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# **Ethical considerations in outdoor studies research**

**Ashworth, L., Maynard, L. and Stuart, K.**

## **Introduction**

Following Humberstone et al.'s chapter in section one of this book, this chapter will explore the ethical considerations that need to be included when carrying out research in outdoor studies. Because of the diverse scope of this book, a range of people (for example, outdoor studies students, researchers, or practitioners) could be engaging with a variety of research areas. Therefore this chapter is written to meet these varying needs, but with an emphasis on research that involves people and social conditions. It is split into two parts: Firstly, we provide an introductory overview of ethical considerations. This takes a critical perspective on the application of these considerations in practice. Second, we explore the implications of this critique and propose alternative lenses to help guide our consideration.

## **An overview of ethical considerations**

The term ethics is taken from the Greek 'ethos', from Plato and Aristotle. It literally translates to the 'customary or habitual way of behaving', and is often interpreted as the study of good and bad conduct (Shephard, 2002). Essentially, ethics concerns the morality of human conduct. More specifically related to areas of social research, it refers to the moral deliberation, choice and accountability on the part of researchers throughout the research process. (Edwards and Mauthner, 2002). This concerns what "ought to be done" and what "ought not to be done", and makes a move from the practical and logical considerations of methodology to the moral perspective (Denscombe, 2002, p.59).

These definitions have formed the foundations for professional groups to establish codes and standards of behaviour to regulate the actions of their members (Shephard, 2002). Most notable, was the establishment of the Belmont Report, which became the primary ethical framework for protecting human subjects in the United States (Zimmerman, 1997).

The field of ethics is vast and beyond the scope of this chapter. However, below is an overview of ethical considerations thought to be key, which can be used as a foundation or framework for research in outdoor studies. Although these considerations can act as a guideline, we need to ensure that these are critical considerations, rather than simply taken for granted. The context of outdoor studies is both diverse and complex and application can unearth dilemmas in practice. Each key consideration below is therefore also looked at through a critical lens to exemplify such dilemmas.

## **Purpose and Gain**

It is important to consider from the outset, what is the purpose of the research and who will gain? We must ask ourselves these questions and explicitly state the answers within the design and report

process. All stakeholders must be considered within this, be they, for example, participants, practitioners, organisations, funders, or policy holders. It should be made clear how stakeholders will directly gain from participation, or how they will not directly gain, but how others will. We must always question if it is ethical to 'take' the knowledge and experience from one stakeholder for the gain of others. The researcher cannot assume that any of the stakeholders will gladly do this. Consent needs to be sought and is discussed further below. Transparency about purpose and gain also surfaces power dynamics at play. It makes them explicit and therefore open to ethical consideration.

This however is not always straight forward in practice. Sometimes the purpose of the research does not match the reality of the situation. In particular this can be seen when boundaries of practice become blurred. For example, for some participants an interview can push the boundaries of a therapeutic process, as participants are asked to reflect and be listened to by an impartial researcher. This can be magnified in the outdoor studies context if, for example, an outdoor experience has had a profound effect on the participant and the interview process reinforces this. This is not the purpose of the research and is pushing the researchers professional boundaries.

Because the strategies of researcher and therapist are similar (e.g. building rapport, listening, use of pauses, reading between the lines), this can lead the researcher into ethical difficulties (Duncombe and Jessop, 2002). Birch and Miller (2000) indicate that "in practice even skilled interviewers may find it difficult to draw neat boundaries around 'rapport', 'friendship' and 'intimacy' in order to avoid the depths of 'counselling' and 'therapy'" (p. 113). Indeed, Kvale (1996) suggests that much of the inspiration for qualitative interview technique has come from the work of Rogers (1965) in the field of therapeutic interviewing, stating that:

It is difficult to draw any strong line of demarcation between a therapeutic and a research interview. Both may lead to an increased understanding and change, but with the emphasis on personal change in a therapeutic interview and on intellectual understanding in a research interview (p.26).

There is a distinction to be made here from the perspective of purpose and gain. The purpose of research is normally for the researcher's gain, as in a research interview the participant is helping the researcher, whereas in a therapy session the therapist is helping the client (Hart & Crawford-Wright, 1999). However, the participant may well gain from this process as the acts of verbalising as well as being listened to, can be therapeutic (Buckle et al., 2010). The researcher cannot, and it could be argued, should not remove this gain. The researcher is faced with the challenge of balancing the potential blurring of these boundaries of practice. They have the dilemma of finding a balance between building rapport and setting clear, ethical boundaries of practice. This shows that enacting ethical guidelines relating to purpose and gain is not a straight forward task. This is closely related to the area of minimising the risk of harm.

### **Risk of harm**

Consideration needs to be paid to any potential risk of harm. This should be viewed from the perspective of all stakeholders, as well as the research project's impact as a whole. This can be

thought of in terms of risk of the project failing (for example, due to insufficient data), risk of damaging information about the service provider (Squirrell, 2012), or the risk of distress to participants and adverse impact on stakeholders. Our discussion here focuses on the latter of these three risks.

In considering all stakeholders, we should question all eventualities. This can be viewed in terms of psychological, emotional or physical risk. To start, the research process should not be emotionally distressing or psychologically damaging. However, most people will have negative experiences during their lives and talking about the negative experiences is likely to evoke negative or distressing emotions within the research process. As researchers we do not just ignore someone's negative experiences or emotions. Buckle et al. (2010) offer support for continuing with research at these times, arguing that we are not causing pain, but bearing witness to the pain that is already there (this obviously relates to the discussion of therapeutic experiences discussed above).

The researcher needs to manage the process if it becomes distressing for the participant. Knowledge of how to offer support, offer to cease the research process and, in the case of young people or vulnerable adults, offer to follow up with significant others. This is of particular significance when dealing with disclosure (this is discussed in greater detail below, relating to confidentiality).

Furthermore research participants should not be put at any physical risk from others by taking part? This could be in terms of the location of the data collection being in a dangerous geographical area or perhaps the location being too public and exposing of participant's engagement. For example, we have had experiences of carrying out post-course interviews with people to understand the extent to which an outdoor programme impacted on offending behaviour. As white female researchers, we were immediately thought to be the police and in going into black and ethnic minority areas the very act of being seen with us placed the participants at risk of harm from peers.

When considering all stakeholders, the researcher should also consider themselves within this. Again this should be considered in terms of psychological, emotional and physical safety. Researchers should have appropriate background checks and be trained to the appropriate standard. They should not work beyond their boundaries, always working within remit and training (Weiss, 1998). We should also ensure we have the appropriate supervisory support structures in place to manage our own emotional and psychological safety.

### **Anonymity and Confidentiality**

Participants should be assured their anonymity and that their name or any information that could identify them, will not be used in the dissemination of findings. This is also true within the process of data collection, as Weiss (1998) highlights the importance of not telling "one respondent what another has said...as they will be able to piece together their identities" (p.94).

In considering the area of anonymity, Weiss (1998) continues that anonymity should be ensured, unless an individual gives specific permission to be identified. We have come across people several times, who wish to be identified. This has often been because they feel strongly about a matter and want to help others learn from their experience. However, this should be seriously considered, particularly when working with more vulnerable or disadvantaged young people. They may regret

this choice in the future. They may also inadvertently identify other young people by association. This should also be considered if professionals or organisations choose to be identified, as this could also inadvertently identify participants wishing to stay anonymous.

Participants should also be assured any information they share will be confidential. This however is another problematic matter. Confidentiality can be assured for some things, for example dislike of a particular activity, but cannot be assured for others, for example disclosures of harm.

Dealing with disclosure is a discreet element associated with both confidentiality and risk, particularly related to young people under 18 and vulnerable people. Confidentiality can only be assured up until there is a safeguarding issue. This should be made clear to young people from the beginning (within the informed consent process) and be reiterated if the researcher senses a young person is starting to disclose something. This can obviously have an adverse impact on rapport building with participants, but is considered an absolute priority. This is a very blurred and disputed area. Some suggest (Williamson et al., 2005) that any disclosure relating to harm to self, harm to others, or criminality, should be reported. Some people (REF) debate the criminality element, suggesting that this would be impossible when working with young offenders for example. Others debate the area more generally from a participatory perspective, arguing that young people should have more control in this area (Lansdown, 2013). Alignment with stakeholder and organisational policies wherever possible will support researchers in these dilemmas.

Squirrell (2012) highlights how photo's, tapes and video's add an extra complexity to the discussion of anonymity. There needs to be specific reference to this data within the informed consent process. This has increasing relevance because of the growing popularity of digital mediums and social networks.

### **Informed consent**

Before conducting any research, consent should be gained from all stakeholders (Christian, 2005). This consent should be fully informed including the details this chapter has covered up to this point. Emanuel, et al. (2000) state this should include, “the provision of information to participants, about purpose of the research, its procedures, potential risks, benefits and alternatives, so that the individual understands this information and can make a voluntary decision whether to enrol and continue to participate” (p.2703).

Denscombe (2010) states that ‘Informed’ relates to the fact that participants should be aware of what may occur and what might be expected of them. Furthermore, that they are actually able to comprehend this information. ‘Consent’ relates to the fact the participant is able to make a rational and mature judgement of whether to participate or not, and that participation should be voluntary, and free from coercion.

Informed consent should typically include the following, as well as any other considerations specific to a particular project:

- Purpose - including research questions and the intended use of the research
- Confidentiality and anonymity - including the use of pseudonyms (or code names)

- Safeguarding and disclosure
- Security of the data - including who will have access to the data, where the data will be stored and for how long, and how the data will be disposed of
- Participant's access to their own data at any time
- Participant validation
- Participant's right to withdraw their information at any point
- How the research will be written up and who will see it.

People should be made aware that they have the right to withdraw their consent at any point - beginning, middle and end (and up to a pre-agreed point, where the research report is written up). It should be made clear that they don't have to participate in all activities or answer all questions. Squirrell (2012) states the importance of also ensuring that people have no obligation to state why they are withdrawing.

Participants should also be aware of, and consent to, how the research report is disseminated. The report should be available to all stakeholders in an accessible format. As much as possible, the ethical considerations taken within a project should be made clear to all recipients or readers of the research. This shows credibility to researchers as professional and considerate, as well as adding validity to the research report.

Informed consent needs to be accessible to participants and therefore needs to be explained in ways that they will find intelligible. Usually this is in both a written and verbal form, where participant's questions can be answered. This should also be considerate of language issues, to ensure that participants are truly informed.

In working with young people, we need to ensure that informed consent is given and gained from young people themselves and not just their gatekeepers, for example, teachers, youth workers or parents. It may be that these gatekeepers think it is fine for us to access young people for information, but we must not assume this. Equally, we should not assume that those gatekeepers that prevent access to young people are actually representing the young people's wishes.

Researchers need to reflect on how they make any of these considerations a reality rather than simply a bland statement of permission for participants. Crow et al. (2006) suggest that careful consideration of the informed consent process leads to better research, as it helps prepare the researcher and participant, and establishes a more equal relationship between the two. This in turn gives the participants the confidence to be more open and frank about the aspects of their lives that are being researched.

In considering the area of informed consent, researchers should be aware that some people may feel coerced into consenting. For example this could be through peers, managers, parents, or the researcher. We need to ensure that people understand that they are not obliged to consent and we feel no repercussions of their choice.

This links to the topic of incentives for participation. This is a highly contentious area for two key reasons. Firstly, linking to the previous point regarding coercion, people may feel they have to participate because they are receiving something in return. Further, they may feel they have to say the 'right thing' in order to receive the incentive. This, obviously, may lead to inaccurate data.

Secondly, debate lies with what type of incentive people should receive. Some argue, from an equitable perspective, that this should be a monetary payment (Noaks and Wincup 2004). Others argue that this is not always appropriate when working with vulnerable people, as they may, for example, use their money for drugs or alcohol (Seddon, 2005). Alternative incentives include food vouchers or cinema tickets. This is obviously context specific and should be negotiated within the research design phase.

Crow et al (2006) also notes a negative aspect of the process of gaining informed consent, in that it can inhibit the development of rapport necessary for the collection of authentic data. Certainly this would be the case if you open your outdoor programme with a monologue of research ethics, informed consent sheets etc. Crow argues that the 'paperwork' and concept of research can put up a barrier to inclusion to certain groups, for example those who are vulnerable, of different ethnicity or social class to the traditional white middle class western researcher. Whilst we have a duty to inform people, both timing and a dynamic approach can help in this situation.

In summary, the process of informed consent is tricky, and one which is more about striking balances, than following a set of rules (Wiles, Crow, Charles, & Heath, 2007) and one where the information presented to participants is manageable, meaningful and at a timeframe that suits participants (Crow, et al., 2006).

Outdoor studies, with its links to experiential learning, lends itself to experiences that are spontaneous and novel, which are co-created in the moment (Beames, 2012). Not only are we often researching people's experiences of something that we cannot predict, we regularly use open ended approaches to collecting data, such as questionnaires, interviews, or personal journals. Hadjistravopoulos and Smythe (2001) suggest that open ended or emergent ways of gathering data cause issues with the traditional notion of informed consent as participants cannot give true informed consent as they do not know from the outset as to how research dialogue will unfold.

### **Ethics panels and committees**

So far we have discussed four prime areas of ethics – purpose and gain, risk of harm, anonymity and confidentiality and informed consent. These are often expressed as ethical checklists. If you use such a checklist, it is imperative that the complexity of each of the four areas is carefully considered, rather than just 'ticking the box'. Most research needs its ethics cleared by a panel of experts. This maybe within a university or academic structure, or for larger research organisations and departments, this maybe an internal feature. This may not always be possible for everyone carrying out research in outdoor studies. However, ethical procedures still need to be adhered to for the same reasons as we have discussed above. To not adhere to them might not only make the research unethical in some way, but we are at risk of only considering ethics to get past the ethics panel, rather than for the actual consideration of the participants.

However, in considering the area of ethics panels and committees, Simpson (2011) suggests that they can act as 'uniform aperture through which to pass research of all different shapes and sizes' (p 378). This does not fit all approaches to research and in particular does not fit post-positivistic approaches, that may not have the same fixed views of positivism and where a square peg will not

fit a round hole. Simpson details that the aperture becomes more visible and constricting with qualitative methods in particular and proposes a need for their own set of ethics. Proposals of such alternative approaches to considering ethics are developed below.

### **Alternative approaches to ethical considerations**

It is clear that research ethics are rarely straight forward. Having recognised that there are more 'shapes and sizes of research being forced through a 'uniform aperture' (Simpson, 2011, p. 378). It is now fairly obvious that we should start to consider the aperture and how we might change it.

Denscombe (2010, p. 61) points out that basic codes of ethics, such as those suggested above, are guidelines, not "rules of conduct". Each principle should not be followed but considered as a starting point. Any departure from the guidelines needs to be noted and justified. However, it rarely feels like this in practice, but more a strict set of rules. In what seems like a world of ever increasing bureaucracy, there is much support for ethical guidelines not to become regulatory (Crow et al., 2006; Wiles et al., 2007).

Sparkes & Smith (2014) writing in the area of sport, exercise and health offer some useful insight. They are sceptical of traditional ethics for a number of reasons, suggesting that they define people as 'bounded, autonomous self-contained subjects rather than as dialogical and relational, also they are 'modernist, male orientated and imperialist' (p207). Furthermore that they are based on positivist traditions of biomedical research and that they 'lack the ability to understand the nature of ethics as an emergent process in the field' (p208). Lastly, traditional ethics are largely bureaucratic and are set up purely to protect the institutions themselves.

Sparkes & Smith (2014) consider that traditional ethics are very minimalistic and only 'a first step, the basic entry point, into a long and complex process (p212). This view is supported by Simpson (2011), who suggests research has a "series of ethical moments which arise throughout the research...rather than a single moment at its outset" (p377). The ethics process is ongoing, and rather than passing through a single aperture, we should be in a *continuous shoot mode*, where we constantly check and re-check that ethical procedures put in place are working effectively. This process is sometimes termed 'running' or 'process' ethics (Ramcharan and Cutcliffe, 2001). This appears to be more in keeping and meet the needs of a growing place for social science research in the field of outdoor studies.

Alderson & Morrow (2006) suggest the use of multidisciplinary research ethics guidelines, separating healthcare ethics from social research ethics. Simpson (2011) develops this argument suggesting that we separate 'ethics of the body (with a person attached) and ethics of the person (with a body attached)' (p377). In using these terms Simpson suggests that the ethics of a body relates to traditional 'human subject research' model, developed out of a medical research background. The ethics of the person allows for a 'social subject research' in which we engage with an 'open subject' with whom there is some kind of relationship with. While he recognises that neither the body and person are entirely separate, he concludes that social science research should have a different genealogy of ethics.



While Sparkes & Smith (2014) are fairly scathing of what they consider to be traditionalist minimalist ethics, drawing on the work of Lahman, et al. (2011) they offer some examples of emerging alternatives which they term *aspirational* ethics.

### **Aspirational ethics**

Lahman et al (2011) consider that there are newer *aspirational* ethics emerging that go beyond the more traditional minimalist ethics. These include *virtue ethics, relational ethics, feminist ethics, narrative ethics, caring ethics and reflexive ethics*. All of which may have something to offer as alternatives.

Virtue ethics for example suggest a move away from abstract rules and considers that ethics should be based on the contexts and practices in which we research, driven by the situational contexts as opposed to pre-determined rules (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). This relies to some extent on the moral background and reflexivity of the researcher. Drawing from Blee and Currier (2011), Sparkes & Smith (2014) note that the focus is on the integrity of the researcher, rather than the research and that characteristics such as honesty, resoluteness and humility are important.

In addition, this should not just be left up to the researcher, instead according to Simpson (2011) we should develop the role of research supervisors and mentors, as some kind of 'ethical consultants' that provide ongoing support. Ethics can be seen as ongoing and situational, as such getting them passed through a one off board, or panel may no longer be appropriate.

Similarly reflexive ethics is situational and emerges from the interactions between the researcher and participant. Here Sparkes & Smith (2014) suggest that researchers need to;

- (a) be sensitive to the interactions of self, others and situations, (b) notice the reactions to a research situation and adapt in a responsive, ethical, moral way, where the participant's safety, privacy, dignity and autonomy are respected, (c) pay special attention to the possible power imbalances between the researcher and the participants...(p.212).

While the list goes on, there are clear overlaps here with, for example, an experiential approach to learning, which a great deal of outdoor studies is underpinned by.

Stern (2011) suggests that typically research ethics consist of a set of 'negatives', which relate mostly to avoiding harm and deception. This can be seen as limiting and moreover can result on focusing on this rather on more positive gain. Stern tries to reconceptualise research ethics into a set of positive qualities or 'virtues', that researchers should demonstrate, rather than a set of negatives to be avoided. While he recognises the need to consider the ethical guidelines in your area of work, he also suggests that it is important for a research to consider their personal qualities or 'virtues'. These virtues being, sincerity, trust, courage, kindness, modesty, humility, truthfulness, openness to criticism and respect. Stern's work helps in this in that he suggests turning a set of negatives, things that shouldn't be done to a more positive and empowering process, that focuses on what should be done.

Alderson & Morrow (2006) suggest there is a need to refer to the long standing principles of justice, avoiding harm, respecting participant's views and gaining informed consent. Good ethical considerations should:

- Take realistic account of everyday difficulties in research
- Avoid being too prescriptive
- Respect researchers' and teams' individual responsibility
- Promote 'good' research practice
- Appreciate many kinds of research methods and disciplines (p414).

## Chapter summary

This chapter has defined ethics, tracing its history and presenting four key ethical considerations; purpose and gain, risk of harm, anonymity and confidentiality and informed consent. We have problematised an approach that treats these considerations superficially and that relies on 'checklists' or external panels to validate methodological decisions. We propose the use of just guidelines, discipline specific frameworks, and ever vigilant researchers and supervisors, alert to arising and changing ethical issues. Ethics are presented here as an on-going process. This nuanced understanding of ethics has arisen in part because of the complex nature of research with people and partly due to the nature of outdoor studies and in particular experiential learning, in which it is situated. The value base of this discipline is human-centred, it respects and values participants, and it views them as capable. Research in such settings will seek to share power; to be a conversational rather than an interrogation. The very nature of the 'blurry' boundaries of practice, is replicated by the researcher. As such, ethical issues will always be complex, changing and based on best judgement rather than hard and fast rules.

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## **Abstract**

This chapter provides an introductory overview of ethical considerations taking a critical perspective on the application of these in the area of outdoor studies. This focuses on the areas of purpose and gain, risk of harm, anonymity and confidentiality, and informed consent. Examples of where research practice does not match up to traditional notions of ethics are explored and the implications are problematised. The chapter supports the use of ethical guidelines, but recognises these as a minimum. To support research in our complex practice ethics need to be seen as ongoing, be discipline specific, and allow for the vigilance of the researcher and supervisor.

## **Author Bios**

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Letty Ashworth, Research Teaching Assistant in the Department of Science, Natural Resources and Outdoor Studies, at the University of Cumbria, Ambleside. She has worked with marginalised young people in informal outdoor education settings, though her practice and research. Her research areas are informal outdoor learning, outdoor curriculums and youth development. She teaches across Post-graduate and Undergraduate Outdoor courses, in areas such as Personal Development and Therapeutic Applications of the Outdoors, Social Issues and Research Methods. She is a keen walker, canoeist and enjoys outdoor journeying with her young family.