

**Negotiating ‘ethically important moments’ in research with young people:  
Reflections of a novice researcher**

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**Acknowledgements**

This work was made possible through joint funding received from Limerick Regeneration, Limerick City Sports Partnership and the Irish Sports Council and an internship position within the Department of Physical Education and Sport Sciences at the University of Limerick.

## Negotiating ‘ethically important moments’ in research with young people: Reflections of a novice researcher

The latter half of the twentieth century witnessed a surge in interest around ethics in research. Originally focused on the compilation of ethics guidelines and the importance of having all research approved by institutional review boards before commencement, discussions of research ethics have more recently centred on how such guidelines translate into ethical practice during the research process. Leisure research has been no exception to this trend. Using as an example a research project in Ireland centred on focus groups with young people (aged 15 to 19) regarding their physical activity behaviours and preferences, this paper explores the situated judgement of the interviewer, a novice researcher, as she attempted to navigate four ethically important moments. Discussions centre on moments where the interviewer’s situated judgement resulted in research ethics being compromised and moments where the interviewer experienced difficulty reconciling personal and research ethics. Our intention in sharing the situations and resulting questions from this research is to shine a light on the decision making which takes place during the research process and consider how researchers might prepare adequately to make decisions in an ethically sound way.

**Keywords:** Ethics, research, reflexivity, focus groups, young people, physical activity

### Introduction

There has been a growing body of research in recent years highlighting the importance of reflexivity for the practice of ethical research (Etherington, 2007; Guillemin and Gillam, 2004; Phelan & Kinsella, 2013; Warin, 2011). The purpose of research reflexivity is gradually being extended beyond ensuring the rigor of research to ensuring its ethical soundness. In 2004, Guillemin and Gillam distinguished between: (i) procedural ethics, the ethical rules and guidelines monitored and approved by institutional review boards; and (ii) ethics in practice, ‘the everyday ethical issues that arise in the doing of research’ (p. 263). While these authors were not the first to bring to light the notion of ethics in practice, their paper was useful in suggesting the use of reflexivity as a tool for promoting truly ethical research. Expanding on Guillemin and Gillam (2004), Etherington stressed the importance of illustrating interactions between researchers and participants in order to promote transparency and increase our understanding of how ethics are negotiated in practice, allowing for an elucidation of ‘not just *what* we have discovered but *how* we have discovered it’ (2007, p. 601). She led by example, sharing conversations she had with her research participants and reflecting on how these conversations informed her ethical decision making. Providing various examples from their visual methods research with children, Phelan and Kinsella reminded us that ethical reflexivity ‘lends to the shaping of the research design, process, implementation, analysis, and dissemination’ (2013, p. 89). Warin, concluding her paper on ethical mindfulness and reflexivity, in which she presented and reflected on ethical dilemmas implicated in her own research, suggested that more researchers ‘need to make very

deliberate and explicit attempts to incorporate the presentation of ethics in practice into published research outputs' (2011, p. 813).

In translating ethical principles into ethical practice, issues such as power relations, emotional relations, cultural sensitivities, public versus private behaviour and the ongoing nature of consent are often more pronounced in qualitative than in quantitative research (McNamee, Olivier, & Wainwright, 2007). The field of leisure studies, which has such a strong qualitative focus, has been acknowledged for the array of complex epistemological and methodological concerns with which it grapples (Watson, 2010). Although published examples of ethics in practice in leisure studies research are somewhat difficult to locate, the ethical dimension of our research endeavours are gradually being attended to. While qualitative research methods texts in our field have previously been critiqued for their tendency to dedicate very few of their pages to the area of research ethics (McNamee et al., 2007), recent chapters of methods texts devoted to ethical qualitative research have served to redress this balance by discussing in more detail the question of process ethics and the dilemmas involved in enacting ethical research (Atkinson, 2014; Jones, 2014; Sparkes & Smith, 2014; Wright & O'Flynn, 2012).

Research articles have also begun to attend to the importance of ethical issues encountered by leisure researchers. Mills and Hoerber (2013) and Phoenix (2010) touched briefly on ethical issues encountered in their work using image-based methods with figure skaters and bodybuilders, respectively. Bernstein and Freidman (2013) recounted the ethical dilemmas they faced in attempting to 'blend in' at community meetings during fieldwork on the relationship of the Baltimore Grand Prix to the city's 2011 mayoral election. Rossi, Rynne, and Nelson (2013) provided a similarly reflexive account of the ethical understanding they developed as they attempted to gain access to Indigenous communities with a view to conducting sports-related research. The ethics of consent and disclosure in autobiographical narrative research where actors in a narrative may be identifiable was highlighted by Mellick and Fleming (2010). The difficulty of anonymity was also discussed by Sparkes, Pérez-Samaniego and Smith (2012), along with other ethical dilemmas, in their account of research conducted with a terminally ill elite cyclist.

There are, however, few examples in our field of detailed interrogations of how ethical principles are enacted by novice researchers in practice. Purdy and Jones (2013) do make a passing reference to ethical dilemmas encountered during an ethnographic study of elite rowers conducted by a neophyte researcher, while the contributions of Bernstein in the work of Bernstein and Freidman (2013) are from the perspective of a graduate student. Further, Atkinson (2014) provides a retrospective examination of the ethical issues of involvement and detachment with which he grappled as a master's student conducting an ethnographic study of ticket scalpers at sports events in Canada. But perhaps the most detailed account of the ethical reflexivity of an early-career researcher is that recounted in the autoethnography of Trussell (2010) following her research on the leisure experiences of homeless women and those at risk of becoming homeless. In her account, issues such as role conflict, empathetic responsibility, and participant-researcher relationships were all probed deeply. It is notable

that all of these examples represent ethnographic research conducted with adult participants. The present paper aims to add to this research, providing a detailed account of the experiences and reflections of an early career researcher as she conducted focus groups with young people.

### **Focus of this paper**

Guillemin and Gillam (2004, p. 262) describe ‘the difficult, often subtle, and usually unpredictable situations that arise in the practice of doing research’ as ‘ethically important moments’. Using as an example a recent research project centred on focus groups with young people in an area of disadvantage regarding their physical activity behaviours and preferences, this paper considers four ethically important moments encountered by the first author, Claire, as she conducted the focus groups and explores her situated judgement as she attempted to navigate these moments. [The first name of first author has been replaced with a pseudonym, Claire, to anonymise the paper for the peer review process. Her real name is used in the original text.] The selected moments were those which caused us to take pause as we analysed the data, those which appeared to raise questions beyond the content of the interview and pertained more to the research process and its ethical dimension. Situated judgement is described by Kvale and Brinkmann as ‘the intellectual virtue of recognising and responding to what is most important in a situation’ (2009, p. 61). It is the cipher through which procedural ethics are decoded into ethics in practice. Our intention in sharing the moments from this research is to add to our understanding of ethics in practice in leisure research by shining a light on the ethical decision making of a novice researcher during the research process and considering what this tells us about how researchers might prepare adequately to make decisions in an ethically sound way. Discussions focus on two moments where Claire’s situated judgement resulted in research ethics being compromised and two moments where she experienced difficulty reconciling personal and research ethics.

In embarking on the writing of this paper we had two concerns. One centred on the feeling that some of the ethically important moments we had to describe did not seem very ‘important’ when compared to those encountered by other researchers (e.g. Guillemin and Gillam, 2004, Sparkes et al., 2012, Trussell, 2010) who faced such dilemmas as how to handle the disclosure of sensitive or incriminating information or whether to continue a research project following the death of a participant. The second concern was that in drawing attention to how Claire struggled to uphold ethical principles we might call into question the integrity of the research or of Claire herself. With regard to our first concern, we note the argument of Guillemin and Gillam that ‘there is much more to ethics than red-letter dilemmas’ (2004, p. 265), such as those noted above, an idea supported by Warin, who emphasises the need to be especially aware of seemingly ‘mundane’ ethical dilemmas (2011, p. 812). Our second concern was answered by the writings of Pillow, who calls on researchers to practice ‘reflexivities of discomfort’ (2003, p. 188) asserting that there is merit in researchers being informed by less successful examples ‘that do not seek a comfortable, transcendent end-point but leave us in the uncomfortable realities of doing engaged qualitative research’ (p. 193).

## **Research context**

Shaw (2008, p. 407) states that ‘ethical decisions, even when we may believe there are shared normative principles, cannot be allocated in a decontextualised manner’. Admitting the logic of this notion, we now present a brief outline of the research context.

The research involved focus groups conducted with six groups of young people in a city in the West of Ireland. The participants, aged from 15 to 19, lived in a deprived urban area marked by high unemployment, a high proportion of one-parent families, and significant educational disadvantage. The purpose of the research was to explore how such young people experience physical activity and why they do or do not choose to participate in physical activity. More detail on the rationale, focus and findings of the research are published elsewhere (Authors, 2015). Claire conducted all 12 focus groups, with each group of young people participating in two interviews. The focus groups took place within two educational settings; three groups were interviewed in a mainstream second-level school and three groups were interviewed in an alternative educational setting established to cater for unemployed young early school-leavers. The selected ethically important moments were encountered across both educational settings. The groups were interviewed in a classroom in each setting with between three and six young people in each focus group. There were 40 participants in total (21 male, 19 female). In each setting a staff member acted as the point of contact for the researchers and was asked to select groups to participate, according to their availability and willingness, ensuring that there were both male and female participants in each group. Written informed consent was received from all participating young people prior to data collection, as well as from the parents or guardians of those under the age of 18. Upon first meeting the young people, Claire relayed again the purpose of the research, requested permission to record the interviews and explained that the names of the young people would not be disclosed at any point. She assured the participants that they were not compelled to answer any questions and could leave at any time.

### ***The interviewer***

Claire did not reside in the area and had no previous connection with the young people or the educational settings. Although she had conducted a small number of research interviews previously with adults and with children, some in an area of disadvantage, this was Claire’s first time interviewing adolescents. Privately, she was somewhat apprehensive about the prospect, unsure what to expect. She wondered whether she would find the participants intimidating or feel in some way exposed by the directness she considered unique to their age group. Although she had pondered ethics on a personal level in her own life, her engagement with research ethics had not gone beyond an understanding of the standard procedural issues of autonomy, justice, informed consent, confidentiality, right to privacy, deception and protection from harm (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Neither had she interrogated the various ‘aspirational ethical stances’ she might take in approaching the research situation, listed by Lahman, Geist, Rodriguez, Graglia, & DeRoche (2011, p. 1400) as including relational ethics, feminist ethics, virtue ethics, narrative ethics, covenantal ethics, ethics in practice, caring ethics and situational ethics. Claire approached the interview situation wishing only to abide by the spirit of procedural ethics, showing respect and humility, and hoped that the

young people would be willing to share their thoughts and experiences with her. As a novice researcher invited to assist with a project led by the second and third authors, she was also keen to justify the faith they had placed in her by inviting her to conduct the focus groups.

We now discuss ethically important moments encountered during the focus groups, grouped under the headings of Struggles of Situated Judgement and Questions of Situated Judgement. Pseudonyms are used in all cases. In the descriptions and reflections that follow, the word 'we' refers to all three authors.

### **Struggles of situated judgement**

When she finally met the young people Claire found that they were at least as apprehensive and self-conscious as she was. She endeavoured to speak gently, honestly and unassumingly and the young people appeared to recognise quite quickly that she was sincere in her wish to listen to their thoughts and experiences and discuss their perspectives. While many of the young people answered questions openly and enthusiastically, at times some exercised their right to refrain from responding to questions, either by not answering or by giving what one could consider less than serious answers. One young person, for example, responded 'I like beans' to various questions which had nothing to do with his dietary preferences. In the majority of such cases Claire's response was to respect the autonomy of the young people and their right to give or not give answers as they so wished. Indeed, Claire took each response seriously, even if she knew it was given in jest, and this seemed to further convince the young people that she was focused on their words and would listen to whatever they wished to share. However, in reading through the transcripts and listening to the recordings, we noticed that there were two occasions when Claire appeared to struggle to uphold the ethical principle of informed consent during the focus groups. Our interest here lies in the fact that this was despite her being fully aware of both the importance of informed consent in ethical terms and the nature of informed consent as a process, rather than a discrete act confined to the signing of consent forms in the preliminary stages of research (Ellis, 2007; McNamee et al., 2007; Sparkes & Smith, 2014).

#### ***Moment 1: 'Okay, well you'll have to try and answer the questions then.'***

Mark was a somewhat disruptive interview participant. He interrupted other participants and prevented them from answering questions or gave what can confidently be considered inappropriate responses:

- Claire: We'll go around the table one more time and if you can just think of a few words to describe yourselves. If you want to start Beth?
- Beth: Em, joyful and happy.
- Claire: Joyful and happy, okay.
- Mark: And a dirty spastic.

The other young people voiced their irritation at Mark's behaviour on numerous occasions, for example:

- Claire: Dan, is there anything that makes you angry?

Dan: Annoying people, annoying people. I'm looking at one now [indicates Mark].

Reflecting on this and similar exchanges, we wondered whether Mark was affected by the reprimands of his peers. At one point Mark demonstrated an awareness of his challenging behaviour. Asked if there was any change he would make if he was principal of the school, he replied:

Mark: You know what I'd do?  
Claire: What would you change?  
Mark: If I was principal, lock me alone into a room.  
Claire: Lock you alone into a room?  
Mark: Lock me alone into a room.

Later, Mark stood up and walked around the room as the focus group continued. Claire allowed this to happen without comment, not wanting to constrain him. After some time he went to the door and opened it and the following exchange took place:

Claire: Mark, are you going out or staying in?  
Mark: I'm staying in Miss.  
Claire: Okay, I'm nearly finished now, okay?  
Mark: Don't finish Miss.  
Claire: Sorry?  
Mark: Don't finish.  
Claire: You don't want to finish?  
Mark: No.  
Claire: Okay, well you'll have to try and answer the questions then.  
Mark: Alright so.

We see here that Claire's contribution to this exchange might be interpreted as bargaining for participation, and as such may be in breach of the principle of informed consent. What is interesting, however, is that she was unaware of this in the moment. It was not until transcribing the interview later that she realised that she had done this.

***Moment 2: 'Can we go back to class? Can we?'***

A participant in another interview, Niall, also made distracting noises and talked in the background while others were responding to questions. The second interview of this group took place on a hot day and Niall observed: 'It's too hot inside here Miss, isn't it?', after which he proceeded to open some windows. A little later the following exchange took place:

Niall: I'm going to go over and stand at the window 'cos it's too hot.  
Claire: What are you doing?  
Niall: Staying over beside the window 'cos it's too hot.  
Claire: Oh right, okay.  
Lucy: Claustrophobic, that fella.

Claire: Niall, I don't mind you standing by the window as long as you answer, alright?  
Niall: Yea.

Similarly to Moment 1, Claire had unthinkingly required Niall to respond to questions. In this situation, as in the last, she did not notice that she might be breaching ethics until transcribing the interview afterwards. The interview continued with no input from Niall other than a short exchange where he questioned Claire regarding what car she drove. Claire attempted to engage Niall again by asking what he thought were the benefits of physical activity. There was no response. A little later she tried one more time:

Claire: Niall?  
Niall: What?  
Aidan: [Referring to an ongoing conversation about a soccer player] I'd love to be getting paid money like him. He's around about twenty years.  
Claire: Niall, if you are not going to answer the questions I really have to ask you to come back and sit down.  
Niall: You didn't ask me any questions.  
Claire: I did, I asked  
Niall: What d'you ask?  
Claire: I asked what are the main benefits of physical activity.

Again, Claire had unwittingly attempted to compel Niall to answer questions. The interview continued without any response from Niall until:

Niall: Can we go back to class, can we?  
Claire: You can if you want, do you want to Niall?  
Niall: Yea.  
Claire: Okay.  
Niall: What class do I have, oh will I get in trouble now for going away?  
Claire: Well I don't mind, I don't know who you're going to or  
Lucy: [The teacher]'ll kill you.  
Aidan: She won't man.  
Lucy: She will.  
Claire: Well I'll tell you what, there's only a couple of questions left and then we can stop and you can either go back to class or wait here for ten minutes. It's up to yourselves. Is that alright? [non-verbal agreement]  
Okay.

Claire recalls a number of thoughts she had when Niall asked to leave. As she responded in the affirmative, she wondered if she should encourage Niall to leave, stress his right to do so. She simultaneously pictured Niall returning to the gym where the rest of his class were and wondered what the teacher would think of his leaving the interview, whether she would wonder if Claire had done something to make him want to leave. She wondered herself if she had done something to make him want to leave. She wondered how his leaving would reflect

on the research project and the researchers she was here to represent. These were but the thoughts of a moment, an ethically important moment. It was as these thoughts were passing through Claire's mind that Lucy began to convince Niall to stay and it was these same thoughts that resulted in Claire 'suggesting' that they continue for just a few more questions.

### *Reflections on Moments 1 and 2*

There are a number of things to note here. Firstly, the power dynamics within the focus groups were complex. As Christensen (2004) points out, the research process sees power being produced and negotiated while moving between different actors and different social positions. It has been highlighted by some that young people are often in positions of powerlessness relative to adults in a school setting (Fine, 2003; Nairn, Munro, & Smith, 2005), and the need for researchers to challenge uneven power relations between young people and adults has been acknowledged (Piggott, 2010). Both Mark and Niall referred to Claire as 'Miss'. This may have been a mark of respect for a guest in the school but it did give the feeling of her being conferred with the status of a teacher, signifying an unfortunate power imbalance. On the other hand, Claire's ability to conduct the focus group was dependent on the extent to which the young people chose to share their thoughts and experiences and the extent to which they either facilitated or resisted the research process (Karnieli-Miller, Strier, & Pessach, 2009). Cases of resistance, however, rather than making Claire welcome an opportunity to democratise power relations, appeared to make her adopt a position of authority at crucial moments. She used Mark not wishing the interview to end and Niall wishing to stay by the window to attempt to persuade each of them to respond to the interview questions. She struck a deal in each case. The principle of informed consent had been compromised. Claire had been very careful to ensure participants were free to exercise their right to not respond to questions at all other times but with Mark and Niall something changed. Their resisting and disrupting the interview process and walking around the room appeared to break her ethical concentration such that she relapsed into a reflex response to the situations which, as it happened, might be interpreted as unethical. It was, perhaps, her relative powerlessness in these moments which resulted in her instinctively attempting to regain a degree of control. She was not sensitive to the ethical dimension of the situation, focused instead on the practical task of managing the interview situation.

In the moment when Niall asked to leave the interview, however, we see that Claire was aware that this was a moment in which ethics were of import. She was, however, as researchers often are, influenced by a number of priorities at once. She wished to collect rich data and to represent her research team well by being an effective as well as an ethical researcher. Her on-the-spot decision to allow another young person to convince Niall to stay rather than stress his right to leave, leveraging the power of peer influence, did not align with her original intention of respecting the autonomy of the young people and allowing them to determine whether and to what extent they would be involved in the research.

Reflecting on these moments during data analysis, Claire wished that she had not compelled Mark or Niall to respond to questions and that she had encouraged Niall to leave if he so wished, stressing that there would be no negative repercussions to his absenting himself.

However, due to the transience of the moments it was her reflexes, conscious and unconscious, which she considered were operative in her responses. Pondering this, Claire found herself agreeing with Kvale and Brinkmann that ‘morally responsible research behaviour is more than abstract ethical knowledge and cognitive choices; it involves the moral integrity of the researcher, his or her sensitivity and commitment to moral issues and action’ (2009, p. 74). We will return to these reflections in our discussion, but first we will elaborate on the third and fourth ethically important moments.

### **Questions of situated judgement**

The previous discussion centred on informed consent and how Claire, although knowing the ethically correct behaviour for the situation, struggled to navigate the described ethically important moments. This section will deal with other moments in which the ethically correct behaviour was not so obvious to Claire and she felt somewhat compromised and confined by the boundaries of her role as a researcher. In the moments illustrated below, Claire found that she was not clear on the degree to which her personal ethics should influence her behaviour in the research situation.

#### ***Moment 3: Should I respond?***

There were occasions where the young people made comments to which Claire wished to respond but did not know if she should, given her role as a researcher. For example, while discussing local facilities Niall referred to ‘foreigners’ in a derogatory manner:

- Claire: Okay, and you said if you could have anything you’d have a swimming pool?  
Lucy: Yea.  
Katie: Yea, anything, like.  
Niall: That’s only to wash themselves.  
Claire: What d’you say Niall?  
Niall: That’s only for all the foreigners to wash themselves. Dirty. [laughter]

In addition to these comments, there were also racist comments made on two occasions during the focus groups. Claire was conflicted in these circumstances because she felt that while she had a responsibility as a researcher to respect the autonomy of the young people she also believed that she should respond to such comments. Outside of the research situation she believed there was an onus on her, if someone made a racist or intolerant comment, to react in a way that questioned or challenged such thinking. However, in the moments she encountered in the focus groups she chose to continue as if the comments had not been made.

#### ***Moment 4: Should I intervene?***

In two of the focus groups Rob appeared to be teased and socially excluded by the other young people. Claire first suspected this when the group entered the room for their first interview. As there were between three and six young people in each interview there were seven chairs in the room, three at either side of a table and one at the end where Claire usually sat. When the group of four young people entered the room, Rob sat on a chair at the far side of the table and one girl, Dee, walked around to take the seat next to him, while the

other two young people sat in chairs at the near side of the table. However, when Dee noticed that she was at the same side as Rob she quickly and demonstrably moved to the near side of the table with the other two young people, making it clear that she did not wish to sit next to Rob, and all but Rob and Claire smiled/laughed. Claire, who had not yet sat down, instinctively sat at the same side of the table as Rob to even the sides.

Rob was teased in various subtle ways throughout the focus group by the other young people. They imitated what he said, talked over his responses and made fun of his remarks. Again, Claire was unsure of her role in this circumstance, struggling to reconcile her personal and research ethics. She experienced a feeling of judgement paralysis which prevented her knowing what the ethically correct response was. She did not wish to say or do anything that would further ostracise Rob from the group and, equally, she did not wish to overstep her role as a researcher. However, she also felt a duty of care towards Rob and did not wish him to be negatively affected through his participation in the research. At one point in the second interview of this group, Claire took advantage of a particular circumstance where there had been some good-natured teasing of another young person, James, about the fact that he used to dance (laughing *with* rather than *at* him), to speak in defence of Rob:

- Claire: And you said last, you have a punch bag as well, don't you? [to Rob]  
James: You don't look like it.  
Sarah: You what?  
Claire: Well now James, hang on a second, they were laughing at you for dancing and now you're laughing at him for the punch bag.  
Rob: Yea, see?  
Claire: Can we all stop laughing at each other? It might help.

In this case Claire chose to walk a fine line. She did not wish to leave Rob open to further ridicule by overtly taking his side and chose instead to request that '*we all* stop laughing at each other'.

### ***Reflections on Moments 3 and 4***

Moments 3 and 4 highlight the difficulty a researcher can face in judging the boundaries between how we should behave as researchers and how we should behave as humans. Etherington, concluding her discussion on ethical research relationships, noted that ethically reflexive research 'requires us to come from behind the protective barriers of objectivity and invite others to join with us in our exploration of being a researcher *and* being human' (2007, p. 615). In terms of situated judgement, Claire found it difficult to either recognise or respond to what was most important in the situation. Should she prioritise the autonomy of the young people, and their right to speak and act freely? Should she prioritise the generally accepted imperatives to combat racism, prejudice and bullying? Does she have a right to impose her values or moral standards on research participants? Should the research mandate to gather rich data trump all other requisites? And just as importantly, if what was most important in the situation could be determined, how should it be responded to? For example, if she should act to ensure Rob is not being teased or ostracised how can this be done in a way that does not go beyond the boundaries of the role of the researcher?

Another boundary issue is also worth mentioning regarding moments 3 and 4. Reflecting on the keen ‘duty of care’ Claire felt towards the young people, evidenced in her concern for Rob’s social exclusion and for the thinking of others who displayed racist or intolerant tendencies, we wondered whether the ethical standards being applied were different to those that would be applied if the participants were adults. Is the autonomy of the young people to be less respected in relation to how they are permitted to speak or act? Or should the ‘duty of care’ felt by Claire be applied to any research participant, irrespective of age?

## **Discussion**

As researchers we complete ethics applications and pledge to uphold ethical principles. However, as Ryen (2004, p. 225) explains, ‘doing fieldwork means confronting idealism with practice, in circumstances and situations seldom described in textbooks and in situations that need immediate action or choices.’ This immediacy of ethical choices poses a difficulty for the enactment of ethical research, especially among less experienced researchers. Fernández Balboa and Brubaker (2012) make the point that for novice researchers total presence of mind and holistic awareness may be less attainable due to the absence of a solid experiential base. The examples of ethically important moments experienced by graduate students (Atkinson, 2014; Bernstein & Friedman, 2013; Trussell, 2010; Wright & O’Flynn, 2012) serve to further illustrate the steep ethical learning curve of the novice researcher. In Claire’s case, the effort of managing the interviews at times when there was some disruption to the process made her focus switch from ethical considerations to practical considerations. While her conscious thoughts focused on interview management her unconscious action resulted in her breaching the principle of informed consent. What is of interest to us here is that her unconscious action revealed an unethical reflex. Moments 1 and 2 demonstrate that there may be a mismatch between the values and principles a researcher brings to a research situation and those they enact in a particular research moment. Believing as she did in the principle of informed consent, Claire was confounded to discover that she had not enacted it at certain points during the interviews. As a novice researcher, however, this discovery was highly important to sensitise her to how this principle manifests in practice and prepare her to respond more appropriately in future ethically important moments.

The sense of paralysed judgement Claire experienced when she encountered intolerance and racism in the focus groups indicates a conflict between the researcher’s ethical duty to respect the autonomy of the participants and her sense that she also had an ethical duty to speak out against certain ideas or, as Hammersley and Traianou phrase it, a conflict between ‘external ethical demands and felt commitments’ (2014, p. 233). Regarding the apparent teasing of one of the young people, Claire was conflicted regarding her duty to ensure no harm came to the young people as a result of participation in the research and a question as to what she should or should not do or say to avoid such harm. The point of interest here is less what Claire should have done or said in each case and more the fact that she was unsure of what to do or say. Principles of research ethics serve a purpose. Taken as a whole, they give us an ethical direction in which to aim our on-the-spot decisions. They do not, however, as numerous researchers have attested (Hammersley 2009, Homan 2005, McFee 2009, Rossman and Rallis 2010, Ryen 2004), answer all questions or prepare us for all eventualities. We must,

therefore, find a way to uphold the spirit of ethical principles when their particularities fail us. Homan (2005, p. 208), who suggests that ‘we recognize a moral position in the established professional guidelines, not by looking at them but by looking through them’, advises that rather than starting with formal rules, we ought to begin with the principles or moral values we seek to honour.

Lahman et al. (2011) stress the importance of researchers thinking through the ethical stance to which they wish to aspire prior to embarking on research (such as virtue ethics, feminist ethics, relational ethics, etc.). They further contend that a researcher’s ethics are socially constructed during the various stages of the research process. This proved true in our study. Although Claire was unfamiliar with the various ethical stances she might take prior to engaging in the research, we find that she adopted one or other of them during the ethically important moments and subsequent reflections. She tended towards, for example, a virtue ethicist stance in considering that it was her underlying character which caused her reflex responses to be flawed in Moments 1 and 2 (Brinkman & Kvale, 2005) and she touched on elements of caring, relational and feminist ethics in reflecting on the power dynamic in Moments 1 and 2 and in debating the importance of various obligations towards the participants and herself during Moments 3 and 4. We suggest that a better understanding of the various ethical stances and the thinking behind them may have prepared Claire to make more informed decisions during the ethically important moments she encountered.

Lahman et al. (2011) propose culturally responsive relational reflexive ethics (CRRRE) as an ethical stance useful to all research in all situations. This amalgam ethical stance is particularly useful as it incorporates various ethical stances and weds these to ongoing ethical reflexivity. As its name suggests, CRRRE emphasises that researchers affirm cultural differences, are ethically responsive at each stage of the research process, prioritise obligations towards and relations with participants as highly as research concerns, and continuously practice ethical reflexivity. We find this ethical stance particularly useful for the research context described in this paper. In describing its various elements, Lahman et al. (2011) specifically mention that the responsive nature of CRRRE requires that a researcher not shy away from such actions as allowing a participant to leave the research situation, a caution that speaks directly to Moment 2 in this paper. Further, they give an example of a focus group with young people in which one young person’s mention that he was gay elicited giggles from other participants. Although the nature of the teasing is different, this is reminiscent of Moment 4 in our study. Following CRRRE ethics the researcher in the case presented by Lahman et al. responded by speaking with the young person during the time between two focus groups and asking whether he wished the giggling be addressed during the subsequent focus group. Although the participant declined, the ethic upheld was that ‘the process of working through ethically loaded situations is honoured over prescribed solutions or avoidance of tricky research scenarios’ (Lahman et al., 2011, p. 1408).

### **Concluding thoughts**

This paper sought to share and reflect upon examples of ethically important moments encountered by a novice researcher as she conducted interviews in the area of youth physical

activity. Our choice to publish this paper in *Leisure Studies* rather than targeting a methodological or ethics journal was a deliberate one. It was rooted in our belief that ethical issues should be aired and engaged with more frequently by those researching in the field of leisure, especially for the benefit of less experienced scholars. The danger of not sensitising researchers to ethical issues during the early stages of their careers is, of course, that subtle ethical breaches can become habit, going unnoticed as researchers progress through their careers. If we always limit the discussion of ethical issues to methodological footnotes or separate methods-focused publications, we risk losing sight of the centrality of sound ethical judgement to the whole research enterprise.

Indeed, in concluding this paper one reflection we shared is that the struggles and questions of situated judgement presented here are much more common than their representation in the leisure literature would suggest. Recalling the recommendation of Pillow (2003, p. 188) that researchers practice ‘reflexivities of discomfort’, we hope to prompt more researchers in our field to document the uncomfortable, confounding, even the mundane ethical predicaments they encounter, to discuss these with colleagues and to embed them in methods courses for researchers. We further urge that researchers acknowledge the ethical stances they take in their work and introduce to novice researchers the ethical frameworks they may rely upon to inform their ethical reflexivity. It is through challenging our ethical responses to situations that we might come to know ourselves better as people and researchers and hone our ethical selves so when faced with a point of tension in a research encounter our responses might be improved.

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