



This paper contains the full text and images from a blog post published on 23 July 2021 on the **Ethical Research Involving Children** (ERIC) website. For the official posted version go to: <https://childethics.com/blog/anonymity-or-recognition/>

Anonymity or recognition? Seeking harmony in an ethical grey area between researcher and researched

Harry Shier

What's the issue here?

In this blog I want to explore the problem of how to harmonise the apparent dissonance between the guarantee of anonymity we (researchers) are required to give to those children who engage in our research, and children's desire to be seen, heard, identified, recognised and valued for what they contribute – not just to the eternal quest for knowledge, but often to the impetus for justice, equality, social change and the defence of human rights.

It is still not uncommon for researchers negotiating university ethical approval to be urged – directly or indirectly – to steer clear of research involving children (e.g. Gora, 2015). Often, however, there will be no alternative to involving children, and in these cases the paramount rule is that the children's identity must be kept secret at all costs.

"Anonymity is a key concern of much social research, often deemed essential, a self-evident principle for protecting research participants from possible harm." (Moore, 2012)

Drawing on Mary Kellett's typology of research ON, ABOUT, WITH and BY children (Kellett 2010), it can be argued that, if one is doing research ON or ABOUT children, there is a strong case on ethical grounds for keeping their identity a secret. However, when one is doing research WITH children, the issue is less clear-cut; and when one is supporting research BY children, then denying them their identity – especially when it comes to publication – far from being an ethical touchstone, seems unjust and unethical (not to mention a potential rights violation).

If the world of research only permitted two categories of people, *researchers* and *researched*, the ethical issue would be simple: *Researchers* are both accountable for their research, and given credit and recognition for it. They are therefore entitled to be named, and indeed, must be named. The *researched*, on the other hand, are entitled to, and must be guaranteed, anonymity. It seems to me that most university ethical approval systems operate on the basis that this is the only reality.

However, this is not the only reality, and there is often a blurred dividing line between the researcher and the researched. Rather than a crude binary, it may be more helpful to consider the many different kinds of roles children take on (or are given) in research as a continuum. At the "researched" end of the spectrum, children are essentially the source of data for analysis. They may be examined, tested or observed, or their parents may answer questions about them. In this kind of research there is no need to question the sanctity of participant anonymity.

At the “researcher” end of the spectrum are the situations where children themselves take on the role of researcher, either collaborating with adult researchers (where they may be called “co-researchers”) or undertaking their own research project, with or without adult facilitation. Child researchers, just like adult researchers, are entitled to credit and recognition for their effort and achievement, which they cannot get if they remain anonymous (there may still be good reasons why a researcher – adult or child – may choose to hide their identity, but that’s a different issue, of which more later).

Between these extremes lies the grey area, where it is not immediately obvious whether a child participant is more of a “researched” or a “researcher,” and whether their interest is better served by anonymity or recognition (and whether this choice should be theirs or should be made by an adult researcher on their behalf).

Examples from my experience doing research WITH children and supporting research BY children in Nicaragua

My thinking on this is informed by critical reflection on my own experiences both facilitating research BY children and carrying out research WITH children on the coffee plantations of Nicaragua in Central America. There we developed the approach known as *Transformative Research by Children and Adolescents* (TRCA) (Shier, 2015). When we applied this model, there was no doubt that the children were the researchers; I and my colleagues were supporters and facilitators, and when it came to publishing and disseminating the findings, all credit was given to the children. TRCA involves child researchers working in teams, and they usually published their findings under the collective authorship of the team, but then insisted on mentioning each team member by name in the final publications. All this work was done in Spanish and most has not been translated. However, you can see an example in translation in CESESMA (2012), where, on the inside front cover, you can see the full names of all the young researchers (who were aged 9-16 at the time).



Members of the Yúcul Young Researchers Team reviewing the wording of questions for their interview questionnaire (October 2011)

This was a challenging situation, because the four teams of young researchers who contributed to the book had the opportunity to choose their own research topic, and all four chose to investigate topics related to violence in families and communities. In particular, the Yúcul team researched the link between alcohol and violence. Not only did they want to be recognised for what they had achieved, but they wanted to speak out to promote their findings and recommendations. This was a challenge for the adult team, whose primary responsibility was to ensure the children’s safety. An easy way to do this would have been to keep the identity of the young researchers secret, to publish their findings

anonymously or not to publish them at all. However the option we chose was to give them the support and recognition they wanted, which meant publishing their research under their own names, while analysing potential risks and putting in place the protection and support mechanisms needed to keep them safe (even when they decided to appear on national television to promote their research). We faced similar challenges when child researchers chose to investigate local children's understandings of sex and sexuality, or children's rights violations on the coffee plantations, and in both cases wanted to go public with their findings.

The key point here is that the children's right to speak out, and to be given credit and recognition for their achievements, cannot be trumped or invalidated by their right to be protected from threats of harm or violence. Both rights are valid and inalienable, so it is up to the adults responsible to find ways to protect both.

It is also important to note here that in the course of their research, the young researchers interviewed many other children, and it was data provided by these other children that the young researchers analysed to determine their findings and conclusions. There were thus two groups of children involved in this research in very different roles. One group were in "researcher" roles, and this informed ethical decisions about how they were treated, including their entitlement to be recognised and credited with their achievement. The other group were the "researched", and by contrast, they were guaranteed the anonymity that traditional research ethics demanded.

*Research project
"How children and
young people influence
policy-makers":
Participants reviewing
research findings to
formulate conclusions
(April 2010)*



Different issues arose when I and my colleagues undertook research projects WITH children and adolescents. An example of this was the project "How children and young people influence policy-makers". The full report was never translated (CESESMA-UNN, 2010), but a summary in English can be seen in Shier et al (2014). Here, the adult researchers devised and ran the project, but the role of the children and adolescents changed as it went along, crossing over the grey area between "researched" and "researchers". They started out participating in focus groups – a standard research method where anonymity is the norm. But later we invited them to a two-day seminar to discuss and debate the findings and determine conclusions and recommendations, so they crossed over into the "co-researcher" role. Then, when the draft report was ready, we invited them to a final "validation event" where their chosen representatives presented their recommendations in a public arena with NGO leaders, public officials and media present ... and they all got a name-check in the final report. Similar role-bending happened in our other "WITH children" research projects.



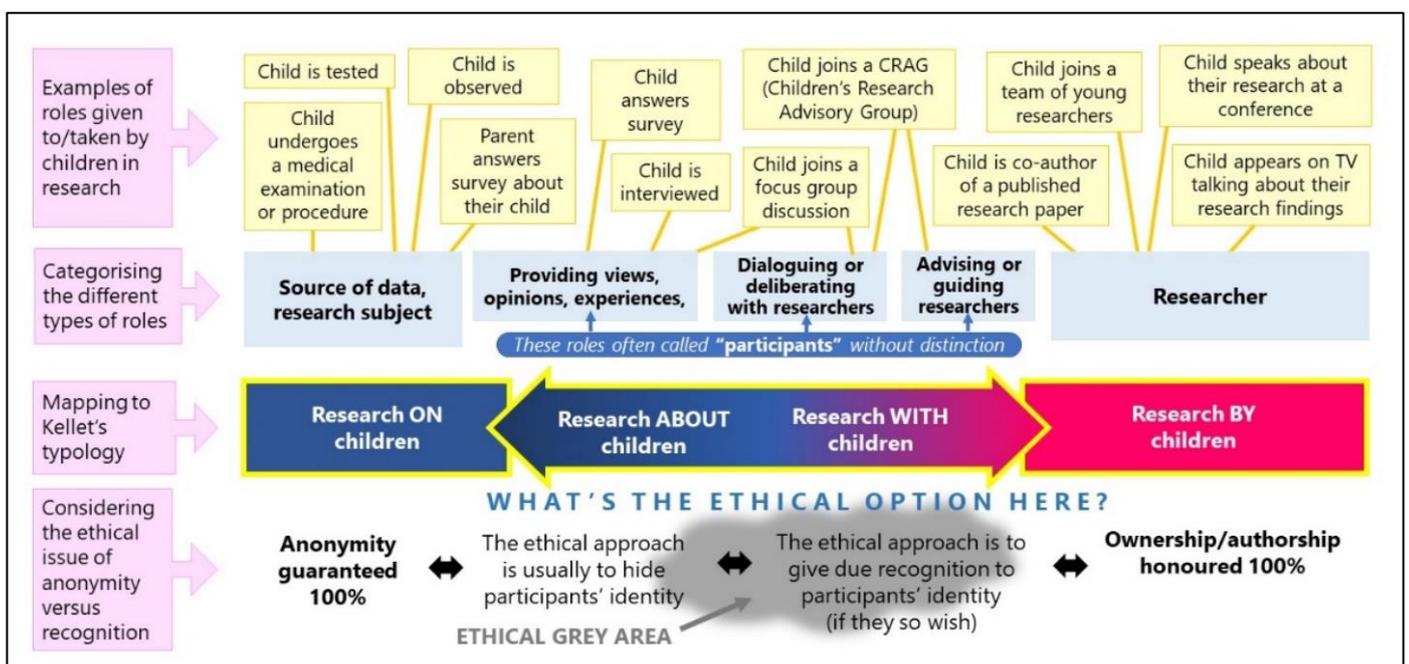
Research project "How children and young people influence policy-makers": A young participant gives an interview for TV news (April 2010)

(I should mention that, working in the NGO sector in Nicaragua, none of this was done under the aegis of a British or Irish university. We were not subject to formal ethical approval for any of this work, but took full responsibility for setting and maintaining our own ethical standards. As a researcher seasoned by this experience, these days I often find myself at odds with the way research ethics is managed in British and Irish universities – but that’s for a different blog).

Now I am back in my native land of Ireland, working as a researcher on the COVISION project at University College Dublin (www.covision.ie), and here similar issues are coming up. Our project methodology will involve children and adolescents signing up for a workshop process, where we will facilitate a creative collaboration to co-design and co-produce new initiatives for supporting children and families during pandemics. We are required to guarantee anonymity to the young participants, but at the same time, as in Nicaragua, there may be opportunities for them to follow up their involvement in the workshop process with a further engagement with the wider world, taking an active role in disseminating and promoting their ideas, influencing the media and leaning on policy-makers to implement their ideas for change. They won’t be able to do this if they have to remain anonymous.

A graphic to help visualise the issue

Trying to organise my thinking on this issue, it occurred to me that a graphic might help. Here’s what I came up with...



A couple of points to note about the graphic:

- The yellow boxes across the top are examples of the different roles children can and do take on in research. The boxes towards the right are from my own experience in Nicaragua as described above. The ones on the left are stereotypes, but I believe they are close to reality. There must be many more roles I have neglected to mention, and an infinite number of variations on these. These are just examples to set the scene.
- In writing up research it is common these days to refer to the children involved as “participants”. This is a positive step insofar as it tells us they are seen as more than just data sources. However, as indicated in the centre of the diagram, the term “participants” can cover a number of distinct roles, and this can be unhelpful. We need to unpack and understand each role properly if we are to make wise ethical decisions about how to support, protect, and at the same time recognise the children involved.

Moving forward...

Reflecting on this graphic, it occurs to me that the designers of university ethical approval processes could usefully take heed of Kellett’s typology, and seek to understand, as part of the ethical review process, whether applicant researchers are proposing research ON, ABOUT, WITH or BY children. If the applicant ticks the box for research ON or ABOUT children, the standard rules about guaranteeing anonymity can be applied without hindrance. However, if they tick the box for research WITH children (or even BY children), there is a new set of questions to be answered, where the role or roles of the children in the research have to be unpacked. According to the specific role the children are expected to take, the ethical arguments for and against keeping their identity secret – and for and against recognising and honouring their contribution – have to be reconsidered and brought into harmony. It goes without saying that the traditional dictat of universal guaranteed anonymity is not helpful here. Allowance will also have to be made for such decisions to be reviewed should the roles taken on by children change during the course of a research project.

Gaining ethical approval, then, does not mark the end of the “ethics process”, but is just the beginning.

Photo credits and permissions

The photographs that accompany this blog are taken from the published reports of the projects discussed in the blog. All were taken with informed consent of those involved and their parents, including permission for publication/dissemination. The photographs featured in the published reports were selected by the young people themselves.

Author’s bio



Writer, researcher, facilitator and commentator on children’s rights, participation and play. Born in Belfast, started as a playworker in the UK, then worked in children’s rights and participation. Moved to Nicaragua, Central America in 2001 to work with local community education organisation CESESMA, supporting child workers on coffee plantations promoting and defending their rights. Awarded PhD at Queen’s University Belfast in 2016 for his study on Nicaraguan children’s perceptions of human rights in school. Currently working on COVISION project (www.covision.ie) at University College Dublin and ReSPECT project at Western Sydney University. More at www.harryshier.net

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