay close attention to the wider narrative rather than those specific disclosures, particularly where there is no apparent intention to inflict further or future harm or engage in similar future criminality.

## References

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