Risks and Dilemmas, Virtues and Vices:
Engaging with Stakeholders and Gatekeepers
in Australian Traveller Education Research

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Abstract

Scott and Usher (1999, pp. 129-134) have postulated three possible models of analysing the rights and responsibilities of researchers and researched: covert research; open democratic research; and open autocratic research. While we eschew characterising our research as "covert", we are less definitive about whether and how it is "democratic" and/or "autocratic". Partly this dilemma derives from uncertainties involved in identifying stakeholders with 'legitimate' involvement in the conduct and outcomes of a research project. Partly this dilemma also reflects the risks attendant on stakeholders becoming gatekeepers, and/or when stakeholders' expectations of the project diverge.

We illustrate these risks and dilemmas by reference to an ongoing research project investigating the educational experiences and opportunities of Australian occupational Travellers – specifically, itinerant circus and fairground people. This critically reflexive illustration is informed by our deployment of selected elements of Pring's (2002) provocative delineation of the "virtues" and "vices" of educational researchers. We argue that Pring's depiction of "the virtuous research community" (pp. 125-126), augmented by the principles of co-operative communities, provides a more contingent and nuanced basis than Scott and Usher's (1999) "democratic" versus "autocratic" research for engaging with the multiple and sometimes conflicting interests of stakeholders and gatekeepers in Australian Traveller education research.

Introduction

According to Coombes and Danaher (2001, p. 115), "we consider the question '*Cui bono*?' — understood as 'Who benefits?' or 'In whose interests?' — as one of the most enduringly significant questions to be directed at an educational research project". In this paper we pursue the issue of '*Cui bono*?' in relation to risks and dilemmas arising from identifying and working with stakeholders and gatekeepers in our ongoing research into the education of Australian occupational Travellers such as circus and show people. We do this working on the assumption that the answer to '*Cui bono*?' is complex and contextualised, and with the expectation that engaging with stakeholders and gatekeepers – who might be presumed to be the direct intended beneficiaries of a research project – reveals much about the ethical and political dimensions of contemporary educational research.

The paper is divided into three sections:
- ?? Risks and dilemmas arising from the three models of the rights and responsibilities of 'researchers' and 'researched' elaborated by Scott and Usher (1999);
- ?? Pring's (2002) useful articulation of the virtues and vices of educational researchers and the elements of "the virtuous research community" (pp. 125-126), augmented by the principles of co-operative communities;
- ?? The implications of our preference for Pring's (2002) "virtuous research community" and co-operative community principles for engaging with stakeholders and gatekeepers in Australian Traveller education research.

The underlying argument is that understanding educational research as simultaneously politically framed and ethically grounded helps to confirm a nuanced, modest and contingent approach to such research. This approach in turn assists considerably in the continuing

project of addressing the risks and dilemmas, maximising the virtues and minimising the vices of contemporary qualitative educational research.

Risks and dilemmas and three models of 'researcher' and 'researched' rights and responsibilities
Scott and Usher offer three possible models for making sense of the relationship between researchers and researched groups:

> The first – covert research – emphasizes the need to conceal from respondents the aims and purposes of the research and for the researcher to act in a clandestine way. The second – open democratic research – stresses the rights of participants to control which data are collected and which are included in the research report. The third – open autocratic research – argues the case against allowing respondents these rights of veto and therefore obligates the researcher to protect the interests of those who have agreed to take part in the research. (1999, p. 128)

This section of the paper will discuss each of these models in relation to the research into Australian Traveller education that we have undertaken through Central Queensland University. In doing so, we will illustrate the inadequacy of Scott and Usher's approach for apprehending the nuances and challenges – and hence the risks and dilemmas – of such research.

Perhaps an example from popular culture of covert research would be Professor Henry Higgins' attempts to appropriate Eliza Doolittle's speech acts at the beginning of Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*. There might be contexts in which such a clandestine approach seems justified: research into the values and practices of criminal gangs or extreme political organisations, for example. This model of research, however, is neither the aspiration of, nor a possibility for, the Traveller education research team. Research into human actors requires approval from the university's Human Ethics Review Panel and before talking with anyone from the community in the context of research we are required to obtain their signed and informed consent. Indeed, the practicalities of researching the educational experiences of occupational Travellers such as a circus or show community militate against the covert approach. Rather, the practice that we have tended to undertake has been to approach some official from the Traveller community and negotiate opportunities to interview and observe various members. Beyond all this, there is the firm view that, in the context of this research project, such a clandestine approach is ethically unsustainable.

While the open democratic model of research seems, on the face of it, to constitute the most ethically just approach, Scott and Usher point to various practical difficulties and theoretical limitations implicit in this model. From a practical perspective, the time and effort needed to consult each stakeholder in the research about the different data collected and communicated in publications derived from the research presents enormous logistical difficulties. In the context of a mobile community, whose members might be dispersed across and beyond Australia at the time when various publications are composed, this difficulty is compounded. From a theoretical perspective, Scott and Usher suggest that the open democratic model is dependent upon what they identify as Habermas's 1987 concept of an 'ideal speech situation' (1999, p. 132), an environment in which each party to the communication understands perfectly the meanings and motivations of others and in which significant contextual features such as differential power relations and cultural backgrounds have been miraculously effaced. Such an ideal speech situation certainly does not apply in relation to our Traveller education research. It is not just that university researchers and occupational Travellers come from very different social universes with different values and ways of making meaning; it is

also that the differences that pertain between and within these social universes in relation to such research lend it, we would argue, its excitement and significance. So engaging with difference, and negotiating the risks and dilemmas involved with engaging with difference, is an integral element of the Traveller education research project.

There is a further limitation associated with the open democratic model. It seems to imply a coincidence of interests between the researchers and the researched community. This implication is not only invalid but can also be dangerous. The interest of university researchers in earning research publication points is evidently not shared by the circus communities we have studied, just as their interest in learning new acrobatic manoeuvres or lion-taming acts is not one that we share (even if some colleagues might think they constitute valuable attributes in the context of the contemporary higher education sector). The danger in the coincidence of interests perspective is that it risks compromising the relationship between researcher and researched: it could lead to the researched group expecting the researchers to take on an advocacy role, interceding on their behalf with state or political institutions. Yet to do so would compromise the professional distance that some researchers would argue is needed to maintain the integrity of such research.

Scott and Usher suggest that open autocratic research is the most suitable model that researchers can adopt (1999, pp. 133-134). This places the onus on the researcher to make judgements about how the interests of the research groups are to be protected, including epistemological decisions about how the knowledge created through the research experience can be communicated in a manner that is consistent with this ethical position, and how much about the research process and its outcomes should be communicated to the research group.

While Scott and Usher's models do offer significant insights into the risks and dilemmas involved in the research project, ultimately we find this approach limited. The complexities of the research process are such that they resist being reduced to three discrete models. For example, experiences that might seem to fall within the purview of the covert model – such as the researcher witnessing a chance encounter within the showgrounds or overhearing the spruiking of a stallholder – might assist in consolidating or inflecting understandings gathered through processes that belong to the open democratic model. Nor does Scott and Usher's approach engage effectively with the multiple roles and moves that the different stakeholders within the Traveller education project take on. Within the context of a research project in which the value of difference is paramount, their approach tends to be totalising and restrictive. Accordingly we look to a more nuanced approach to discussing the relationship between researchers and researched, and we turn to Johnson and Johnson's (1998) principles of co-operative community to see whether and how, informed by Pring's (2002) discussion of a virtuous research community, those principles provide such an approach.

Virtues and vices and co-operative community principles
A dialogue around a number of issues argued by Pring (2002) in his chapter on "The virtues and vices of an educational researcher" could serve both intellectual and pragmatic interests. In this part of the present discussion, however, the predominant focus is a more general principle proposed by Pring. According to Pring, "Virtues are fostered – and indeed related to – particular social contexts and without that social support personal virtues so often weaken" (2002, p. 125). Our purpose here is to examine co-operative community theory (Johnson & Johnson, 1998) in the light of its appropriateness as a conceptual framework or blueprint for

developing and sustaining communities of researchers who foster among themselves the virtues that Pring proposed.

A key point in Pring's articulation of the virtuous researcher relates to dispositions that, he argues, define virtue in the sense of those dispositions that lead to appropriate actions in given contexts. The argument that we propose is that the combination of five principles or elements found to be essential to the successful operation of co-operative communities (Johnson and Johnson, 1998) forms an ideal platform to support and encourage virtuous dispositions in a research community. This type of support is also likely to discourage the weakening of personal virtues that might be threatened in a less encouraging context. According to Pring, "if we are wanting virtuous researchers, then we must have virtuous research communities, communities which embody the very virtues which one requires of the members of these communities" (Pring, 2002, p. 125). The principles of co-operative community, as described below, embody these virtues.

All of the principles provide social support for members of a co-operative community. Positive interdependence involves developing shared goals and directions, adopting complementary roles, a shared identity and shared resources, people working together and sharing joint rewards. While it may be argued that these points are not inherently virtuous, they are supportive of the directions that research community members are likely to adopt when each member has the disposition to behave appropriately in the research context. The argument for co-operative community principles becomes stronger as the other four principles are unfolded and particularly if the interaction between the principles is considered.

The second principle, individual accountability, is consistent with the first principle, particularly with regard to the adoption of complementary roles. When the roles of the members are differentiated but are individually imperative to the achievement of agreed shared goals and directions, then responsibility is placed on each person. Conceivably, that responsibility could extend to actions being appropriate and ethical, in line with the dispositions that the group tacitly or overtly encourages or expects. It would be more difficult for an individual who has the propensity to weaken or to resort to less ethical behaviours to do so in the presence of others when goals and tasks are shared openly.

A more directly proactive approach to members encouraging one another to behave in ways that the group considers virtuous is embedded in the third principle, that of members promoting one another's success. This promotion entails providing assistance and encouragement, praise and support for fellow group members. It helps to avoid the situation in which members might wonder whether the others in the group value their actions. With the guesswork removed, the atmosphere is one that is more positive and supportive – the ideal context in which members can support one another in situations that might otherwise lead to a weakening of dispositions and inappropriate actions. Incidentally, when members of co-operative research communities promote one another's success in the ways mentioned here, they can be seen to be enacting what Pring describes as moral virtues or "dispositions like courage, kindness, generosity of spirit, honesty, concern for justice" (2002, p. 124). For example, in some situations, it may take courage to argue for the most ethical course of action and courage to support another in this argument but, in doing so, members promote the dispositions that they believe are appropriate. It could be argued that members have an individual accountability to assist and encourage, praise and support one another in the pursuit of the group goals and to promote the dispositions that the group values.

Another virtue that Pring considered was that of trusting relationships. Trust needs to be shown by actions and by words and is developed through interpersonal and small group skills, the fourth principle of co-operative community (Johnson & Johnson, 1998). In fact, the Johnsons emphasise the importance of trusting relationships in the development of effective interpersonal and small group skills. It is also through interpersonal interaction that "the virtuous researcher will be aware of difficulties that others would not be" and that "such a researcher would bring factors into the deliberations which others would omit" (p. 124). In order for this to happen, members must be able to trust one another and know that the environment in which any debates or discussions of this nature occur will be supportive.

Pring (2002) also points to the importance of researchers nurturing a spirit of self-criticism and openness to criticism from others. It could be argued that a more positive reference than criticism would be critical reflection. A co-operative community of researchers who adopted the five principles of co-operative community successfully would provide one another with the supportive context for critical reflection to occur. The fifth principle of co-operative community, in fact, is reflection or group processing and it requires a positive context for it to be enacted successfully. Group processing is a two-stage process that embodies reflection on the extent to which the group is achieving its goals and how well the team is working together.

Engaging with stakeholders and gatekeepers in Australian Traveller education research
In the first section of this paper, we asserted that Scott and Usher's (1999) three possible models of 'researcher' and 'researched' rights and responsibilities have limited value in addressing the risks and dilemmas arising from contemporary educational research, and that indeed the models create risks and dilemmas of their own. In making these assertions, we highlighted our interest, in the Australian Traveller education research project, in celebrating difference in relation to occupational Travellers' lives and educational experiences. At the same time, we posited that the interests of Travellers and ourselves as researchers are not necessarily consistent or convergent, and that risks and dilemmas also arise from advocating a coincidence of such interests.

In the second section of the paper, we took up the challenge of Pring's (2002) provocative evocation of the "virtues" and vices" of educational researchers and the elements of a "virtuous research community". We linked his account with the five principles of co-operative communities (Johnson & Johnson, 1998), which we argued provide both principled and practical strategies for maximising the "virtues" of educational researchers while minimising their "vices". Underpinning that argument is a set of assumptions that we hold about 'appropriate' educational research being both politically framed and ethically grounded.

In this section of the paper, we explore some of the key implications of the points developed in the two preceding sections. In doing so, we wish to make three crucial points about the ways that we have sought to identify and engage with stakeholders and gatekeepers in the Traveller education research project.

Firstly, an important implication of our delineation of differences between the interests of researchers and those of other research participants is our conviction that researchers are as much stakeholders in research as are other participants. We do not mean by this conviction that we assume that researchers should take a pre-eminent role and/or that their interests

should be met before those of other participants are considered. On the contrary, what we mean is that recognising researchers as stakeholders increases rather than diminishes their ethical responsibility: instead of abrogating that responsibility to the assumed interests of non-researcher stakeholders, researchers need to reflect carefully and deeply on their own roles and responsibilities as stakeholders. A related assumption is that, while as a general principle researchers should be stakeholders but not gatekeepers, in "particular social contexts" (Pring, 2002, p. 125) they might indeed need to take on the role of gatekeeper, in the sense of restricting access to research participants and/or data to those (such as hostile media commentators) who in the researchers' view do not necessarily have the 'best interests' of the research participants at heart.

Secondly, Pring's (2002) challenging emphasis on the "virtues" and "vices" of researchers, and our linking of those characteristics with the principles of co-operative communities (Johnson & Johnson, 1998), suggest strongly that non-researcher stakeholders and gatekeepers in a particular project also need to behave in ethically 'appropriate' ways. For example, provided that researchers conduct themselves 'appropriately', presumably they have a right to expect that interviewees who have given their informed consent to participate will ensure that their words convey what they truly believe, as opposed to engaging in deliberate falsifications. Similarly, gatekeepers such as members of ethics review panels might be expected to do their utmost to canvass the views of the sometimes marginalised groups and individuals on whose behalf they act, rather than claiming to speak for such people while actually keeping them mute. In other words, we argue that concepts such as 'mutuality' and 'reciprocity' ought to characterise a "virtuous research community", and that such concepts have direct application to all stakeholders and gatekeepers.

Thirdly, it follows from the two previous points that stakeholders and gatekeepers alike should consider carefully claims that a particular research project will 'benefit' participants in certain ways. If researchers are accepted as stakeholders, it is appropriate that their 'interests' be encompassed within the understanding of such a project's benefits. Again we are not suggesting that the researchers' gains from a project should take priority over those of non-researcher stakeholders. What we are arguing is that it does researchers a disservice, and creates more harm than good, to construct researchers as altruistic and disinterested participants. On the contrary, accepting and holding up to critical scrutiny that researchers function within "particular social contexts" (Pring, 2002, p. 125) actually heightens rather than diminishes their ethical responsibility to ensure that their interests and the interests of other stakeholders are considered to be in positively interdependent, individually accountable, promoting of one another's success, enhanced where possible by the operation of interpersonal and small group skills and subjected to reflection or group processing – the five principles of co-operative communities (Johnson & Johnson, 1998) and, we contend, the foundations of a "virtuous research community" (Pring, 2002). Our conviction is that it is actually quite difficult to identify immediate, specific and guaranteed 'benefits' to non-researcher stakeholders arising from their participation in qualitative research projects. Yet this is – appropriately – increasingly a question being posed by gatekeepers such as ethics review panels. Our response to this question – arising from our three points in this section of the paper – is that trustworthy claims about benefits are likely to be nuanced, modest and contingent.

We have presented detailed accounts (Anteliz, Danaher, & Danaher, 2001; Moriarty & Hallinan, 2001) of how we see the Traveller education research project as hopefully achieving a range of benefits for stakeholders and hence as being more likely to meet the

approval of gatekeepers. In calling for greater communication between circuses and schools, for example, Moriarty asserted:

> It can be argued that co-operative community theory not only describes how successful circus and school communities work among themselves, but can form the basis for mutually beneficial collaboration. Far from there being a dilemma regarding the authenticity of lessons from the circus being applied to school communities and to classrooms, therefore, the potential for mutual benefit through research collaboration has only just begun to be explored. (2001, p. 210)

In relation to their research with Venezuelan and Australian fairground people, Anteliz, Danaher and Danaher contended:

> All of this means that the questions of who benefits from this research dialogue, and of the nature of the ethics underlying this dialogue, can most fairly be answered from an open acknowledgment of the limits and partiality of the encounter. The researchers benefit from a rich issue with definite outcomes. The academy benefits from being exposed to an issue that can add to as well as challenge research literature across a range of fields. The fairground communities can benefit to the extent that this greater awareness leads to changes in provision in areas such as social services, educational provision and cultural representations. (2001, p. 232)

In other words, stakeholders and gatekeepers in the Australian Traveller education research project can be identified narrowly or extremely broadly, according to the 'units of analysis' and the conceptual and methodological lenses employed. At the same time, to *be* a stakeholder and/or a gatekeeper in such a project entails particular roles and responsibilities – not least the celebration of 'difference' and the acceptance of multiple legitimate interests in the outcomes of that project. These dispositions are the kind of "virtues" that we have in mind making up Pring's (2002) potentially contentious claim that "if we are wanting virtuous researchers, then we must have virtuous research communities, communities which embody the very virtues which one requires of the members of these communities" (p. 125) – where "research communities" are understood as including non-researcher stakeholders and/or gatekeepers.

Conclusion

According to Coombes and Danaher (2001), "…we are convinced that engagements with that crucial question ["*Cui bono?*" or "Who benefits from research?"] not only can, but must, be as theoretically informed as they are empirically grounded and methodologically charged" (p. 116). We seek to have added support to that conviction in this paper. From our depiction of Scott and Usher's (1999) three models as useful but ultimately limiting and limited to our championing of the five principles of co-operative communities (Johnson & Johnson, 1998), augmented by researchers' "virtues" and "vices" and the tenets of "a virtuous research community" (Pring, 2002), we have deployed theoretical resources to guide our reflections on ethically 'appropriate' ways of engaging with stakeholders and gatekeepers in Australian Traveller education research. Those reflections have yielded a healthy scepticism about grand claims and fixed assumptions about the ethics and politics of contemporary qualitative educational research and a determination to subject conduct – our own and others' – to ongoing critical scrutiny.

More broadly, we close by predicting that research risks and dilemmas will become more and more the explicit focus of educational enquiry, and by asserting that this can only benefit and strengthen the future outcomes of such enquiry. Engaging with stakeholders and gatekeepers

is both risky and likely to involve dilemmas; so too is any set of social relationships that aspire to mutual understanding and to learning from one another. In the end, the "virtues" and "vices" of researchers and the foundations of "a virtuous research community" (Pring, 2002), and the principles of co-operative communities (Johnson & Johnson, 1998), depend not on protocols and procedures, but rather on the very human phenomena of valuing difference, exhibiting trust and being mutually respectful and concerned. We have sought to demonstrate these behaviours with the Australian occupational Travellers, and they have certainly reciprocated in full measure in their engagements with us as fellow research stakeholders and sometime gatekeepers.

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