2024-08-13

Hybrid researching race-related issues during COVID-19: Methodological conundrums

Suparna Bagchi *School of Society and Culture*

Hybrid researching race-related issues during COVID-19: Methodological conundrums

Bagchi, Suparna

Published in:
Possibility Studies & Society

Publication date:
2024

Document version:
Peer reviewed version

2024-08-13

Hybrid researching race-related issues during COVID-19: Methodological conundrums

Suparna Bagchi *School of Society and Culture*

Hybrid researching race-related issues during COVID-19: Methodological conundrums

Bagchi, Suparna

Published in:
Possibility Studies & Society

DOI:
10.1177/27538699241273732

Publication date:
2024

Document version:
Peer reviewed version

Introduction

Universities embraced a predominantly online platform as COVID-19 broke out. With their extensive technical prowess, universities swiftly went all out to make available various valuable resources informing about virtual research techniques (Keen et al., 2022). Indeed, moving to a primarily online platform was economical, flexible, and convenient (Davis et al., 2019). While toolkits for online research methodology and data collection techniques became available to conduct research studies, it was possibly necessary to discuss their ethical dimensions. Drawing instances from my doctoral study (Bagchi, unpublished doctoral thesis), this paper highlights several key methodological considerations related to ethical choices made by a 'pandemic Times' qualitative researcher (Bagchi, in press) to ensure that the study continued with minimum hindrance.

The core of the present article is constituted by key considerations that I made to conduct research in a partial "hands-off" mode (Lupton, 2021, p. 1). I begin the discussion with a brief description of my research topic and methodology. Then, I talk about some ethical challenges that cropped up in my research study and how I dealt with them while researching with children and adults as participants amidst the pandemic. Briefly, the challenges revolved around researching a sensitive topic with minors in an *indirect* way and negotiating cautiously with the adult participants, especially teachers who worked as key workers amidst the pandemic.

Topic, methodology, and theoretical framework of the study

My research explored experiences and understanding of multiculturalism of teachers, students, and parents in four mainstream primary schools located in Southwest England. Multiculturalism entails a mandatory requirement of race equality and acknowledgment and accommodation of ethnic, religious, and cultural differences (Modood, 2019). It supports equal rights and dignity among citizens (Taylor, 1994). Multiculturalism necessitates national

belonging, which recognizes cultural differences as a fundamental part of national unity (Chin, 2021). I adopted a qualitative case study methodology underpinned by a sociocultural theoretical framework. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with adult participants (head teachers, head of key stage two, teacher, and parents), observation of classroom activities of students from key stage two (age group 7-11), and physical artifacts like classroom and corridor displays. I framed two research questions for the study. These are:

1. How do teachers, parents, and students describe their experiences and understanding of multiculturalism in four mainstream primary schools in Southwest England? How might consideration of sociocultural factors interpret these descriptions?
2. In particular, how are teachers' experiences and understanding of multiculturalism shaped by the primary National Curriculum in England?

The ontology of the research study was based on relativism, which considers reality to be dependent on human interpretations of it (Clarke & Braun, 2013). Ontology is "the study of being" (Crotty, 1998, p. 10), which has to do with reality as such and the nature of existence. I think that knowledge is socially developed. Linking this line of argument to my research means that the participants could have multiple interpretations of multiculturalism in mainstream primary schools. The study adopted an interpretivist epistemological stance. Epistemology focuses on what knowledge is and what kinds of knowledge there are; it includes the justifications behind the knowledge, beliefs, and nature of the truth of how we know what we know (Creswell & Tashakkori, 2007). Interpretivism entails the understanding that individuals make of their own lives and interprets the sense-making that other individuals may have of the world (Creswell & Tashakkori, 2007; Mason, 2017). Interpretivism allowed me to study the multiple ways in which participants experienced and perceived multiculturalism in their social context by exploring their perspectives, positions, emotions,

and feelings in the natural setting (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Mason, 2018). The idea of including both children and adult participants in the study was inspired by my purpose to jointly construct meaning as an epistemological approach containing particular perspectives concerning the nature of knowledge and how it was developed and transmitted (Clark & Moss, 2011). However, the present study was not an action research. Action research may be understood as "a learning process, and in trying to bring about improvements in human interactions […] the action researcher is always engaged in an educative process" (Somekh, 2010, p. 104). Action research comes under qualitative methodology and is aimed at implementing and analyzing change through the investigation of an issue under study in a given context (Banegas & de Castro, 2019), like a school or classroom in the present study. I had several meetings with the school head teachers amidst the pandemic to discuss the vital aspects of fieldwork. This included decisions involving participant recruitment, data collection methods, type, time, and duration of the students' classroom activities, and adult participants' interviews. Head teachers played an influential role in making these important decisions. It was a conscious negotiation on my part to accept their opinions most of the time to show flexibility in the restrictive pandemic circumstances. In the next section, I discuss some ethical challenges that I faced and the ways in which I dealt with them.

Ethics in practice

It is known that traditionally, following ethical principles used to be a necessary requirement in biomedical research, particularly those adopting a quantitative methodology since the times of the Nuremberg Code. Eventually, since the 1960s, this requirement became extended in research adopting qualitative methodology, which involved human beings (Bulmer, 1982; Robley, 1995). In countries like the USA, Canada, and Australia, universities set up ethical committees, which drew out procedural ethical guidelines for conducting all

kinds of research (Tannert et al., 2007). The importance of procedural ethics laid down by ethical committees cannot be disregarded because they provide a toolkit for researchers to adhere to ethical principles concerning several significant issues. These issues include avoiding potential harm, risks to participants, fraudulence and contrivance in research, protecting participants' privacy, anonymity, withdrawal, and informed consent rights, and providing information about the study (AERA, 2011; BERA, 2018; Tracy & Hinrichs, 2017). While guidelines concerning these issues are important for ensuring the participants' safety and rights, they possibly do not cover every ethical consideration that a researcher may need to take into account once they land at the research site for fieldwork. To gain ethical approval, the researcher does not need to focus on specific situations that may arise and adversely affect the research while conducting it because it is impossible to foresee them before starting fieldwork. As long as researchers adhere to research integrity in their narratives on the approval form and follow them later, they may acquire ethical approval with minimum revisions and disputes and without having to stress potential ethical considerations during fieldwork (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). Guillemin and Gillam call these considerations the "ethics in practice," which deal with "the realities of research practice" that a researcher needs to follow once they start fieldwork (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004, p. 269). These are ethical issues that crop up during the doing of research requiring the researcher to show their obligation towards participants by acting in a non-exploitative and humane way while also being aware of their role as a researcher (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). The authors argue that such ethics come into play in "ethically important moments" while conducting research, which are tough, subtle, and generally unforeseeable circumstances (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004, p. 262).

Ethics in practice is the researchers' sole responsibility for putting their ethical competence into action concerning issues that arise during or connected to fieldwork, which are generally not covered by the institutional ethical committees in their procedural ethical guidelines (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). For instance, ethical committees emphasize the necessity of not harming the participants, which is rather a generic guideline (Ellis, 2007). Such an explanation of a guideline might be confusing and ambiguous, especially for early career researchers like me, as it possibly does not give a clear idea about how not to harm the participants when exactly such uncertain situations arise. I use the following two sub-sections to discuss situations where I demonstrated ethics in practice in my study.

Usage of mobile phones

I argue that a researcher can actualize ethics in practice not just during fieldwork but even before that while discussing aspects related to the planning of the fieldwork with participants. When put to work, such ethics in practice may contribute to high-quality research (Coady, 2020). There are moments of what Tannert et al. (2007) call subjective uncertainty that trigger rule-driven and intuition-driven decisions. Rule-driven decisions are characterized by the more generalized rules deduced from set guidelines for specific situations. On the other hand, intuition-driven decisions are characterized by moral convictions and internalized experiences based on a researcher's intuition (Tannert et al., 2007). The following examples from my research may clarify these points.

Studies show support for the prohibition of using mobile phones in classrooms as an established formal policy in educational institutions (Campbell, 2006). This support was recently reinforced by the UK Government's Department for Education (DfE) proposal to ban mobile phone usage across schools to reduce disruption and improve classroom behavior (DfE, 2024). Although directed towards school children, such a policy may reinforce one rule-guided decision in research, which is equally applicable to guest visitors, like researchers

refraining them using mobile phones during fieldwork. This decision may be considered important for researchers in school visits while doing research involving minors. However, it can create problems while doing fieldwork by not sharing personal mobile numbers with research participants when requested. In my study, it was essential for me to use my laptop for recording classroom activities and writing field notes in a school during data generation. The school policy was to send a verification code on my mobile phone via text. I needed to use that code to connect to the school Wi-Fi on my laptop and start my research activities in the school. Hence, I did not follow the rule-driven decision in one school of not using my mobile phone while collecting data generated from the students' classroom activities. Using the mobile phone was not an issue for the school concerned. However, reflexively speaking, I felt that a rule should be a rule for everyone, whether minors or adults, school children or guest visitors like me. In that sense, mobile phone usage was something that I felt the need to address in my updated research ethics document.

Again, we all know that Zoom as a virtual platform is used actively and efficiently nowadays. However, Zoom was still in its infancy in the early days of the pandemic. While people were getting used to this new technology, Zoom itself was growing and improvising itself by adding specifications. To discuss aspects of my research, I met the participant educators several times via Zoom before starting data generation. During one such meeting that I fixed with a senior leader in one school, the video function worked on Zoom, but not the audio. This meant that while the senior leader and I could see each other, we could not hear each other. After trying for some time with failed efforts, the senior leader promptly wrote on the chat box asking for my mobile phone number. Here, I put my intuition-driven decision into action and readily shared my number. The senior leader called me at once from the school. We saw each other on Zoom and heard each other over the phone simultaneously as we engaged in a detailed discussion on various aspects of my research. This situation

shows that technology is not free from hitches and when one technology could not fulfill its purpose fully, another technology could come to the rescue to fulfill the purpose. On another occasion in another school, a teacher asked for my mobile number and availability via email to discuss with me aspects concerning students' classroom activities. I shared my mobile number and availability, and we talked at length over the phone about the design and execution of classroom activities.

The above situations challenge the presumption: "Uncertainties challenge the central claim of science: that all problems are presumed to be solvable by research" (Tannert et al., 2007, p. 895). My mobile phone usage demonstrates the gap in rule-driven decisions that discourages it. As a researcher, I discarded this rule-driven decision due to its unsatisfactory and generally-deduced nature based on definitive predictions. My intuition-driven decision guided me to make an efficient, ethical choice instead of staying ignorant of unanticipated happenings in these particular situations. Unexpected situations may include fear of the unknown (Ellis, 2007) that no one can predict from before. In the ever-changing landscape of virtual research in the early days of the pandemic, there was a high probability for things to go wrong or in ways unplanned and unexpected. My experiences were likewise on several occasions. It is important to accept that technical aspects might intervene with ethical principles. In such scenarios, researchers must take control and manage their projects by using their preferences responsibly and realistically that they consider best suited through continuous updates and (re)contextualization of the ethical principles. There is an inherent relationship between flexibility and ethical decisions (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004, p. 270). Being mindful of this argument, it is possibly necessary for ethics committees to take a step back and (re)think pragmatically about considering flexible ethical guidelines based on subjective conditions instead of the rather restrictive guidelines to decrease ambiguity and generalization. This approach will ensure the important role of ethics committees as the

mediator agency between science and society that promotes societal faith in research and the ethical efficacy of educational institutions (Lanzerath, 2023).

Trust building and rapport

An important ethical consideration for conducting meaningful research is the establishment of trust and rapport (Lefevre, 2010). In my study, I needed to build rapport and trust with the students so that they could talk freely on the sensitive topic of multiculturalism in the presence of an outsider researcher during classroom activities. The pandemic-induced circumstances allowed me to have several virtual interactions with the adult participants. However, these circumstances did not allow me to have similar interactions with the minors. I had designed the classroom activities for the students, which I would have conducted with them in normalcy. Adhering to the pandemic restrictions, I observed the students' activities conducted by the teacher, talked when the teacher asked me, and, at times, sat in a socially distanced place. I realized quickly that I needed to do something about this somewhat formal position of mine vis-à-vis the students.

Guillemin and Gillam (2004) mention Komesaroff's (1995) use of the term microethics, which involves looking into the everyday ethical issues in medical practice in contexts like trust-building between a doctor and a patient, documenting the sexual history of a patient, and inquiring about the past fears and illness experiences. It possibly resonates with ethics in practice between a researcher and participants because it arises once they both start interaction during the research process. Moreover, just as microethics entails a complex dynamic relationship between a doctor and the patients, the same is relevant for ethics in practice between a researcher and the participants (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004; Komesaroff, 1995). Like Komesaroff, I used microethics to strike familiarization with the participant students. I used small talk with them, which helped to break the ice. In one school, during familiarization, the children asked me several questions, and we could make tiny links to our

lives and experiences, digressing from the research topic. The questions included how old I was, whether I celebrated Christmas, and in what way. Generally speaking, there were jokes and light moments during the classroom activities in all the schools. For instance, I introduced myself to the students as a student who was just like them; the only difference was that they studied in a school while I studied in a university. I added that I was writing *a big report* for which I was seeking help from the students to participate in the classroom activities. This kind of introduction was to bring me to the same level as them in the cognitive frame of the students. This helped me to present myself not as a *stranger danger* but as an ordinary student who was older than them and to hold the students as indispensable in helping me with my studies. Furthermore, one student activity involved me showing pictures to the students of festivals, dresses, and food connected to diverse cultures. I used some of my personal photos to establish proximity, familiarity, and accessibility towards me for the students. These techniques were aimed at making the students feel comfortable in my presence. Dockett and Perry (2005, p. 517) advise that no "one best approach suits all children or all contexts. Adapt approaches that are contextually relevant and make sense to the children involved". I think that these little efforts by me helped to establish rapport and a warm environment (Griffin et al., 2016). One nice experience for me was when I was gifted a 'Thank You' card by a student in a school, which possibly implies the student's enjoyment of the activities.

Microethics can be similar to ethics of care and protection, which refers to the treatment of participants with respect and dignity (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). Both require complex dynamics between the inquirer and the subjects. Elements like care (Slattery & Rapp, 2003), dignity, and cooperation are based on interpersonal relationships between the participants and the researcher. These elements are central to relational ethics, which involves the duty of the researcher to take actions as deemed necessary and directed by their heart and mind (Ellis,

2007). Relational ethics is rooted in self-consciousness, making it necessary for the researcher to treat the participants as valuable and subjects with emotions and to ensure that the researcher is aware of their character, activities, and effects on the participants (Tracy & Hinrichs, 2017). In other words, relational ethics supports the researcher to take accountability for their actions and the potential effects of those actions (Ellis, 2007).

Over the course of my doctoral project, I met the educators several times preceding the interview, albeit virtually, to design the activities and discuss other areas of my fieldwork. Eventually, as we kept meeting, I could see that the little somewhat stiffness of the virtual interaction, which was often noticeable on the first day, was gone. Meeting the educators at their preferred time possibly led to meaningful communication through in-depth interactions when they shared their views and feelings openly and candidly (Ellis, 2007). Often, feelings and reflections concerning their personal life, along with those of their work life, spilled into our discussions. This tendency was possibly aggravated by the pandemic situation which often exposed our vulnerabilities in front of others. There are several such instances in my study. One such instance was when an educator shared with me about her difficulty in managing her home and work simultaneously during COVID-19. I instantaneously replied that I could relate to her situation. In the then-ongoing pandemic, when the educator expressed her natural and possibly vulnerable self, it was only instinctive for me to find myself relatable to her as a spontaneous reaction. It goes without saying that doctoral study is a lonely journey, which became lonelier during the pandemic (Stancer et al., 2024). After all, it would have been naïve for me to act as if all was fine when I was wrestling with difficulties and emotional turbulence in my personal life concerning home-schooling, my spouse working as an emergency healthcare worker, and scary thoughts about the effects of the virus as a person from an ethnic minority community (Stancer et al., 2024). The last straw was my school visits for data generation during bereavement. I think that it is necessary to not just

write but practice ethics in the way we experience the world. Although I did not share my personal battles with the educator, situations like these laid bare how relationships between humans and (re)thinking care without patronizing it was important, especially at a time when the dastardly disease of coronavirus had reduced human beings to numbers. Therefore, although not a friend, I tried to behave as a friendly person, fulfilling two roles simultaneously: a friendly, relatable person and a researcher. This ensured keeping a balance between my emotions and actions. The following section is devoted to situational ethics in practice where I mention instances of putting it into action in my study.

Situational ethics in practice

Situational ethics refers to the ethical decisions that a researcher makes based on the context or situation at that very moment in time (Munteanu et al., 2015; Tracy & Hinrichs, 2017). It is based on the idea that since there is no uniform moral principle or 'right' that applies to all situations universally, each situation is unique, subjective, and singular, demanding its own similar appropriate solution to arrive at a plausible decision (Robertson et al., 2002). Thus, situational ethics supports flexibility instead of absoluteness of ethical framework and prescriptions. In that sense, compared to prefabricated standardized (Øye et al., 2016) ethical prescriptions, situational ethics gives more personal and particular attention to each context or situation on a case-to-case basis. Since every research project is different, situational, or contextual, ethics cannot be good or bad in general and demands the researcher to continuously and repetitively critique, question, and reflect upon their ethical choices (Tracy & Hinrichs, 2017; Warrell & Jacobsen, 2014). One example of situational ethics can be a situation where a person uses violence for self-defense driven by a moral justification, as such an act is otherwise normally discouraged. No such dangerous situation arose in my study. However, the example shows that these are moral decisions in human actions that emphasize sensitivity towards individuals' well-being and things that they value. But then, it

may be held that pre-made uniform ethical principles in research also place utmost importance on individual well-being (AERA, 2011; BERA, 2018). Situational ethics is criticized for its rejection of an ethical framework in guiding human actions and behavior, inconsistency and implementational difficulty since it is based on a specific contextual situation and time. However, I think that situational ethics goes a step ahead of the standardized ethical guidelines. It is especially helpful in qualitative research, which includes research methods and data collection processes that may be highly unpredictable until the time they are actualized (Aluwihare-Samaranayake, 2012; Øye et al., 2016). Important elements like the researcher's intuition, morality, personal judgment, and conviction are applied at the point in time in the situation, which the researcher must consider apart from the already existing ethical prescriptions and practical knowledge of the research topic (Øye et al., 2016). There were situation-based ethical challenges that I faced and solved. I mention a few examples drawn from my research study.

Informed consent of students

To understand the students' experiences of multiculturalism, I designed three students' classroom activities, which took place in three lessons, each lasting for an hour spread over three separate days. These were collective classroom activities for students, which formed a part of their daily school routine. In one school on the familiarization day, while sharing informed consent with the student cohort verbally, I said that it was fine if they did not want to participate in the activity. Suddenly, the teacher interrupted and said to the students that *all* students would be participating since it was a classroom activity. Graue and Walsh (1998) include a particular question in the context of the researcher researching with children: "Would you rather stay here and answer my clumsy questions or go have fun with your friends?" (p. 112). On this occasion in the study, I wish I could interject and ask the students: "Would you rather decide whether to participate in the activities or not as you wish instead of

following the strict instruction of your teacher?". This is because I found the teacher's insistence on 'all' students' mandatory participation a bit monopolizing. It was also distracting for me when I was trying to provide informed consent to minors, explaining to them about my research and what their participation and free choice to participate (or not) meant in the project. Despite achieving initial consent, it was important for me to supplement it with the informed consent of students verbally as a part of the ongoing consenting process, which is an important consideration in research involving minors (Falb et al., 2019). This incident was particularly significant in my study, which was designed to give equal importance to all the participants, whether adults or minors. Though minors, I wanted to enable the students' voices in my study to "form a central and equally considered part of any evidence base which concerns them" (Pascal & Bertram, 2009, p. 255). This incident concerning the teacher's insistence on compulsory participation of all students highlighted the potential teacher-student power imbalance characterized by a hierarchical relationship in the classroom. More importantly, this incident led to the creeping in of several questions in my mind concerning essential ethical requisites: What if the participant teachers tried to monitor or influence the students to respond in particular ways? What if the participant teachers could not treat the vulnerable students sensitively while discussing this difficult topic? What if the participant teachers used biased language, however unintentional, while conducting the students' activities?

As a non-participant observer researcher in the classroom activities, I felt that I had no choice as it would have been inappropriate to refute the teacher in this delicate situation. This instance of situational ethics may overlap with ethics in practice as both are subtle, delicate, and tough and cannot be foreseen before fieldwork. This particular incident made me reflect on the extent to which I could intervene. The researcher in me needed to show a mature understanding that in a hypothetical situation, a teacher could play a teacher's role even when

conducting activities on behalf of a researcher, just like I could play a researcher's role even when teaching students as a part of a research activity. How the principles of power between the teacher and students could transform into principles of communication depended upon how the teacher could create a safe place by treating the students sensitively without objectifying them and influencing their responses (Clark & Moss, 2011). Situational ethics in this situation was for me to acknowledge that despite switching roles, a teacher's role was different from a researcher's role bringing variations in the study in ways that were possibly less likely in normal times. Reciprocal trustworthiness and negotiated ethics became the essential basis in this teacher-researcher cooperative venture.

Negotiating data collection arrangements

COVID-19 was an unprecedented period of human stress, anxiety, and complexities related to individuals' mental, physical, social, emotional, or financial state. School students had lost considerable study time due to the lockdown circumstances. Educators worked relentlessly as key workers to make up for the lost time in students' learning. Therefore, under these circumstances, my research could well be seen as an unnecessary burden on educators and students. Educators, who were possibly already stretched to limits by their professional commitments, were not bound to participate in the interviews or conduct classroom activities on my behalf for my research study. This is because the research study was not personally beneficial for them directly, although they may be beneficial indirectly later (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004).

Amidst COVID-19, a challenge revolved around data collection arrangements that included coordinating with the participants for arranging and conducting the interviews and planning the students' activities. Familiarization is considered an important segment of qualitative research (Gadberry, 2014). Familiarization is possibly more important for studies involving minors to strike a rapport and create a comfortable atmosphere for both the

participants and the researcher (Lefevre, 2010, p. 34). While negotiating for the classroom activities, two schools could not provide me with the time needed for familiarization with the students. However, I accepted this adjustment requested by the schools since the students' welfare was paramount, which was focused on catching up with their mandatory learning requirements in the abnormal pandemic circumstances. I tactfully accepted this negotiation and seized the opportunity, which was based on mutual understanding and cooperation. This meant that the students and teachers continued to perform their academic functions unhindered while I did the necessary research data generation on the days made available to me through the students' classroom activities. Through this collaborative balancing act, both the participant schools and I could fulfill our respective objectives.

I followed a similar cooperative strategy while fixing meeting and interview dates with the participant educators and parents. One thing that I ensured was to meet them at the time that they preferred, even if it clashed with my other engagements. I think that this was the least I could do to show my gratefulness and respect to both the educators and parents, many of whom were working as key workers in the unprecedented times of COVID-19. Meeting the participants at their preferred time helped in meaningful communication and intense interaction while I generated rich data for my research. In these situations, I needed to show strong interpersonal skills based on empathy and care to interact efficiently with the participants to conduct my research study. It was a prime purpose for me to respect the position, context, and autonomy of the participants (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004) who I researched *with*, not *on*. I must admit that being a reserved person, I had to work on my interpersonal skills, especially during the difficult times of the pandemic when I needed empathy and care as I was experiencing personal emotional turmoil along with academic difficulties. On reflection, I think that since I myself needed empathy, I could relate to the participants' position, and therefore, through my interpersonal skills, I could treat them with

empathy and dignity. I wanted to ensure that my participants were not mere tools or objects of research with whom I interacted only to further my self-interest.

This attitude can be taken as an inherent part of the reflexivity of a 'pandemic Times' researcher. Reflexivity has been defined as: "a process whereby researchers place themselves and their practices under scrutiny, acknowledging the ethical dilemmas that permeate the research process and impinge on the creation of knowledge" (McGraw et al., 2000, p. 68). Reflexivity is not a static process. It is a continuum in a research study, pervading all its phases like design, methodology, conceptual and theoretical frameworks, interpretation, analysis, presentation of findings, and research dissemination. For me, reflexivity was to go with the flow and reflect continuously on the research process and its nature, driven by moral considerations.

My research was a sensitive topic, especially in the then-ongoing Black Lives Matter movement following the killing of George Floyd in the USA in 2020. Talks on multiculturalism and racism go hand-in-glove together. From this perspective, researching multiculturalism involved some uncomfortable moments during the data generation process, both during the interviews and classroom activities. For instance, the participants shared about racism and Islamophobia. Those uncomfortable moments, which included difficult conversations, required me to be skillful in handling them ethically, situationally, and sensitively and deciding the extent to which I could probe. After all, the study was not a tick-box exercise for me that I needed to do 'by hook or by crook.' Amidst the pandemic, my reflexivity included using my skills and moral convictions responsibly through continuous questioning and reflecting on my ethical decisions and behavior realistically throughout the research. This attitude was necessary to ensure a rigorous research practice, which guarantees research integrity and is absolutely central to any research study involving humans (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). According to Marshall, integrity involves "doing the right thing

when you don't have to— when no one else is looking or will ever know—when there will be no congratulations or recognition for having done so" (Marshall, 2003, p. 142). I found it essential to show my ability to follow moral principles and maintain high intellectual and professional standards, which were necessary to ensure accuracy and integrity in research (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Steneck, 2006).

Conclusion

The present article discusses the pandemic-induced difficulties that I experienced concerning ethical issues in my study and how I dealt with them to promote ethically sound research. The ethical issues I faced showed how my pandemic Times research depended heavily on new technologies like Zoom as the major medium of communication for undertaking research and how, no matter how much one relies on technology, it can play up at any time unexpectedly. The pandemic made it particularly difficult to research with participant minors, which included establishing rapport and trust with and gaining informed consent from them while communicating with them indirectly. Finally, the pandemic circumstances required me to be specifically sensitive, empathetic, and skillful while interacting with the educators who were working as key workers. Throughout my research, I was guided by the chief motive to adopt a sensible responsible-cum-response-able strategy to ensure transparent research. This strategy did not develop in one day; it developed as I progressed through the different stages of my research and various phases of the abnormal pandemic conditions. It extended to areas that demanded being sensitive and aware of the participants' situations and views, which were possibly shaped by various specific motivations amidst the pandemic. Most importantly, the responsible-cum-response-able strategy was compatible with my interpretivist epistemological stance to promote good research. While many toolkits for virtual research became available as COVID-19 struck, it was possibly essential to discuss the ethical dimensions minutely. Assessing the ethical risks and working them out appropriately is particularly necessary for

qualitative studies, especially those dealing with sensitive topics involving minors. If I had not embraced this responsible-cum-response-able strategy amidst COVID-19, I would have been ignorant of the more uncertain and unambiguous happenings (Stirling, 2007). Hence, embracing the ethics of the unknown (Tannert et al., 2007), I made appropriate ethical decisions, adhering to high moral standards as a top priority (Falb et al., 2019) to suit the needs and circumstances in context and time while continuously reflecting on them. I must admit that the difficulties concerning ethics that I experienced were invaluable learning moments for me in my journey as an early career qualitative researcher in social sciences. In these learning moments, I acquired knowledge and developed skills through complex multi-layered processes, which were interesting, enjoyable, and tricky. In the process of this doctoral journey, I metamorphosed when my professional, intellectual, and personal personas were entwined closely. This is because these moments gave me a mature understanding not only of the available ethical choices (Ellis, 2007) but also the nature in which my study was progressing and I was developing as a researcher.

In the context of discourse analysis, Gee maintains that they offer their ideas "not in the hope that you will believe everything I say, but in the hope that you will make up your own mind and develop your own style and contributions" (Gee, 2014, p. 2). I think that this argument applies to my research study. In the present article, I have shared the situations I experienced and the ethical choices I made in response to those in my research. They worked for my participants, study, and me. These ethical choices were necessary to guarantee that my research study was rigorous and ethically virtuous. I can be hopeful that my readers can relate to my position and views. My ethical strategy may be of wider appeal and interest to a broader body of researchers who are researching difficult topics in particular spaces and contexts with participants deemed as vulnerable, excluded, or under-researched. The tempestuous tide of COVID-19 illuminated the necessity of 21st-century researchers to uphold sustainable and

resilient education. The present paper discusses my flexible attitude and skills that went with the flow of pandemic circumstances. This resilient attitude will possibly stand as one of the hallmarks of good research, which was probably tricky to conceive for me in a ‘COVID-free’ world.

References

Aluwihare-Samaranayake, D. (2012). Ethics in qualitative research: A view of the participants' and researchers' world from a critical standpoint. *International Journal of qualitative methods*, *11*(2), 64-81. https://doi.org/10.1177/160940691201100208

Bagchi, S. (2024). *The experiences and understanding of multiculturalism in mainstream primary schools in Southwest England.* University of Plymouth. [Unpublished doctoral thesis].

Bagchi, S. (in press). International Summer Schools as a Platform of Inclusive Education for Doctoral Students. *Educação, Sociedade & Culturas*. (Education, Society & Cultures), Centre for Research and Intervention in Education (CIIE), University of Porto, Portugal.

Banegas, D. L., & de Castro, L. S. V. (2019). Action research. In *The Routledge handbook of English language teacher education* (pp. 570-582). Routledge.

American Educational Research Association. (2011). AERA Code of Ethics Approved by the AERA Council February 2011. *Educational Researcher*, *40*(3), 145-156. https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X11410403

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2022). Conceptual and design thinking for thematic analysis. *Qualitative Psychology*, *9*(1), 3. https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1037/qup0000196

British Education Research Association (BERA) (4th Ed.). (2018) *Ethical Guidance for Education Researchers.* Available at: https://www.bera.ac.uk/publication/ethical-guidelines-for-educational-research-2018 (Accessed: 17 March 2024).

Bulmer, M. (1982). *Social Research Ethics.* London and Basingstoke.

Campbell, S. W. (2006). Perceptions of mobile phones in college classrooms: Ringing, cheating, and classroom policies. *Communication education*, *55*(3), 280-294. https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1080/03634520600748573

Chin, C. (2021). Multiculturalism and nationalism: Models of belonging to diverse political community. *Nations and Nationalism*, *27*(1), 112-129. https://doi.org/10.1111/nana.12657

Clark, A., & Moss, P. (2011). *Listening to young children: The mosaic approach*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Clarke, V., & Braun, V. (2013). Successful qualitative research: A practical guide for beginners. *Successful qualitative research*, 1-400.

Coady, M. (2020). Ethics in early childhood research. In *Doing early childhood research* (pp. 73-84). Routledge. http://dx.doi.org/10.4324/9781003115403-6

Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2017). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*. Sage publications.

Creswell, J. W., & Tashakkori, A. (2007). Differing perspectives on mixed methods research. *Journal of mixed methods research*, *1*(4), 303-308. https://doi.org/10.1177/1558689807306132

Crotty, M. J. (1998). The foundations of social research: Meaning and perspective in the research process. *The foundations of social research*, 1-256.

Davis, N. L., Gough, M., & Taylor, L. L. (2019). Online teaching: Advantages, obstacles and tools for getting it right. *Journal of Teaching in Travel & Tourism*, *19*(3), 256-263. https://doi.org/10.1080/15313220.2019.1612313

Department for Education (DfE). (2024). *Government launches crackdown on mobile phones in schools.* Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-launches-crackdown-on-mobile-phones-in-schools (Accessed: 17 March 2024).

Dockett, S., & Perry, B. (2005). Researching with children: Insights from the starting school research project. *Early child development and care*, *175*(6), 507-521. http://ezproxy.uws.edu.au/login?url=http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03004430500131312

Ellis, C. (2007). Telling secrets, revealing lives: Relational ethics in research with intimate others. *Qualitative inquiry*, *13*(1), 3-29. https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800406294947

Falb, K., Laird, B., Ratnayake, R., Rodrigues, K., & Annan, J. (2019). The ethical contours of research in crisis settings: five practical considerations for academic institutional review boards and researchers. *Disasters*, *43*(4), 711-726. https://doi.org/10.1111/disa.12398

Gadberry, A. L. (2014). Cross-cultural perspective: A thematic analysis of a music therapist's experience providing treatment in a foreign country. *Australian Journal of Music Therapy*, *25*, 66-80. https://www.thefreelibrary.com/Cross-cultural+perspective%3a+a+thematic+analysis+of+a+music...-a0403588874

Gee, J. P. (2014). How to do discourse analysis: A toolkit. Hoboken.

Graue, M. E., & Walsh, D. J. (1998). *Studying children in context: Theories, methods, and ethics*. Sage.

Griffin, K. M., Lahman, M. K., & Opitz, M. F. (2016). Shoulder-to-shoulder research with children: Methodological and ethical considerations. *Journal of Early Childhood Research*, *14*(1), 18-27. http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1476718X14523747

Guba, E. G., & Lincoln, Y. S. (1994). Competing paradigms in qualitative research. *Handbook of qualitative research*, *2*(163-194), 105-117. http://elisa.ugm.ac.id/files/PSantoso_Isipol/FyBFBvRa/bab%206%20denzin%20(ed.).pdf

Guillemin, M., & Gillam, L. (2004). Ethics, reflexivity, and "ethically important moments" in research. *Qualitative inquiry*, *10*(2), 261-280. https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800403262360

Keen, S., Lomeli-Rodriguez, M., & Joffe, H. (2022). From challenge to opportunity: virtual qualitative research during COVID-19 and beyond. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, *21*, 16094069221105075. https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069221105075

Komesaroff, P. A. (Ed.). (1995). *Troubled bodies: Critical perspectives on postmodernism, medical ethics, and the body*. Duke University Press.

Lanzerath, D. (2023). Research Ethics and Research Ethics Committees in Europe. In *Medical Research Ethics: Challenges in the 21st Century* (pp. 423-439). Cham: Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-12692-5_22

Lefevre, M. (2010). *Communicating with children and young people: Making a difference*. Policy Press.

Lupton, D. (2021). Doing fieldwork in a pandemic (crowd-sourced document), revised version. https://docs.google.com/document/d/1clGjGABB2h2qbduTgfqribHmog9B6P0NvMgVuiHZCl8/edit?ts=5e88ae0a#

Marshall, C. W. (2003). *Shattering the glass slipper*. M Power Resources.

Mason, A. (2018). The critique of multiculturalism in Britain: Integration, separation and shared identification. *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*, *21*(1), 22-45. https://doi.org/10.1080/13698230.2017.1398444

Mason, J. (2017). Qualitative researching. *Qualitative researching*, 1-288.

McGraw, L. A., Zvonkovic, A. M., & Walker, A. J. (2000). Studying postmodern families: A feminist analysis of ethical tensions in work and family research. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, *62*(1), 68-77. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-3737.2000.00068.x

Modood, T. (2019). A multicultural nationalism. *Brown Journal of World Affairs.*, *25(3)*, 233-246.

Munteanu, C., Molyneaux, H., Moncur, W., Romero, M., O'Donnell, S., & Vines, J. (2015, April). Situational ethics: Re-thinking approaches to formal ethics requirements for human-computer interaction. In *Proceedings of the 33rd Annual ACM Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems* (pp. 105-114). https://doi.org/10.1145/2702123.2702481

Øye, C., Sørensen, N. Ø., & Glasdam, S. (2016). Qualitative research ethics on the spot: Not only on the desktop. *Nursing ethics*, *23*(4), 455-464. https://doi.org/10.1177/0969733014567023

Pascal, C., & Bertram, T. (2009). Listening to young citizens: The struggle to make real a participatory paradigm in research with young children. *European early childhood education research journal*, *17*(2), 249-262. https://doi.org/10.1080/13502930902951486

Robertson, C. J., Crittenden, W. F., Brady, M. K., & Hoffman, J. J. (2002). Situational ethics across borders: A multicultural examination. *Journal of Business Ethics*, *38*, 327-338. http://dx.doi.org/10.1023/A:1016067231599

Robley, L. R. (1995). The ethics of qualitative nursing research. *Journal of Professional Nursing*, *11*(1), 45-48. https://doi.org/10.1016/S8755-7223(95)80072-7

Slattery, P., & Rapp, D. (2003). *Ethics and the foundations of education: Teaching convictions in a postmodern world*. Allyn & Bacon.

Somekh, B. (2010). The Collaborative Action Research Network: 30 years of agency in developing educational action research. *Educational Action Research*, *18*(1), 103-121. https://doi.org/10.1080/09650790903484566

Stancer, R., Georgeson, J., Bagchi, S., Myhill, C., Gulliver, K., Vassallo, T., ... & Merk, R. (2024). Covid stories: A narrative exploration of experiences of the pandemic among members of an academic research group. *Human Systems*, 26344041241245418. http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/26344041241245418

Steneck, N. H. (2006). Fostering integrity in research: Definitions, current knowledge, and future directions. *Science and engineering ethics*, *12*, 53-74. https://doi.org/10.1007/pl00022268

Stirling, A. (2007). Risk, precaution and science: towards a more constructive policy debate: talking point on the precautionary principle. *EMBO reports*, *8*(4), 309-315. https://doi.org/10.1038%2Fsj.embor.7400953

Tannert, C., Elvers, H. D., & Jandrig, B. (2007). The ethics of uncertainty: In the light of possible dangers, research becomes a moral duty. *EMBO reports*, *8*(10), 892-896. https://doi.org/10.1038/sj.embor.7401072

Taylor, C. (1994). *Multiculturalism: Examining the politics of recognition*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Tracy, S. J., & Hinrichs, M. M. (2017). Big tent criteria for qualitative quality. *The international encyclopedia of communication research methods*, 1-10. https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118901731.iecrm0016

Warrell, J. G., & Jacobsen, M. (2014). Internet Research Ethics and the Policy Gap for Ethical Practice in Online Research Settings. *Canadian Journal of Higher Education*, *44*(1), 22-37. https://doi.org/10.47678/cjhe.v44i1.2594