

Ethical reflexivity in policy analysis: what is it and why do we need it?*

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to contribute to the discussion about the concept and relevance of the ethical reflexivity in policy analysis. It presents some reasons for doing more of it and to begin to highlight potential tensions, dilemmas and difficulties related to the use of it. The author argues that there is a general need for more ethical reflexivity within the field and, to illustrate the importance of ethical reflexivity, some examples of research are presented.

Key words: ethical reflexivity, research, policy analysis.

Resumo

Este trabalho pretende contribuir para a discussão sobre o conceito e importância da reflexividade ética na pesquisa sobre políticas educacionais. Apresenta também algumas razões pelas quais ela precisaria ser utilizada com maior intensidade, bem como as tensões, dilemas e potenciais dificuldades relacionadas ao seu emprego. A autora argumenta que há uma necessidade geral de uma maior reflexividade ética dentro das pesquisas desse campo e, para ilustrar a importância das justificativas em favor da reflexividade ética, alguns exemplos de pesquisas são apresentados.

Palavras – chave: reflexividade ética, pesquisa, análise de políticas .

I am going to answer the first part of the question - i.e. what is ethical reflexivity? - fairly quickly. I will devote considerably more attention to the second part - why do we need it?

What is ethical reflexivity?

What I am calling ethical reflexivity involves doing three things:

1. Making explicit the ethical values and principles that inform our analyses.
2. Justifying them where possible or at least where necessary. Some values are so fundamental that we should be able to take for granted that they are justified e.g. do we have to explain why we think emotional or physical bullying, harassment or physical violence is wrong? Or we may think that whilst the ethical values we hold have been adequately justified by others and that where this is the case we can simply refer to the work that others have done, e.g. the belief that it is wrong for students with learning difficulties to be educated in special schools. However, it becomes particularly necessary to justify values where our analysis rests on some assumptions about the best resolution of a values dilemma.

For example, I would argue that there is a common assumption in recent education policy research that comprehensive schooling is a more worthwhile policy aim than parents or children being able to choose a school that suits what they perceive to be their needs or interests, but this is rarely made explicit.

3. Weighing up the potential ethical implications of our work - e.g. in what ways might our work harm others or legitimate or intensify conditions, institutions, policies, power relations or discourses that we think are wrong?

In arguing for more ethical reflexivity in policy research, I am not assuming that nobody does it. People do in fact do it to varying degrees so that it is possible to think of an ethical reflexivity continuum with, at the highly reflexive end, work that self-consciously and meticulously sets out and defends the author's ethical stance and its practical consequences and, at the non-reflexive end, work that does not make explicit the ethical values that inform the analysis. An example of work at the highly reflexive end is Fiona Williams' (2000a and b) advocacy and detailed explication of a set of 'key principles of recognition and respect' which could inform what Williams calls 'a reordering of the social relations of welfare'¹.

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¹ The principles are interdependence, care, intimacy, bodily integrity, identity, transnational welfare, voice which Williams argues intersect with different dimensions of redistribution 'to provide a shared vocabulary with which to write our individual and collective welfare scripts' (Williams 2000a: 350).

Somewhere in the middle of the continuum lies work which explicitly acknowledges the desirability of ethical reflexivity but in practice avoids an explicit commitment to a particular ethical stance. I would put Stephen Ball's recent work on the school choice making practices of middle-class parents in this category (Bali 2003). In this work Bali briefly rehearses the rights and wrongs of middle-class parents making choices that may be in the individual interests of their own children but which also contribute to an increase in the overall inequality of educational provision. And Bali explicitly acknowledges that analysts can treat the individualistic actions of middle-class parents with varying degrees of empathy or disapproval. However, he shies away from making explicit his own stance on the ways in which middle-class parents resolve the ethical dilemmas they face, beyond recognising that his own stance is inconsistent:

In effect this is a story [of middle-class choice making] that can be told in more than one way - more or less sympathetically or cynically - again, though, I shall try to elude temptations of the simple binary and steer between the two. I certainly will not be offering a simple answer to any of the questions asked above [about the tensions between being a good parent and being a good citizen] and my own emphasis in terms of sympathy or judgement shifts over time (Bali 2003: 115).

Although this position has merits in that there is a degree of reflexivity and a recognition of the moral complexities involved in school choice, it is also, I would suggest, inadequate in key respects. My particular concern about this position is that it represents a tendency that Alan Cribb and I have called 'critique from above' (Gewirtz and Cribb 2003) - that is a tendency to see sociological analysis as taking place above the realm of practice rather than as something which can contribute to the development of more just social policies and practices.

Finally on the ethical reflexivity continuum, rather than give examples of work located at the unreflexive end, I simply want to make the point that work that is ethically unreflexive is not necessarily deficient. In other words, I am not arguing that all work needs to be ethically reflexive - it would be unrealistic to expect all policy analysts to do everything all of the time. I am simply arguing that there is a general need for more ethical reflexivity within the field, but that it is perfectly legitimate for only some people to do this work that others can then refer to, or 'take as read'.

So to summarise the argument so far, ethical reflexivity is present in much policy analysis to varying degrees. My purpose here, therefore, is not to suggest it is not being done, but rather to highlight it as an issue, present some reasons for doing more of it and to begin to highlight potential difficulties - because although some people do it they rarely talk about why or how they are doing it or about the dilemmas that being ethically reflexive gives rise to.

One person who has raised ethical reflexivity as an issue for discussion, although she does not use the term so far as I am aware, is Kathleen Lynch of the Equality Studies Centre at University College Dublin. Writing specifically about the sociology of education, Lynch expresses concern about the 'relative silence about values' that is normalised in the field. She argues that the majority of research informed by positivist or postmodernist epistemological positions implicitly or explicitly rejects the normative domain as a legitimate area of analysis, whilst in much critical and feminist social science 'the normative or ethical dimension remains implicit rather than explicit' (Lynch 2001: 240). Lynch is concerned that what she sees as 'crucial ethical questions have been left unexplored in sociological research' as a consequence of the separation between what she refers to as 'analytical discourses which she suggests is the traditional domain of sociological theory and 'normative' discourses - traditionally the domain of ethical theory. The integration of analytic and normative discourses, would, Lynch argues, enable sociologists to systematically develop 'counterfactuals' - i.e. 'serious and systemic outlines of alternative structures and systems' (Lynch 2001: 241. See also Sayer 2000). Such an integration would also enable sociologists to use egalitarian theory to fully understand the 'generative roots' (Lynch 2001: 252) of inequality and thereby expose the limitations of policies based on meritocratic and neo-liberal ideologies (as well as the limitations of 'identity-based solutions to educational difference' (248)). Lynch argues that egalitarian theory provides a 'counter-hegemonic discourse' that can be used by sociologists of education 'to challenge and deconstruct the highly inegalitarian assumptions of the new educational orthodoxies' (Lynch 2001: 246). Finally, Lynch argues that ethical issues need to be engaged with explicitly and reflexively, if we are to ensure that our research does not contribute to the production of injustices by colonising the injustices of others. Aligning herself with the tradition of emancipatory research, represented by the perspectives of Patti Lather and others, she warns against a situation where researchers unintentionally, and often with the best intentions,

become colonisers, creating public images about groups and contexts of inequality (in both the academic and the policy world) over which most people participating in the pain and marginalization of injustice and inequality have little or no control. Professional researchers know and own (as do the policy institutions, research foundations and state agencies that fund them) part of people's world about which people themselves know very little. By owning the data about oppressed peoples, the 'experts' own part of them. The very owning and controlling of the stories of oppression adds further to the oppression as it means that there are now people who can claim to know and understand you better than you understand yourself; there are experts there to interpret your world and to speak on your behalf. They take away your voice by speaking about you and for you (Lynch 2001: 243-4; see also Lynch and O'Neill 1994).

Lynch's particular focus is on the value of using egalitarian theory in research in the sociology of education. Although I have concerns that overlap with Lynch's I want to start in a different place. In what follows I want to build on the spirit of Lynch's discussion, which calls for an integration of ethical and sociological forms of analysis, but I am interested in producing a more general account of ethical reflexivity in policy analysis - an account that would have relevance to scholars with any value commitments, egalitarian or otherwise. I will begin by setting out the reasons for being ethically reflexive and then go on to begin to problematise the task by highlighting a dilemma facing policy analysts who wish to be ethically reflexive. Although my analysis is meant to be relevant to the field of public policy analysis more broadly, I am going to use examples from education.

So why do we need it?

I want to suggest there are three main reasons for being ethically reflexive. I will state these baldly at first, and then go back and try to illustrate their importance. First, just as we are expected to explicate and defend the empirical claims we make, so we should be expected to explicate and defend our ethical claims or at least the ethical judgements that inform our analysis. Although the latter is not a conventional expectation within the disciplines of either sociology or social policy, I want to suggest it should be, i.e. that we need to be just as robust in analysing our ethical claims and judgements as we are expected to be in analysing our empirical claims or assumptions and that there is no good reason for privileging the empirical.

Second, where there are tensions or conflicts between the different ethical commitments that

might inform a particular piece of analytic work, being ethically reflexive forces the analyst to try and resolve these in some way. I would argue that this is essential if we are to avoid the pitfalls of 'critique from above' (Gewirtz and Cribb 2003).

Third, policy analysis has effects in the world we are trying to analyse and we have an ethical responsibility for these real world consequences. If we are to be ethically responsible analysts, then we have the same duties as any actors have in relation to their own actions. So, in the case of policy analysis, although we cannot control how our work is read or used, we need to try as far as it is possible to reduce the potential for our analysis to contribute to what we would regard as undesirable ends.

To illustrate the importance of these three rationales for ethical reflexivity, I want to use the example of recent research into widening participation in higher education. There is a growing body of research that looks at the barriers to widening participation and how these might be redressed. Much of this work shows some degree of ethical reflexivity but I would argue there is scope for more. A good example of work in this area is Hayton and Paczuska's (2002) recent edited collection, *Access, Participation and Higher Education: policy and practice*. There seem to be two key overlapping ethical judgements that underpin the arguments in this book. The first is that widening access to higher education by removing the barriers and class biases that hinder the participation of working class students is a good thing. The second is that the content, purpose and mode of provision of higher education has to change, quite radically, in ways that are more responsive to the experiences, needs and aspirations of a wider range of learners. However, the bulk of the book focuses on an empirical account of the barriers and how they work. The barriers identified include cultural bias in the admissions system and qualifications frameworks, an unfair funding system which privileges elite institutions, insufficient financial support for low-income students, insufficient collaboration between the different sectors of education, and a mismatch between the values and cultural identity of working-class students and institutional values and cultures. Although some attention is also devoted to explicating some of the ethical issues associated with widening participation - i.e. *why* widening participation is a good thing and *why* higher education needs to change - these issues are treated in a cursory manner, and the contours of what a more appropriate HE would look like are drawn in a very broad brush way. For example, the authors call for: new models of progression into and within HE that reflect the non-linear routes of non-traditional students; an HE system that 'values all contributions equally,

respecting the insights that different backgrounds and experiences offer, rather than trying to make us all middle class' (268) and the development of 'a new curriculum and innovative approaches to teaching and learning that will enable students to develop the skills, knowledge and understanding to equip them for the challenges of the 21st century' (269). What this new curriculum and innovative approaches might look like is not specified. Some of the challenges are specified but only in the vaguest terms. These are seen to relate to 'The global nature of our society, the growth of technologies which permit transglobal exchanges of knowledge and information and the growing capacity to store knowledge and information' (268). Now, on the one hand, it could be argued, as do the series editors (Hodgson and Spours 2002: x) that 'the discussion of a new type of higher education goes beyond the parameters of this volume', that there is only so much one volume can do and that this needs to be the topic of another book. However, I want to argue that there are three reasons why such a discussion would enhance the analysis and these relate to the three rationales for ethical reflexivity I have set out above.

First, I think that it is difficult to make sense of the analysis offered in the book without a clearer understanding of the relationship between the two ethical judgements that inform the study. I.e. from a policy perspective, is the conclusion that needs to be drawn that widening participation is a good thing, *regardless of whether* higher education is radically reformed (in so far as it is possible to remove some barriers without radically transforming the curriculum)? Or is it only worthwhile widening participation // "higher education is going to be more radically reformed? In order to be able to answer these questions we need a more thorough analysis of under what circumstances widening participation is a good thing. Without this, it is unclear precisely what the argument that is being asserted in the book is and so it is difficult to draw out the practical implications of the study.

Second, because the key ethical judgements are not sufficiently elaborated, there is a latent, and arguably crucial, tension in the argument which is not addressed. This tension is between the principle of distributing valuable knowledge and forms of understanding more equitably and the principle of recognising diverse cultural identities. Overall, it appears that at least on one reading, recognitional principles may be being privileged over distributional ones. For instance, the editors advocate valuing 'all contributions equally'. What this means in practice is not specified, but if we take it to mean that all kinds of knowledge and forms of understanding should be equally valued, then the implications are substantial. In particular, an equal valuing would seem to

involve a complete transformation of what has conventionally been understood as valuable academic knowledge. There are a number of potential problems with such a transformation, but the one that particularly concerns me is that if all forms of understanding are valued equally, students will not necessarily be inducted into the skills of critical analysis that are embodied in a range of disciplinary traditions. So the price of cultural recognition interpreted in this way may be a reinforcement of the existing unequal distribution of the skills of critical analysis which I would want to argue are of both intrinsic and instrumental value.

Third, this point allows me to illustrate the potentially negative ethical consequences of some forms of policy analysis. Specifically, if the reading I have offered of Hayton and Paczuska's work on widening participation is sound - and they are arguing for an equal valuing of all forms of knowledge and understanding - there is a danger that one of its effects will be to reinforce the fears of conservative critics of widening participation and strengthen the position of these critics that widening participation represents a 'dumbing down'. More ethical reflexivity in this area, I suggest, could offer a more nuanced accommodation between the principles of recognition and redistribution which involves valuing diverse cultural identities whilst being open to the possibility that some valuational hierarchies of knowledge are valid.

A key tension

Having set out the arguments in favour of ethical reflexivity, I think it is important to say something about one of the challenges involved in doing it. This challenge stems from the fact that the first and the third rationales for ethical reflexivity may themselves come into conflict with one another. What I mean here is that explicating and defending ones ethical judgements involves an open-minded and generous engagement with competing value perspectives. But in doing this there is a danger that we legitimate and therefore reinforce what we may see as unacceptable political positions and practices. For example, I would argue that a thorough defence of comprehensive schooling involves taking seriously arguments in favour of parental choice and markets. Not to do this analytical work risks undermining the rigour of the argument and may reduce our advocacy of comprehensive schooling to a simple assertion unsupported by argument. On the other hand, there are significant political risks associated with this exercise. For instance, engaging with the arguments of school market advocates means acknowledging the relevance of their claims about the potential for markets to enhance responsiveness and challenge 'selection by mortgage'. Furthermore, it may in some instances involve recognising the

validity of some elements of these arguments. In terms of practical politics there is a fine line between engaging in constructive dialogue with one's adversaries and legitimating their case when theirs is the dominant discourse.

Conclusions

So having advocated more ethical reflexivity, I have now introduced a spanner in the works. Does that mean that ethical reflexivity is so hard, we should not bother? I think it still is worth the bother. First, I am not sure that the tension between the first and the third rationale is going to be a significant problem in many cases. Taking seriously the arguments of one's opponents does not necessarily involve legitimating them. You could take them seriously but present a thorough critique of them which might be all the more effective because you have taken them seriously. So I do not think the tension makes the task of ethical reflexivity impossible. It simply means that the line between constructive engagement with opposing views and legitimating them needs to be trod carefully.

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