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For the Greater Good? Ethical reflections on interviewing the ‘rich’ and ‘poor’ in qualitative research

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Abstract

There is increasing emphasis on understanding economic advantage alongside disadvantage – on studying both ‘poverty’ and ‘riches’. This trend prompts and requires new ethical reflection. I argue that in qualitative research, a clearer distinction needs to be drawn between ethical commitments to individual research participants, and the group(s) to which they belong. This distinction is often elided in ethics guidelines and when researchers discuss their own work. Attending to the distinction highlights a symmetrical ethical dilemma: researchers studying disadvantage are often motivated to further the interests of the wider group to which their participants belong, yet the study itself risks eliciting or exacerbating negative experiences or identities amongst participants themselves. Conversely, the process of studying advantage frequently bolsters the positive identities or experiences of individual study participants, even as the research findings challenge or subvert the interests of their group.

Introduction

‘We should have studied the rich’: these were reputedly Erving Goffman’s last words (McGoey, 2017). The social sciences have recently rediscovered the importance of ‘looking up’, through new research into the wealthy and the powerful. Studies of inequality or inequalities are in vogue (Savage and Hills, 2015); the focus of new research initiatives or centres, the subjects of new taught courses, and the focus of job adverts are all testament to this. The interrelationship between advantage and disadvantage covers not only the description and understanding of these phenomena, but also the normative question of what might be done: ‘what thoughtful rich people call the problem of poverty, thoughtful poor people call with equal justice a problem of riches’ (Tawney, 1913: 10). These trends provide both an opportunity and a requirement to reflect on the ethical implications of researching the economic top and bottom.

In this paper, I draw on qualitative research involving ‘rich’ and ‘poor’ participants, conducted by myself and a colleague (Hecht, 2017; Summers, 2018), to highlight an overlooked distinction between ethical commitments to individual research participants and the group(s) to which they belong. Our research consisted of depth interviews with participants at the top and bottom of the income and wealth distributions in the United Kingdom; our findings form the basis of an ongoing comparative project (Hecht and Summers, 2017). In our substantive work, we argue that the exercise of comparing participants at the extreme ends of the income and wealth distributions generates novel insights into the temporal experience of money, and the moral frameworks used to make sense of and justify one’s economic position. Similarly, reflecting on the implications of interviewing those experiencing the poles of economic inequality pushes us to consider previously underappreciated ethical contrasts.

My central argument is that ethically justifiable research involves considering and weighing both the interests of our individual research participants, but also the wider social group(s) to which they are understood to belong. This is so, notwithstanding debates about the ontological status of

individual research participants in relation to wider social groups. Furthermore, I show that the interests of individual participants can be in tension with the interests of their group. Individual research participants may be treated (inadvertently) as ethical collateral to further the interests of their group; conversely, the interests of a group may be undermined while individual participants are treated ethically appropriately. I conclude that an ethics of representation (Pickering and Kara, 2017) needs to be more deeply incorporated as a reflexive consideration across the research process.

The rest of the article is structured as follows. First, I identify that ethical commitments to individual research participants and the group to which they belong are an additional, and so far underappreciated, source of ethical tension. Second, after briefly outlining the substantive focus of the empirical research that grounds the ethical reflections of this paper, I consider research ethics at an individual level and how navigating aspects of these differs between economically advantaged and disadvantaged participants. Third, I consider research ethics at the group level, and the implications of research aiming to contribute to how a certain group or social phenomenon is understood, by trying to shape debate or policy. I finish by considering the theoretical and practical implications of taking seriously this distinction.

Distinguishing individual and group interests in research ethics

The foundational ethical principles now adopted in the social sciences were to some extent imported from medical research (The National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). These principles include beneficence, non-maleficence, justice and respect for persons; they translate into reducing harm to participants, maximising the benefits of the research process for participants, recognising the rights of participants as autonomous consenting individuals, and treating them with respect and dignity.

Moral framework	Principle	Prescription
Consequentialist	Non-maleficence	'Do no harm'
	Beneficence	Provide benefit
Deontological	Justice	Right to respect
	Autonomy	Right to consent

Table 1: Ethical principles and guidelines stemming from the Belmont report, adapted from (Knott, 2019)

Given the distinct moral frameworks from which these key principles are drawn, their specific prescriptions may sometimes involve unspoken tensions or trade-offs. The deontological mandates of respect and justice are not necessarily aligned with the consequentialist aims of achieving good and doing no harm. For example, in order to treat participants with respect a researcher may not be able to maximise the benefits (for participants) of the research process. Or to avoid doing harm to participants, not treat them as fully autonomous consenting individuals.¹ Moreover, these principles and how they tend to be considered presume an application to the individual research participant, first and foremost.

Such tensions are revealed at an additional layer when one differentiates more clearly between individual research participants and the social group they are part of. Existing ethics guidelines often run the individual and the group together. For example, the UK Social Policy Association ethics guidelines note that social policy research involves the study of both “disadvantaged” as well as “relatively powerful” individuals and social groups, and it is important that all participants are able to freely consent to participate (Social Policy Association, 2009: 3). ‘Individuals and social groups’ are not explicitly delineated, and the focus is on the ethical commitments to those directly participating in the research. In a similar vein, the British Sociological Association recommends in its ethical guidelines that,

¹ Although some argue that it not logically possible to separate the components of this example and the previous one: namely, to not treat someone as a fully autonomous individual *is* to do harm to them.

It should be borne in mind that decisions made on the basis of research may have effects on individuals as members of a group, even if individual research participants are protected by confidentiality and anonymity. (British Sociological Association, 2017: 6)

These effects might, for example, include reputational damage to a wider group. Here, there is an assumption that the interests of individual research participants and the group they are a part of are shared and congruous. The risk imagined at the group level, therefore, follows from anonymity and confidentiality only protecting those actually participating in the research. I want to question this assumed congruity. It may be, for example, that we are in fact pursuing justice for a group but are doing harm to an individual. It may be that we are respecting an individual, but are doing harm to the group they are a part of.

Previous writing has drawn instructive distinctions between ‘micro’ and ‘macro’ research ethics (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015: 353-356). Microethics concerns the relationships within the interview situation, while macroethics concerns relationships in wider society. Microethics are what are typically covered in contemporary accounts of research ethics, while macroethics “consider how the knowledge produced will circulate in the wider culture and affect humans and society” (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2005: 167). Microethics and macroethics can be aligned or in conflict. Microethics as defined here maps onto what I mean by ethics at the individual research participant level. Macroethics is concerned with ethics at the societal level. However, my focus in this article is on the more proximal group level: in the illustrative case used in this article this means ‘the rich’ and ‘the poor’ as groups in the United Kingdom.

I acknowledge that is very difficult to define what a ‘social group’ is, and what it means to be a part of a group. Indeed, this is the substantive focus of much social science research. Definitions of what constitutes a group are dependent on context; whose perspective is taken; the scale; and the terms of reference. This is not something I can resolve here, apart from to clarify that what I have in mind when I refer to a ‘group’ in this article is a collective of individuals, defined by some

sort of shared characteristic, that is bigger than participants incorporated into a research study but smaller than the whole of the relevant given society.

Illustrative case: researching the 'rich' and 'poor'

I explore this ethical distinction between the individual and the group in more detail by reflecting on empirical research in which I have been involved. This 'casuistry' approach to research ethics can overlap with other approaches (Blee and Currier, 2011), but in essence takes a specific case or condition for the purpose of developing insights that can be applied to other contexts (Israel and Hay, 2006).

The substantive research consists of seventy-three in-depth interviews with individuals at the top and bottom of the income and wealth distributions in London. Of these, forty-three participants formed one set of participants defined by their low-income and low or negative wealth. These participants were drawn from across east London, and all were in receipt of means-tested social security benefits. The remaining set of thirty participants had very high income and wealth. These participants were drawn from across London and were in the top 1% of the income and wealth distributions or higher; three featured on the Sunday Times Rich List.

The interviews with 'rich' and 'poor' participants were originally conducted for two separate research projects (Hecht, 2017; Summers, 2018), but were found to be suitable for comparison and so were combined to form a larger corpus of material (Wright and Patrick, 2019). The narratives of the individuals across these two samples were compared to explore how they talked about their own money in a context of high economic inequality. The research explores issues related to how money is discussed and constructed as deserved or undeserved, and how relative abundance or lack of income and wealth constrains or facilitates temporal orientations towards the future. The findings enhance our understanding of how economic resources are experienced at the poles of the economic distribution (Bottero, 2019).

Ethics at the individual level

Economic resources often form part of the central focus of studies of inequality and tend to be operationalised as sampling criteria in interview-based studies, as in our study. Indeed, the study of poverty and riches involves a clear focus on material inequalities in order to maintain conceptual clarity (Lister, 2017: 36). One question this raises is whether research participants identified as ‘poor’ or ‘rich’ according to a researcher’s sampling criteria consider themselves in this way. It may be that participants do not see themselves on the terms that the researcher has defined them, and do not consider themselves a part of a wider group of ‘poor’ or ‘rich’ in society. This possible disjuncture, and the wider methodological question of how we should think about individual participants’ relationship to wider social groups or phenomena, as understood by both participants and the researcher, is considered further in the Ethics at the Group Level and Implications sections.

There is sometimes a conflation between *lack* of material resources and ethically challenging research, which can obfuscate issues that require ethical reflexivity. Specifically, one can see this in the amount of guidance and attention that is given when considering what is often termed, ‘research with vulnerable populations’, often on ‘sensitive topics’ (see for example, Chan et al., 2017; Dickson-Swift et al., 2007; Liamputtong, 2007), where lack of material resources are often a primary or secondary marker of ‘vulnerability’ or ‘sensitivity’. This emphasis can be interpreted as an identification of where ethical sensibilities are most needed: it is those who lack resources of some kind who present a more ethically complex task for the researcher. As I demonstrate in what follows, this is not necessarily the case.

One example concerns topic guide construction. Topic guides provide the framework for an interviewer to conduct a qualitative research interview, and typically consist of formulated, ordered questions with follow up prompts that the researcher refers to during the conversation (Edwards and Holland, 2013: 54-7). In our study, both topic guides were semi-structured and originally developed for the respective individual projects described above. Although the similarities in focus

of the two original projects meant the researchers both deemed the interview data as fruitful for substantive comparison (Wright and Patrick, 2019). However, identifying the considerations underpinning some aspects of topic guide design shows a divergence in what is being given and taken between the researcher and the participant, depending on whether the participant is economically advantaged or disadvantaged.

There was a shared aim across both samples to access how interview participants talked about and thought about money in their own lives; however, these phenomena were elicited in different ways. Previous research tells us that money is a taboo subject (Parry and Bloch, 1989), but that the wealthy are particularly reluctant to talk about this aspect of their lives (Sherman, 2018). The 'rich' participants were asked indirectly about their money, with the topic guide focusing on the nature of inequality in the UK today. This then served as a way into talking about money in their own lives. For the 'poor' group, participants' money was instead discussed directly from the beginning of the interview. While talking about money is a sensitive matter, low-income participants did not have the same attitude towards privacy and taboo around the topic. Participants were much more used to (semi-)publicly disclosing aspects of their private lives, and in particular their financial lives, through various interactions with the state including in the course of making and maintaining social security claims (Patrick, 2017). This erosion of the money taboo meant that they were also relatively more comfortable doing so in the research context. It is at least ethically ambiguous that the researcher is piggybacking on low-income participants having aspects of their private lives disclosed in the course of interacting with government administrative systems, whereby this also makes them more open research participants.

The choices around topic guide design had the unintended consequence of pre-empting and prescribing the sort of material that the participant was able to share. The advantaged participants were invited to comment on the structure of society, and were therefore positioned as having some sort of insight or expertise in this respect (Dexter, 2006). The disadvantaged participants, on the

other hand, were asked only to consider their own experience within said structure. The implication is that on the level of individual research participants the advantaged participants were placed in positions of relative power and authority, whereas the disadvantaged participants were placed in a position that only directly elicited reflection on their own lives and capitalised on participants being accustomed to sharing details about their personal financial lives.

The location of the interviews for different participants also demonstrates further differences in how ethical considerations were navigated at the individual level. Disadvantaged participants were most often interviewed in a café or local public space such as a quiet room in a library or community centre. This choice of location was in part decided so that participants should not be put under pressure to 'host' the researcher. On the other hand, interviews with the advantaged participants saw this dynamic flipped. The interview often took place in their office, clearly positioning them in the role of host (Mason-Bish, 2019: 268). These choices about location can be understood as affirming the social roles of relative advantage and disadvantage that participants held outside of the research context: disadvantaged participants are being hosted and are thus ceding control, the reverse was true for advantaged participants.

It was the 'poor' participants who were more likely to find the interview distressing or upsetting. Some participants became emotional in the course of the interview as they talked about aspects of their financial lives that they experienced as stressful or embarrassing. The decision was made to take the role of empathetic interviewer with this group of participants (Oakley, 1981; Edwards and Mauthner, 2012). For example, by giving responses such as "I'm sorry to hear that" as opposed to a more neutral reaction. Participants found aspects of their financial lives shameful or upsetting, and it was seen as appropriate to engage in a style of interviewing that mitigated this if possible. Regardless, it remained the case that at its core the interviews with disadvantaged participants required them to speak at length about aspects of their identity that were upsetting for some of them. They were being asked to divulge and engage with personal identities that are highly

stigmatised in contemporary British society, including being poor and being unemployed (Stuber and Schlesinger, 2006). The obverse was true for advantaged participants, who could engage with positive, lauded, self-identities in the course of the interview. I have serious doubts as to whether it is possible to surmount these dynamics in the course of a research interview to any great extent.² In an interview context, participants are navigating aspects of their ‘moral selves’ (May, 2008: 471-2) and working to present a morally *acceptable* self. ‘Poor’ participants were (inadvertently) put in a position where they had to account for being poor and to protect their (moral) identities; ‘rich’ participants had no such stigmatised identity to navigate or protect within the context of the research interview.

That said, it is also important to temper the above points with the observation that for some low-income and wealth participants, the process of being interviewed was experienced cathartically. Some participants expressed how the interview provided an opportunity to talk openly about experiences where they were listened to. However, the experience of a research interview as some sort of therapeutic exercise blurs the purpose of the interview and the role of the researcher themselves, thus presenting its own ethical challenges (Birch and Miller, 2000; Rossetto, 2014: 486).

Ethics at the group level

This section moves beyond considering ethics at the individual research participant level. Ethical quandaries in interview research arise particularly because of the complexities of ‘researching private lives and placing accounts in the public arena’ (Mauthner et al., 2002: 1). One of the implications, or often moreover objectives, of writing about and disseminating research, is that we are making some sort of case about the group that our research participants are a part of, and

See also Tarrant and Hughes (2019) who explored how the research context can inadvertently underscore participants’ positions of powerlessness or constraint.²

therefore seek to engage with and influence the world in some way that will have an effect on how this group is understood or treated.

There is a very important issue here regarding epistemological claims in qualitative research: how do data collected from our individual research participants relate to the status or experience of a broader group? Specifically, in this article, how do the interview accounts of respectively (what we termed) ‘rich’ and ‘poor’ participants relate to ‘the rich’ and ‘the poor’ in British society? A representative sample that makes statistical inference to a wider population is neither possible nor desirable in qualitative research (Emmel, 2013). However, researchers are divided as to whether we can only say something meaningful about the individual participants in a given study; whether we are engaged in generating theoretical insights that might apply to different contexts while our empirical findings are specific to the context in which they are generated; whether we can use the tools of qualitative research to gradually build towards logical inferences about a broader social phenomenon; or whether generalizability *should* be the standard we are aiming for (for interlocution on this debate see, Lucas, 2014 and Small, 2009).

For the purpose of my ethical arguments it is not necessary to intervene directly in this debate. The *ethical* tensions between obligations towards individual research participants and the wider group to which they belong exists somewhat separately to how one conceives of the ontological relationship between the two. This is because except in the most extreme cases, researchers are inevitably taken (rightly or wrongly) to be making some sort of claim about an aspect of the social world that stretches beyond the immediate empirical context of a given study (Lucas, 2014: 407). In multi-method intellectual environments, as well as more broadly ‘out there’ in wider social, political and policy debates, the specifics of a research study are *read* to signify something about a wider picture, and thus a link between individual research participants and a wider group are enforced or created (Small, 2009: 6-11) regardless of the intention of the researcher.

This returns us to the central dilemma of this article. When the subjects of the research are members of a disadvantaged group, it can be that the research may further interests of the group at the expense of the individual. Researchers are often explicitly motivated by the pursuit of social justice, redressing imbalances of representation, and highlighting voices or perspectives that have previously been overlooked (Lister, 2017; Taylor-Gooby, 2013). As can be highlighted in reflexive consideration of researchers' choice of research topics, this process inevitably incorporates or is influenced by their personal normative frameworks and motivations. Social science researchers may be working on a topic because they have a normative motivation for engaging with and having an influence on how this topic is regarded or acted upon in the wider world.

However, a motivation to further the interests of some broader group can sit alongside individual research participants being asked to engage with negative aspects of self-identity in the course of the research. Indeed, in the study presented in this article, the substantive research findings include understanding and considering how conditions of poverty might be altered or addressed, and ultimately ameliorated, by different public policy interventions. But as shown in the previous section, individual research participants were potentially having negative aspects of their identity and experience highlighted through their participation in a way that was injurious to them individually and potentially rendering them more vulnerable.

The study of advantaged groups, on the other hand, often presents a quite different- even opposing - problem. Individual participants may enjoy rehearsing venerated aspects of self-identity.³ In the interviews with 'rich' participants, for example, they spoke about luxury goods and leisure activities they had purchased. However, researchers may be implicitly or explicitly motivated by normative concerns to contribute to broader political activities that seek to undo the privilege of the economically advantaged as a social group. A central finding of the empirical study with advantaged participants was that many experienced 'relative disadvantage' because their social

³ Although the interview may also serve, for example, to prompt more critical self-reflection.

comparisons were other extremely wealthy people, an insight that has been applied to engage with the possibilities of a more redistributive policy agenda.

Looking at other examples of researching ‘up’ demonstrates the ubiquity of this ethical challenge. For example, in interviewing successful professionals who had to some extent surmounted the ‘class ceiling’, Friedman and Laurison seek to understand how ultimately that ceiling can be broken (2020). Harrington’s study of wealth management, where she collected ethnographic data including interviews with practitioners, concludes that reform of this profession should be the focus of public policymakers if they want to curtail the power of the super-rich (2016). These studies are motivated both by wanting to understand these systems of power and privilege, but also by wanting to challenge them.

Holding up qualitative interviews with advantaged and disadvantaged research participants alongside one another allows us to highlight ethical considerations that might be overlooked if considering either in isolation. Returning to the research principles laid out near the beginning of this article, individual economically disadvantaged interview participants may not be being individually benefited, or are perhaps even inadvertently harmed, with the instrumental intention of benefiting the group to which they belong. The obverse can be true for the study of advantage. ‘Macroethics’ has been defined as ethical considerations in relation to the wider public benefit. The contrast and tension between ‘rich’ and ‘poor’ participants, and the ‘rich’ and ‘poor’ respectively as social groups, shows we need a more nuanced, or layered, understanding of ‘the public’ in research ethics that recognises that it is made up of different groups, who might be differentially benefitted or harmed by the research.

Implications

In this article I have argued that researchers should put the distinction between the interests of individual research participants and the group(s) to which they belong at the surface of their ethical

considerations. The argument prompts the question of how, or whether, these respective interests can be reconciled when they are in tension.

One possible resolution would be to prioritise our ethical obligations to the individuals who are directly participating in the research. Within Western social science, underpinned by a liberal tradition of individualism, ethical principles commonly focus on the interests and autonomy of individuals (Hammersley, 2015: 442). This emphasis flows from a liberal perspective that recognises the plurality of values and concludes that there is not a determinate way of reconciling these; therefore, the autonomy of the individual must necessarily be our focus. There are different implications of focusing predominantly on research ethics at the individual level. For ‘poor’ participants, the researcher cannot justify infringements of ethics at the individual level by reference to (possible) gains for the relevant wider group whose interests may be furthered by the research. For ‘rich’ participants, this approach implies more latitude for the researcher to undermine the position of the group as long as they fulfil their ethical obligations to individual participants. However, this focus at the individual level does not seem an adequate depiction of what researchers are doing when they carry out their work. We are often trying to change material circumstances or understandings (Becker, 1967: 243-244); the research enterprise stretches beyond the researcher and their participants and out into the wider world.

One could instead argue that some weight should be given to the interests of the group. Indeed, some would go further and suggest that the academy has an obligation and a crucial role in questioning taken for granted deleterious structures and hierarchies.⁴ On the one hand, this provides a justification for undermining the interests of powerful social groups. On the other hand, the implications of this are that, as a researcher, one must conclude that it is ethically appropriate to instrumentalise individual research participants to some extent in order to further the interests

⁴ Or instead make the empirical claim that social inequalities within a society harm us *all*, including the advantaged (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2010).

of a wider group. This orientation is clear in some of the existing literature on covert research, where foregoing individual participant's ability to give informed consent is seen as justified if there is an overwhelming broader benefit to the research (Spicker, 2011: 122).

I do not seek finally to resolve this ethical dilemma here. Instead, I argue that further progress can be made by a more serious consideration of an ethics of representation, and a reassessment of what is involved in gaining informed consent (Pickering and Kara, 2017). In particular, we need to consider *how* and *why* participants are being represented, and how researchers “engage with their study participants, their participants’ communities, their audiences and wider publics” (Pickering and Kara, 2017: 308), while recognising that the nature of these engagements may be in tension with one another. The parts of the research process that stretch beyond the immediate interaction between the researcher and participant need to be brought more centrally within the realm of research ethics.

Relatedly, the distinction I have drawn forces us to reconsider the important notion of informed consent. The need to obtain informed consent from participants is a well-known bedrock of research ethics, perhaps to the point that what it actually *means* to obtain informed consent is substituted for a formalistic commitment to ticking the boxes of providing information sheets and consent forms as part of gaining ethical approval for interview based studies. The important point has been made that gaining consent must be regarded as a continuous process rather than a point-in-time event, and that consent can be withdrawn at any point across this process (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2017: 93-94). I would like to highlight an additional consideration. Obtaining informed consent should not only be thought of as making participants aware of the risks and benefits to themselves as individuals, but also what the potential risks and benefits may be to relevant wider social groups (which must also acknowledge the greater ambiguity in accurately predicting this).

I end briefly by highlighting that this article has had space only to sketch the most basic variant of the distinction that I have drawn, between the interests of individuals and their group(s). I

acknowledge that there are additional complications along several dimensions, each of which warrants further ethical reflection. These include: (1) that there might be multiple wider groups that are ethically relevant to a study, whose relationship to one another also need to be considered; (2) that there is a temporal dimension to consider, both in the sense that individual participants might later benefit or be harmed by change effected at the group level, and that in some instances one's membership of a group may not be permanent; (3) that the ethical interests of a social group are more diffuse and indirect in relation to the researcher, making them harder to predict and engage with.

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