

Ethics, ethnography and exploration of everyday family interactions: formal process to field messiness

Yvonne Gora
RMIT University
Melbourne, Vic. Australia, 3000
yvonne.gora@rmit.edu.au

ABSTRACT

Researching modern day families with teens about their everyday interactions with each other and technology in the context of their homes is a challenging and rewarding enterprise. In this paper I describe the ethical and methodological challenges encountered in ethnographic fieldwork using a mixed methods approach. I present ethical principles and procedures and discuss how they can be mitigated in an unpredictable environment; and illuminate ways of directly addressing ethics principles and practicalities to reduce power imbalances, increase collaboration and give teens a voice. This is a story of how I overcame ethical dilemmas in a potentially messy techno-social family domain.

Author Keywords

Ethnography; ethics; family research; teens; technology; field studies

ACM Classification Keywords

H5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI); Miscellaneous.

INTRODUCTION

Information and communication technologies (ICTs) offer families diverse platforms for collaborating, exchanging information, and spending time together. Rapid technology diffusion, increasing use of social networks, mobile media devices and communication formats (text messaging, email, Facebook) are changing the way families engage with each other. Given this changing media landscape, research into how ICTs are used to communicate and interact with family members in the current social ecology is critical to our understanding of family dynamics and the links with technology use. Research also needs to consider the methodological benefits and ethical challenges for studying these evolving forms of ICTs. The aim of this paper is to share my experience as I encountered a variety of ethical challenges during the different stages of an ethnographic research process. I draw on concerns that arise *before* applying for Ethics Committee approval, *during* subsequent stages of recruitment, and issues regarding accessing and maintaining research engagement. The paper focuses on dilemmas around beneficence and the

burdens (and blessings) associated with the relationship between researcher and the researched. The focus is not HCI specific, but is germane to field research in general. My aim is to encourage future researchers to reflect on the research process in greater depth, and to be more directly engaged with ethical challenges and the potential opportunities this affords, especially within ethnography.

Entering family spaces

Families increasingly occupy online as well as physical habitats, and these spaces are becoming significant in the establishment and reproduction of relationships. I am a PhD scholar wanting to go beyond an empirically derived research process to engage directly with families about their lives, habits, and ways of interacting with each other. I aim to explore how families interact in this post-modern environment where face-to-face communication appears to be decreasing, and the use of ICTs increasing (Hertlein & Blumer 2014; Kennedy, Smith & Wellman 2008). ICTs influence how family members communicate with each other, and fundamentally impact parenting, parent-child relationships and family dynamics at different stages of development. As children's technology use increases with their age, parents need to adapt their behaviour to acknowledge developmental shifts. Communication during adolescent and teen years can be a major challenge for parents and children due to these changes and the adolescent's transforming role in the family. An ethnographic research approach allows me to explore the messy complexity of families' everyday lived experience during this important family life stage, and the multitude of social, spatial and temporal contexts that post-modern digital life permeates.

Ethnography access to everyday experiences

The practice of ethnography needs to include online spaces for data collection and research interactions, as technology exponentially evolves and changes how we conduct our everyday lives in the postmodern milieu (Hallett & Barber, 2013; Le Blanc, 2015; Pink 2007). Pink and Mackley (2013) argue for going beyond investigating ethnographies of media content to embrace "sensory embodied and affective routines of everyday life" to gain deeper insights into the role modern media performs in change, intervention and the production of sustainability and wellbeing (p. 678). Ethnographic research is undertaken in many disciplines (beyond anthropology and sociology), and increasingly field studies are being conducted in HCI (Gerling, Linehan, Waddington, Kalyn, & Evans, 2015; Strohmayer & Comber, 2015; Waycott, Morgans,...& Davis, 2015) as

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well as media, communication and internet studies (see boyd 2007; Horst, Hjorth, & Tacchi, 2012; Ito., et al., 2010; Pink & Mackley, 2013). Despite emerging ethnographic practice in family research, quantitative methods tend to dominate the field (see Carvalho & Relvas, 2015 for a literature review highlighting the strong preference for quantitative methods in studies of ICTs in family contexts). Hence there is a distinct and opportune gap to investigate 'normal' family spaces using qualitative methods; and to explore socio-technical interactions via multiple devices and digital platforms as a snapshot in time in a dynamic technoscape.

GAINING ETHICS APPROVAL

In determining the best way to approach my Ethics Committee application, I sought advice from scholars and academics with experience in ethnographic research practice. I was advised to reconsider my target family configuration of (single or two parent) families with teens between 12 to 17 years, due to the potentially vulnerable population of children, and the challenges I would encounter gaining ethics approval. However, I particularly wanted to focus on families with teens in my research to capture perceptions of togetherness in the current computer-mediated environment. This family life cycle stage is traditionally viewed as a time where teens become disengaged from family, and develop increased emotional autonomy (Larson, Richards, Moneta, Holmbeck, & Duckett, 1996; Livingstone & Bovill 1999; Notten & Kraaykamp 2009; Steinberg 2001). Families with teens are messy - with a variety of mediators of change impacting family time including puberty, family conflict, among other qualities of family relationships; in addition to external factors (opportunities outside the home), and life situational factors (having a private bedroom; a personal phone and TV in one's room). It is a significant period in a families' life, and worth examining to provide insight for improved relationships in media rich environments. So I persisted and studied resources about how to conduct ethical research with children/families. By doing this, I was able to design an appropriate study and gain ethics approval without difficulty. Family research pioneers (Bott, 1955; Silversone, Hirsch, & Morley, 1991) and anthropology academics (Pollard, 2009) write about how formidable and demanding the task of research with families, and the process of ethnography can be. Preparation is integral to developing research strategy.

A beneficial approach to gaining ethics approval for research is to be thoroughly prepared by engaging with supervisors, mentors, ethics committee members, academics and researchers. This may seem self-evident, however for novice researchers there is the potential for feeling insecure and ill equipped to contact research experts. The preliminary phase of the research process is critical in defining one's topic (especially in doctoral research). Supportive dialogue with supervisors, experienced researchers and student colleagues is imperative to assist in working out the finer details of the ethics committee application. Research needs to align with the key principles of justice and respect, risk and

beneficence, and research merit and integrity (as defined by the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research National Health and Medical Research Council, Australian Council, and Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee, 2007). In order to meet Ethics Committee requirements I identified why research with teens is important, and demonstrated how to ensure their protection.

It was important to identify participating children (teens) as active agents in experiencing and shaping their own lives. Children's social location is often viewed as subordinate to adults (Alderson, 2001; Harden, Scott, Backett-Milburn, & Jackson, 2000), and therefore participation is reliant on informed consent via adult 'gatekeepers.' As a means of overcoming the potentially coercive element of parents asserting power over their teens to comply, I stipulated that *all members* need to agree to participate, and that if any prospective member did not consent, then I would not go ahead with the research. Gaining consent from the teens specifically was a means of acknowledging their agency in an active, engaged and collaborative participation, in addition to being an ethical requirement. Also, given the project is accessing children directly, it is vital to obtain a Working with Children Check (WWC) in the relevant Australian state research is being conducted in. This provides a level of security to the participant families and Ethics Committee members, as a means of screening the researcher for criminal records and professional conduct reports.

GAINING ACCESS TO FAMILIES AND TEENS

In effect, letting teens know that the project would not go ahead without their approval was a potent method of empowering them. It is imperative to give young people a choice, and a legitimate voice at every stage of the research. Building relationships and using collaborative techniques engage the participants and aid in establishing strong rapport. Being conversant in the available online environments is an important space for connection and engagement as well. This is especially vital when connecting with teenage research participants. In the field of child studies a collaborative approach has been identified as a means of reducing some of the power imbalance in the researcher/researched relationship (boyd, 2008; Coad & Evans, 2008; Hill, 2006). It also provides children greater control over the research process, as all parties are active participants in a social process. Developing strategies that are inclusive and empowering to all family members leads to creating a heightened sense of responsibility and willingness to partake in the project.

Parents are interested in discovering more about their teens' online behaviour, whilst teens are keen to discuss their frustrations regarding ICTs, interactions with parents, and issues of control. In casual conversations, parents want to know what best practice is when it comes to regulating their children's ICTs use at home. "What should we do? How do we manage it? How much time should our kids spend on the computer/internet/gaming

device/Facebook?” Stories are relayed about the ‘good, the bad and the ugly’ of the impact that technology seems to have on family life in general. With so many questions and a genuine interest in the topic, it was logical to identify potential benefits for participants in terms of learning and self-awareness: to reflect on their own behaviours, to listen and be heard. Family members also had their own agendas regarding their participation. It is not within the scope of this paper to detail the (hidden) agendas; however, it is important to acknowledge that all parties have agendas that are often unstated (perhaps not even in conscious awareness).

Ethics formalities versus family realities

A crucial step in the process of determining suitability prior to obtaining consent was to meet all the family members to introduce them to the project, and provide comprehensive instructions for involvement. This first meeting was an opportunity to engage all family members in the topic and subsequent work involved in agreeing to participate. It was the forum for explaining the details in a way that enabled families to make an informed, and voluntary, decision to participate. Keeping in mind ethics principles of respect and beneficence, the plain language statement (PLS) was an important tool that I used to keep me focused on the advantages and disadvantages for both parties: the researched and researcher. It explicitly stated the intrusive nature and (long term) commitment (of at least 4 weeks participation), and the variety of data collection methods from participant observation, to less intrusive methods of short visits and interviews.

Research activities were explained and included formal and informal interviews, self-monitoring of participants’ interactions and cultural (or technology) probes (Gaver, 2002; Graham et al., 2007; Hutchinson et al., 2003). These ‘probing’ kits incorporated materials such as diaries, activity logs, scrap books, digital cameras, text messages and other technology-enabled means available to inspire participants to reflect on their lives in different ways, including online interactions on social networking sites such as Facebook. A family cohesion survey (Olsen, 2000) was given; participant observation conducted with a minimum of ten home visits undertaken lasting at least an hour each. Time spent in family homes for participant-observation was negotiated with families to fit in to their routines. An unambiguous statement outlining the minimum expected visits, maximum level of activities, and notification regarding the possibility for online interaction (e.g. Facebook use among family members) and observation was presented as explicitly as possible. Putting it all together in one articulate document was critical for transparency. Given the level of commitment for time and active engagement in this research process, it required careful, considered consultation with participant families. My agenda to complete the field research was assuaged in order to consider and comply with participant family needs. At all times throughout the fieldwork, the families’ needs were treated as paramount over my own with respect, and the need to ensure the research experience was enjoyable and beneficial to all participants.

Using a pilot family to help navigate the process was highly constructive. It helped to develop boundaries around the visits in terms of whether they were planned activities such as specific interviews with members, survey completion or participant-observation time with no agenda apart from being present to the everyday activities. At the end of the pilot study I was better equipped to deal with many of the ethical dilemmas that arose in subsequent domestic spaces. At the climax of the fieldwork I managed to spend up to 30 hours in each of 7 family homes. As the ethnographic journey progressed, the benefits to the family members became clearer. The recruitment process to get all 7 participating families was challenging, and exposed me to less positive experiences at times.

The timing of research encounters and home visits impinged upon interactions, and though appointments were made (broken and rescheduled), it was not always convenient due to unforeseen emergencies or events. This in turn affects the research interactions and highlights that it is crucial to manage the emotional context of the research (Davis & Waycott, 2015). How does one know when there is a ‘right time’ to make contact? Every home visit is made to accommodate each of the family members. It was difficult to gain access to some of the teenagers, because they would often forget appointments and did not return phone calls, leaving me wondering whether to continue trying to engage them in the research. At what point do I need to persist or desist? Urry, Sanders and Munford (2014) identify this process as finding the ‘right time’, which requires patience and a ‘bracketing out’ of researcher feelings of rejection. Connecting with teens using the tools they are comfortable with (such as Facebook), I was able to relate to them as a different type of adult, where trust is earned and positive interactions established that are different from parents, teachers, and other adult figures in teens’ lives (Urry et al., 2014). This strategy enabled richer discussions with each of the research family teens’ and facilitated respectful, mutually reciprocal, and sometimes cathartic interactions. It is important to allow teenagers a sense of agency in the research, and not to abandon them if they continuously miss meetings. I found that the majority of the teens want to be heard, and to share their stories.

Acknowledging research(er) boundaries

The nature of the interactions with each participating family member was as unique and wide-ranging as the family members themselves - an assortment of interactional permutations and combinations that all needed to be treated with sensitivity. I experienced some challenges in determining appropriate levels of confidence and privacy for each participant. I was able to offer confidentiality to all members provided no illegal boundaries were traversed. It is paramount to be cognisant of potentially sensitive content. In my case I became Facebook ‘friends’ with most of the teens (that had active accounts) from all the families during the research period. The rationale for the use of Facebook is that family members identified it as an alternative

communication tool. My research explores togetherness and interactions involving ICTs - Facebook is considered another platform for these interactions to occur and another method to collect data on how family members use the social networking site to interact with each other. Using the social networking site (SNS) was beneficial in recruiting families to participate, and to observe family dynamics in a public space.

As a researcher I need to be cautious about what data can be used, and be aware that the collaboration between participants and myself will on occasion raise difficult topics. Sometimes these were simply funny confessions that can be considered part of the everyday family interactions, other times they were more serious and I had to think very carefully about what could be disclosed, or used as data. If there were instances of more serious disclosures (made by the teens) I would stop the process and reiterate that if it was something unlawful that compromised their safety, I would need to tell their parents. I did not experience any serious confidentiality dilemmas, but I was privy to some minor indiscretions or occasional lapses in judgement made by some of the young people. I considered this part of normal contextual process of developing rapport. This information was not used to gain advantage, but was a signal that I had established trust and rapport. Usually the confidential activities disclosed related to breaches of house rules or protocols for Internet use, part of the normal teen developmental experience. The establishment of rapport was the most effective means of developing a relationship with each member of the household. I found that the more relaxed the contact with participants was, the richer the data received. My presence as researcher was experienced as less intrusive, and perhaps more natural.

BURDEN VERSUS BENEFIT

Every family is different in the way they want to be accessed, and in how they engage in the research process. All families are busy. The burden of fitting in an additional activity on top of all the others is one of the barriers that I was continually up against in trying to engage family members in an ongoing research engagement. This is where cultural probes become important as a means to maintain involvement without the encumbrance of the researcher's presence. As a researcher I want to engage the participants to be active in their involvement (and do 'the work'), as well as build rapport with family members to generate rich data. Each family demonstrated different levels of commitment to the kit of research activities. Some families preferred participation-observation and negotiated more time spent with the researcher, while others preferred the probes to engage in self-reflection and share the responses. As the researcher I experienced a dilemma to get the research 'successfully' completed in the field – but that success hinges more on being relaxed and open to things not working out the way one expects. From an ethical perspective I need to respect each family's time and space to maintain research integrity and uphold the respect and privacy of all the family members. It is challenging to identify when the burden of the research process

outweighs the benefits.

Benefits acknowledging the burden

There is a fine line between engagement and harassment, and it is not always obvious when contact with the family is perceived as intrusive due to social conventions for courtesy. For example, Adele¹ the mother and gatekeeper for the pilot family was supportive of my research and the first person to respond to my initial recruitment invitation. However, the research period stretched out due to circumstances beyond our control. This family experienced some significant crises that I respectfully retreated from to give them privacy and space. Ethically the most appropriate action would be to conclude their research participation. As a courtesy, I contacted Adele to thank the family for participating. I was surprised to hear that the family did not want to end their participation, as it felt unfinished to them. It is not always easy to gauge what might be the most ethically appropriate course of action. Some research participants are more invested, while others less so. As a researcher it is not always clear when research activity or process is burdensome or beneficial; and when to disengage and/or conclude. The central issue is to maintain ethical practice and honest rapport. It is acknowledged that researchers can be viewed as authority figures (Alderson, 2001; Christensen, 2004; Plesner, 2011), and this needs to be mediated with research participants to give them control of the process.

Participation of family members in the research fostered positive experiences in helping me (as researcher) accomplish the project (altruism) and in making a contribution. Other members achieved a sense of catharsis (a releasing of emotions leading to feelings of relief) from being listened to or from being given a voice. Some participants simply got pleasure from the process and the potential for more family time together. For the most part it would appear that the benefits of research engagement outweighed the burdens.

This paper is intended as a story presenting some of the key ethical research issues I experienced whilst in the field exploring family member interactions with each other and ICTs. The setting of the research was in private, domestic spaces and identifies some of the inherent problems and opportunities that can be applied in HCI or alternative research contexts. I focus on being in the field where most researchers from novice to the highly experienced, will be confronted with ethical dilemmas at some point in their data collection. Ethnographic research is difficult, challenging, rewarding and enriching, and requires supportive, positive discourse regarding ethics guidelines and how to address them from beginning to end, acknowledging that issues arise throughout the life of the research project. The focus of ethics literature has primarily considered the wellbeing of research participants via institutional formalities and procedural practicalities. Implementing inclusive strategies,

¹ All participant's identities have been protected using pseudonyms

collaborative techniques, and empowering participants (especially young people) by giving them agency assists in overcoming power imbalances and inspires greater commitment to the project. The researcher must always be aware of ethical and methodological dilemmas associated with entering the field, gaining access to participants, and reducing the potential burdens associated with research participation. Future recommendations to aid researchers in navigating the occasionally treacherous waters of ethical procedures and practices include establishing academic mentorships and research networks to improve preparation for ethnographic research and fieldwork. Going into 'the wild' can be a daunting prospect, and I would encourage researchers to establish support outside of the research site to provide a safe place to disclose personal research experiences and dilemmas. Ultimately human research is challenging and ethical dilemmas are a necessary part of the transition to becoming a proficient researcher.

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