Ethics as doing – beginnings and endings using a posthumanist lens

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When I started my PhD in Education, one area I believed would be simple for me to navigate was that of ethics. I have worked all my adult life with young people labelled as vulnerable, I believed that my (perceived) sensitivity to the realities of everyday living would mean that acting ethically would be easier for me than for most others whether as a practitioner or researcher. I see now there was an arrogance to my stance; I thought I understood empathy, agency, and responsibility. I had a lot to learn. In this reflection, I will first explain the context of my research, before exploring what a posthumanist lens can offer when confronted with ethical dilemmas during research. This will be in relation to an incident that caused me 'wonder'; that is it gave rise to not just safe curiosity but 'maddening rumination', like an itch that could not be scratched (MacLure, 2013).

The ethnographic research I embarked on was with a government-sponsored community-based volunteering programme for young people (aged 16 years). My research explores how staff and young people build and sustain relationships in non-formal learning environments, what impacts these relationships and how learning is recognised. It was a wonderful, exhausting, overwhelming and uplifting experience. The critical moment I have chosen to reflect on happened during a tough second week (out of four). For that week only, we were staying in a university hall of residence, and the staff were not only managing their groups of young people but also often delivering activities. The days were long, from approximately 7am to midnight.

Posthumanism moves away from an anthropocentric focus, that is the view that humans are of more value than other entities, to de-centre 'the human'. It does this by paying attention to how non-human and material components in the environment come to matter (Taylor and Hughes, 2016) and illuminates the connected and entangled nature of 'being' in this world (Haraway, 2017). This is not just an ontological or epistemological shift but also has ethical implications. Barad (2007) in her development of an ethico-onto-epistem-ological stance, calls for an approach that recognises how ethics cannot be separated from our relational being in and knowing of the world (ontology and epistemology), unlike other research approaches which place these three concepts as discrete. As a researcher and practitioner, thinking entanglement has personal appeal because I am conscious of how I am intertwined within the 'doing'. I am not an objective or even subjective participant; reflection cannot take me out of the phenomena I am studying. As such I need to be cognisant of my encounters and responses within the world (Taylor and Hughes, 2016). This has implications as to where the question of ethics begins and ends.

In doing a PhD, ethics can seem 'done' once the ethics committee has given permission for the research to go ahead. This utilitarian approach, with the emphasis on procedures rather than moral values (Robinson-Pant and Singal, 2019), provides little guidance for unanticipated dilemmas during fieldwork. However, encountering the posthumanist offered me a framework to better consider ethics. It emphasises that any action taken will, by the nature of complementarity, exclude other action and potential futures from happening (Hollin et al., 2017). This brings the importance of decision-making/responding to the fore, whether as a researcher or a practitioner.

The event I reflect on highlights the implications of entanglement and how different decisions/responses affect what comes to matter. The Wednesday of the second week was particularly fraught, the staff and young people had experienced several combative situations during the day, some particularly explosive. Midway through the evening I was approached by two young people who asked me to talk to the staff team about a perception of change related to behaviour management strategies from the staff, which, they believed, was damaging the relationship with the cohort. I agreed to convey this message only if and when it was right to do so. Across staff and young people there was a general sense of lethargy, boredom, irritation and tension exacerbated by the inconsistent timetables, and an oppressive heat. My entanglement meant I, too, experienced the tension, the tiredness, the boredom, the heat. This awareness made me empathetic to the staff when we sat down to the end of the day meeting at 11.30pm that night. We were all blanketed in dejection and weariness and my dilemma arose as to whether to broach the subject raised by the young people.

Posthumanism encourages the researcher to move from representational methods, which employ the use of language, tone and medium to portray 'accurately' the realities of fieldwork, and instead pay more attention to events, relations, doings and affects (Vannini, 2015), acknowledging energy, fluidity and stickiness within the research area (Lorimer, 2008). Here, the relationality of the researcher with the world is immanent and requires a rethinking of both responsibility and attunement (Springgay and Zaliwska, 2017) to be conscious of what futures are excluded and included, to act accordingly, to be response-able as part of what comes to follow (Murris and Bozalek, 2019). I did not want to add to the burden of the team, but the views of the young people had resonance for practice. But what if the words were too much for the staff? How would they take criticism, no matter how constructive I perceived it to be? On the other hand, how would the young people react if I went back to them and told them it had not been right to convey their messages? Whether I did or did not intervene, where does this leave me as a researcher, as acts of both commission and omission would influence future events? If I give greater valence to a practitioner's priorities, what happens to the researcher's position, and vice versa? But are/were these in opposition with each other? These questions bring issues of social justice to the fore and ask how I can enact my responsibilities (Giraud, 2019) response-ably? If I read between the juxtaposition of the positions, it is apparent how difference gets made (Bozalek and Zembylas, 2017); the concept of fairness is difficult to practice. Being response-able does not always give clear cut answers or a sense that justice will be achieved, I cannot know what the future will bring. As with 'situated ethics', posthumanism pays attention to the local and the present. However, it also emphasises the future and the interdependence of realities emerging that come to matter, whilst excluding potential others (Hollin et al., 2017).

The team meeting was hard, I pondered and tried to play different scenarios in my head reading through the seemingly conflictive positions. However, as I sat there, I realised these were my representations of their potential reactions, I was making assumptions. I recognised that both groups had looked to me for advice and guidance as a practitioner previously. Could I build on this? As a researcher, acknowledging my entanglement would influence the future regardless of action/inaction, was it better to use the situation as a reciprocal learning opportunity if handled with sensitivity, empathy and care? With these values in mind, I did relay what the young people had said, to a mixture of responses from gratitude to self-recrimination to anger. As a team we explored what this meant for all of us: were the sentiments justified and, what could be done differently? This approach aligns to the key concept in posthumanism of diffraction, often used to refer to reading alternate theories through each other to find difference. In this situation diffraction offers possibilities for thinking about everyday perspectives, recognising different viewpoints and reading them through each other to help with the sense-making (Taylor and Gannon, 2018) and future actions.

Values of justice, relationality and reciprocity are important to me as a researcher. In difficult moments, considering the posthumanist interpretation of these values helped me move forward. Did I get it right every time? I am sure I did not. Did I try to take a thoughtful, considered position from my entanglement within the programme and research? Yes, I tried. I am happy that I advocated for the young people. My data collection and memory evidences the following day was positive, productive and fun. Was it because I had relayed the messages? For me that would be too simplistic an answer. Posthumanism as a lens has helped me to think about what happened last summer. The question is, would I act similarly at a different point? I cannot possibly say, no moment is ever exactly the same and so cannot be repeated. What I am aware of is the time I have spent considering this incident, before, during and after, it is still present even though it has passed; it is still mattering. With this in mind, where *does* the question of ethics begin and end? It does not do either, it is always and forever in the becoming.

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