
'Going deep' and 'giving back': strategies for exceeding ethical expectations when researching amongst vulnerable youth

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ABSTRACT This article interrogates how research amongst vulnerable populations, especially youth, may be designed and implemented to exceed the usual standards of research ethics. It describes the dual aims of ethical research within an emancipatory framework as 'going deep' through utilizing 'an ethics of parallax perspectives'; and 'giving back' by employing an 'intentional ethics of reciprocation'. It offers a package of six additional ethical strategies, which may be combined in various permutations in order to achieve these ends. These strategies include choosing appropriate research activities; deliberately building relationships with research participants; conveying researcher subjectivity; developing mutuality and flattening the power gradient; considering how language is used and representations are made; and planning 'research-as-intervention'. Drawing on a multi-layered ethnographic study of the moral understandings of a group of impoverished South African township youth, the article offers insight into how these ethical strategies address vulnerability and emancipation in practice, including the multiple ethical dilemmas they raise.

KEYWORDS: *emancipatory research, ethnography, morality, poverty, qualitative research, research ethics, vulnerable youth*

Introduction

As a novice researcher, I understood ethics in research to be a consideration of the moral, legal and professional conduct of researchers in the field and beyond (Kelly and Ali, 2004). It was easy to glean the three conventional standards or 'canons' (Cloe et al., 2000) of research ethics. Paying attention to informed *consent* for research participants, ensuring reasonable *confidentiality*, and undertaking research that aimed to *protect* (especially children) or do

no harm was frequently spoken of. Furthermore, I knew ethics to be of various types; that besides standard or 'procedural' ethics as described above, some, like Ellis (2007: 4-5) also described situational ethics (dealing with unpredictable ethical moments in research) and relational ethics - closely related to feminist ethics and the ethics of care (Christians, 2005; Noddings, 1984). I especially came to appreciate feminist approaches in which mutuality, kindness, respect and connectedness between researcher and researched (including their communities) are valued. Later on in my research training I embraced the goals of social (in)justice research (Charmaz, 2005; Fine and Weis, 2005), was unsettled by Bishop (2005) and Linda Tuhiwai Smith's (1999, 2005) respective notions of 'neocolonial domination' and 'decolonizing methodologies' when researching amongst indigenous peoples; and learnt that various research approaches favour particular ethical outcomes. For example, action research (Boog, 2003) is concerned with self determination and skill development, and postcolonial research (Tuhiwai Smith, 2005) is concerned with representation and reciprocity.

Puzzling questions still remained as my work turned to ethnography among vulnerable youth living in the impoverished streets and shacklands of South Africa's townships. When I embarked on my field work to investigate how 'black'¹ youth living in Cape Town's townships interpreted and enacted the notion of right and wrong, I struggled to find a package of satisfying ethical strategies from which I might draw that articulated with young people's exposed lives. I devoured the literature on working with vulnerable populations (Valentine et al., 2001), doing cross-cultural research (Christians, 2005; Coover, 2004; Kamler and Threadgold, 2003), researching amongst children (Bray and Gooskens, 2006; Morrow and Richards, 1996), 'ethnography with the poor' (Jeffrey, 2006) and how to 'counter the imbalance of benefit' (Bridges, 2002: 79) in the research enterprise. What I missed was a series of ethical strategies that encompassed the principles of 'emancipatory research' (Baker et al., 2004; Denzin, 2005; Lynch, 1999) that I had recently discovered and that I wanted to characterize my work.

In this article, I therefore draw on emancipatory research with its emphasis on empowerment, 'a participatory worldview' (Boog, 2003: 427), and according to Baker et al. (2004: 169-188), the democratization of the creation of academic knowledge through the use of multiple perspectives, and the view that the marginalized have a moral right to own and control knowledge produced about them. Integral to emancipatory approaches to research is a reliance on the ethics of human rights and equal power, and acknowledgment of the ways in which 'the academy and academic knowledge in particular are deeply implicated in the operations of power' (Baker et al., 2004: 169). With regard to this latter point, emancipatory research draws heavily on feminist arguments that link research ethics to power, and prioritizes the assessment of researcher's social positions and subjectivities so that distortion, silencing and

misrepresentation are less likely to occur (Kirsch, 1999). Such a feminist and emancipatory position not only accepts responsibility for the protection and fair representation of participants, but also attempts to engage in research that offers a 'parallax of perspectives' (Ginsburg, 1995; Sameshima, 2007). These 'different angles of vision' (Ginsburg, 1995: 65) ensure research participants (and the topic under scrutiny) are not misrepresented through shallow, monocled gazes, but instead take every opportunity to consider participants' perspectives in ways that allow a reader to change position as the subject is viewed from changing perspectives.² This is what I term the 'going deep' part of emancipatory research ethics or 'an ethics of parallax perspectives'.

The second dimension of emancipatory ethics is what I have called in this article, 'giving back'. It is the 'intentional ethics of reciprocity', in which research is both just and beneficial to participants (Kirsch, 1999; Murphy and Dingwald, 2001), and in which the researcher ensures 'that people know and understand their own oppressions more clearly so that they can work to change them' (Lynch, 1999: 51). The purpose of such an ethics of reciprocity is to give back both ownership of knowledge and material benefit to those participating in research.

Consequently, I reflect on these notions, on the ethical choices I made (some intentionally, others only recognized in hindsight) and show how these decisions played out in practice. I demonstrate how these ethical strategies address vulnerability and emancipation, including the multiple dilemmas they elicit, and how young people responded to (or indeed shaped) these strategies. This description of relationships and incidents in the field against an ethical framework offers an original contribution to knowledge, especially for novice researchers struggling to incorporate multiple ethical theories and strategies in the pressure-cooker of field research. I begin by describing the main features of the study in order to set the context for this ethical and methodological reflection.

Researching morality amongst youth in a South African township

This reflection is based on an ethnographic study of how 37 'black' youth (19 young women and 18 young men), in a South African township aged between 14 and 20, understand and represent morality or right and wrong (Swartz, 2009). Comprising largely of participant observation, interviews and interactive research activities (which will be discussed later), the study was conducted between July 2004 and June 2005, with a two month return visit a year later. Drawing on an ecological systems framework the study describes the notion of a moral ecology in which young people's moral codes, moral positionings, moral processes, and visual narratives of moral influence are considered in the light of their social, historical, and political contexts. Ultimately, the data

provides an account of the moral lives of vulnerable young people from within the context of partial-parenting, partial-schooling, pervasive poverty and inequality, and in the aftermath of the moral injustices of Apartheid. It shows how these young people exhibit conventional values in some areas (substance use, violence, crime), contested values in others (money and sex) as well as postmodern values especially regarding authority and self-authorization.

In implementing the study, I made a concerted effort to fulfil the basic ethical requirements of informed consent, confidentiality and protection. I asked young people for their, and their parents', consent as 'a gradual and emerging process' (Bray and Gooskens, 2006: 47) and only after discussion. Confidentiality was provided through the use of pseudonyms and judicious descriptions of place and context. In terms of child protection, in consultation with local authorities, I developed a protocol for dealing with disclosure of ongoing harm that included asking young people for permission to discuss it with others (Morrow and Richards, 1996: 98) while fulfilling legal reporting requirements. In addition, since interviews were conducted in my home (which I discuss later), I ensured that young people attended in pairs, and that caregivers knew beforehand that young people were coming to my home.

Besides these general ethical strategies, I employed distinct strategies to address the issues of being a 'white' researcher investigating 'black' youth, working amongst a vulnerable population, researching a topic that is by nature contested i.e. 'morality', and that made a conscious effort to 'go deep' and understand young people's lives in its complexity and ambiguity while at the same time 'give back' in some way since I would benefit professionally from publishing their deep disclosures. Over time, I came to see how each of these objectives were central to an emancipatory approach to research, and offer the following six strategies that emerged out of my field practice: choosing appropriate research activities; deliberately building relationships with research participants; conveying researcher subjectivity; developing mutuality and flattening the power gradient; considering how language is used and representations are made; and planning 'research-as-intervention'. Each strategy will be considered in turn, including how they were implemented in practice and how each contributed towards 'going deep' through using *an ethics of parallax perspectives* and how it 'gave back' using *an intentional ethics of reciprocation*.

Choosing appropriate research methods as an ethical strategy

Researching 'morality' is a difficult task and demands considerable reflection on the types of methods used, especially when working with vulnerable populations. By using multiple methods, my study showed characteristics of emancipatory research that avoids deriving erroneous conclusions from single sources of data (Baker et al., 2004; Davis, 1998). An ethnography comprised solely or mostly of participant observation is not likely to capture the depth

and perspective required of a study on moral culture, with its complex cognitive, social, and institutional components. For these reasons the research activities employed in this study extended beyond participant observation and a series of three semi-structured interviews with individuals, to include multiple stimulus activities. Inviting youth to take photographs, compile free lists, complete a rank ordering activity and questionnaire, attend an adventure camp, and draw mind maps were done in an attempt to engage young people and find a parallax of perspectives. The elements of the research question – the contexts of moral formation, the social constructions of right and wrong, the meaning of moral influences, the process of moral decision making – along with developing trust demanded multiple research activities. Table 1 tabulates the various methods employed and indicates how data were used to answer each aspect of the research question.

Decisions regarding what activities to use were not simply methodological decisions, or decisions concerning technique. Ultimately method is constitutive of the research project itself, and impinged on young people's vulnerability

TABLE 1. *The relationship between research activities and research objectives*

<i>Research objective / Research activity</i>	<i>Contexts of moral formation</i>	<i>Social constructions of right and wrong</i>	<i>Moral influences and knowledges</i>	<i>Processes of moral decision making</i>	<i>Building trust</i>
Participant observation	✓		✓	✓	✓
Free lists		✓			
Group interview	✓		✓		✓
Home visits	✓		✓		✓
Decision-making mind map				✓	
Photovoice documentaries			✓		
Adventure camp					✓
Right and wrong questionnaire		✓		✓	
Set of three individual interviews	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Circles of influence rank order			✓		

Source: Author

and emancipation, and therefore ethics. In my previous experience as a youth worker I knew that maintaining young people's interest in a year-long project requires creative strategies. Keeping young people engaged would be beneficial to my study, but it would also serve to 'give back' opportunities to be active, engaged and occupied, in a community where leisure opportunities were limited and boredom high. For these reasons, multiple methods that were also enjoyable and developmental seemed best, along with open-ended activities in order to foreground young people's voices, and to provide sufficient depth to corroborate findings. Taken as a whole, these multiple research activities were an intentional ethical research strategy in that they allowed ample opportunity to reveal 'the structural and relational conditions which generate inequality, injustice and marginalization' (Lynch, 1999: 46). However, for all the creativity and variety I employed in research activities, it was through building relationships that I was able to collect the most valuable data, and it is these relationships that comprise both a key ethical strategy and raise ethical red flags.

Building relationships as an ethical strategy

My first month in the field, based in a local township high school, was rather difficult. Most of the teaching staff greeted me politely but hardly spoke to me. Young people ignored me, giggled when they saw me, or called me *mlungu* ('white' person or 'foreigner') as I walked by. I brazened it out, and upped my planned attendance from three days a week to every day (and later weekends). I had much to learn, and if I was to encourage young people to speak to me, I would have to be intentional about building relationships across the 'racial' divide – and to do so I would need to be there every day. Daily I sat at the back of the Grade 9C class, learnt names and made copious notes to occupy my time while lessons went on, in *isiXhosa* – not a word of which I could understand. This issue of language both impeded and facilitated my research. It provided young people an opportunity to engage me at their leisure and pleasure, and to offer me help in learning *isiXhosa*, which ultimately contributed to relationship-building. During the following months, I spoke to young people informally between classes, in free periods and at lunch times about the weather, school, movies, music, and sport. Many teased me, telling me wild fanciful stories, and then burst out laughing when they saw I was taking them seriously. I joined in. I was happy to be a source of entertainment, since I could see it was deepening rapport. As they negotiated our relationship, from stranger, to teacher, to mother, older sister and friend they asked whether it was okay to use expletives, began calling me by my name and sometimes 'My F' ('my friend') or *mpintshi* (colloquial for friend). After three months, the giggling had subsided, and a few young people who had become key informants asked if we could do things together after school and over weekends.

These outings, conducted on condition they obtained permission from parents, became key to deepening relationships. Driving along the Table Mountain cableway road, walking along the beachfront, sitting on street corners and playing pool in tin-roofed *spots*, the conversation flowed freely. One afternoon, during a chat about sex, young people said they never had the opportunity to talk to adults about 'these things'. I asked 'Don't I count – aren't I an adult?' to which the reply was 'Yes, but you understand young people's things' and explained that it helped that I was not Xhosa since it was a sign of disrespect in Xhosa culture to talk about 'such matters' with or in the presence of elders. These outings typically culminated in me dropping them off at home, and being invited inside to meet their (usually) mothers. Visiting young people in their homes and meeting mothers, siblings, and grandparents came to be an important component of my research, resulting in increased trust between caregivers and myself, as well as providing greater insight into young people's personal biographies. I was definitely outside my comfort zone though. Shacks were off main roads, and roads were treacherous, potholed, and glass-strewn. Many times my fourteen year-old Toyota broke down or got stuck and I had to rely on the generosity of young people and their family members and neighbours to get it going again. It was this vulnerability, openness, and willingness to risk the 'dangers of the township' (as many teachers called it) that allowed me deeper access into young people's lives.

During the second month I began to tell young people more and more about my research and asked whether they'd be interested in participating in the study and going on an adventure camp (see Ramphele, 2002, for a discussion regarding adventure camps in research) to begin our discussions in earnest. Young people were eager to participate and the resulting camps were an outstanding success. It fast-tracked our relationship, while providing young people with opportunities to rock climb and abseil, hike, whale-watch, swim, eat well, and escape township life for four days. Over the course of the year I was invited to watch young people play sport, sing in talent shows, parade in beauty contests, and deejay at community radio stations. They began asking me about my life: about my parents, whether I had 'a boyfriend', what I did to cope with 'the boredom of living in a quiet suburb', and listened to my CDs (loving some and hating others). They asked to visit my home since I had visited theirs and commented on the fact that I lived alone in a two-bedroomed apartment with a large garden. They told me, while they did not think I was rich, I was not 'suffering'. When I asked why they thought I was not rich, 19-year-old Luxolo replied saying: 'If you were rich like some people, maybe you wouldn't be spending time with us. You'd be like going out having fun, doing – having fun with your friends or something'. This comment raised an ethical red flag. Building relationships served the purposes of my research well – but it remained a research study, a fact young people frequently forgot in their eagerness to show and tell me about their lives. In this regard, the methods

used made it easy for young people to forget this and presented me with the ongoing responsibility to remind them not to say more than they might otherwise have chosen to tell, for example, about illegal or criminal activities in which many were involved.

These relationships also helped stories to emerge that were merely difficult to tell, and that young people were keen to tell. Informal conversations were frequently revisited during subsequent interviews as young people gathered courage to provide more details or confessed to untruths they had initially told. Luxolo reflected that knowing me for a lengthy period of time helped her to talk about the complexities of her life: from her struggles as a gay youth, to her time of living on the streets, her abandonment by her father and finally her mother's AIDS illness (and later death) – and how all these factors influenced her moral life, including involvement in a spate of housebreaking and problems with alcohol and drugs. Talking of these things 'needed time' she explained. Young people needed time to consider whether they could trust me, whether they in fact wanted to tell me some things about their lives. Then they had to find both the words and the courage to do so. Building these trusting relationships was only possible over an extended period of time and so my study benefited materially from taking time to immerse myself in young people's lives. Uncovering the complexity of their moral worlds could have been done in no other way.

Conducting interviews at my home raised a further red flag or ethical dilemma. I used my home for practical reasons (privacy and a noise-free environment) and at the request of young people themselves. It did, however, change the dynamic of the research, and intensified the relational intimacy of the study. One way I chose to counter this imbalance was to disclose parts of my own life to research participants, to convey – rather than only reflect upon – my own subjectivities as a researcher.

Conveying researcher subjectivity as an ethical strategy

In qualitative research in general and in ethnographic research in particular, the researcher is the primary instrument (Hammersley, 2000; Lincoln and Guba, 1985). It is therefore an important task of researchers to locate themselves within the research and to explicitly reflect on how personal subjectivities affect (even transform) research and research relationships (Delamont, 1992). I was, at the time, a thirty-something, religiously-committed, English-speaking, 'white' South African woman and youth worker who has been academically trained in two elite international institutions – Harvard and Cambridge. Each of these biographical descriptors impacted upon my research. My age resulted in young people coming to view me as a mixture between mother and friend (Andile and others began calling me *mommy-buddy*). My 'race' – being a 'white' South African – made me a former 'oppressor', a

beneficiary of injustice and a player in historical discrimination and current inequalities. In spite of South Africa's new democracy this relationship was to prove complex. Young people perceived me as someone who had money and who could withhold or dispense it based on, in their opinion, how they treated me and through what they told me – in spite of my efforts to limit the use of money in the study.

My religious faith, although not overtly on display for youth to see, added a pastoral dimension to this research as young people came to see me as a counsellor and confidante. While my faith provided strong motivation for critical and politically-alive research,³ it also caused problems as some of my own values surfaced in this study of young people's moral values. I had to be careful to distinguish between my own values and those young people revealed. Throughout the study I made deliberate attempts to limit evidence of approval or disapproval of young people's opinions and behaviour (except on occasion where I considered silence to be unethical if young people were endangering their own or other's lives). No matter what young people told me I adopted a poker face. I interrogated their answers whether it agreed with my own value system or not. Whatever they told me about abstinence, going to church, sex outside of marriage, multiple partners, hitting children, or substance use, I asked why they thought so, why they practiced these behaviours, and how *they* decided it was right or wrong. As our relationship developed through the year, our conversations turned from the issue at hand (morality), to what we thought about each other's views on moral issues. On reflection, I believe that expressing my values encouraged, rather than limited young people's frankness with me. To be sure, there were some topics they avoided, or about which they offered placatory comments (for example, about 'race' and Apartheid), and others about which they were embarrassed (sex especially). However, over the course of the year, as our relationship deepened, we spoke of these difficult issues too.

In turning the reflexive lens on my field work I have been forced to understand my 'own enterprise' (Emerson et al., 1995: 216) and ask profound questions about what it means to be a 'white' South African living in the midst of inequalities; what place restitution ought to have in South Africa's future (Swartz, 2007); and how I might best invest my privileged academic experience into the South African context. This reflexive gaze is now commonly known as 'autoethnography' (see Anderson, 2006; Atkinson, 2006; Ellis and Bochner, 2006) in which the researcher becomes the subject within the research. My field notes abound with formative autoethnographic reflections:

I have been surprised at my emotional response to this research ... The poverty, poor standards of education, joblessness and fear with which these youth contend have been [heartbreaking] ... Daily youth ask me for money for lunch, shoes, transport ... I am overwhelmed by all that I am experiencing, tears are seldom far off. (Field notes, Sunday 19 September 2004)

This research experience is changing my life, my critical abilities, and challenging my views on poverty, injustice, and 'goodness'. It has given a human face to poverty and injustice... each story different, each experience and aspiration unique. In spite of their behaviour these youth remain good people – their behaviour toward me has been caring, protective, and honest ... It's been an emotional tour de force. (Field notes, Friday 31 December 2004)

These young people's lives are complex and tough ... I'm amazed at what they tell me. Sometimes I feel like a confessor. I am absolutely astounded that these young people are so open with me – of course I ask them to 'be free' but I really didn't expect so much freedom ... Sometimes it's a bit too much. I vacillate between wanting to rescue them and wanting to have them locked up. (Field notes, Tuesday 22 February 2005)

Reflecting on one's own subjectivities as a researcher is good research practice. However, by allowing my key informants to read these reflections (once they had been anonymized) upon my return to the field, and to comment on them, transformed this practice into an ethical strategy. Young people were energized and engaged by the process and spoke of how I 'trusted' them. My aim was to democratize the knowledge produced – a key aim of emancipatory research – since it allows those who are vulnerable to rest back some of the power inherent in the research enterprise (Lynch, 1999). Closely related to conveying researcher subjectivity as an ethical strategy are efforts to develop mutuality or an intentional ethics of reciprocity in research. Both contribute toward flattening the power gradient.

Developing mutuality and flattening the power gradient as an ethical strategy

Tuhiwai Smith (1999: 120) describes the features that ought to characterize a researcher working in an indigenous or cross-cultural context as respect for people, being present amongst the people, being slow to speak and eager to learn, not flaunting your knowledge, not trampling on people's dignity in the course of your research, being cautious, and being generous. She draws attention to the fact that there is an inherent power differential between researcher and researched, especially in cross-cultural contexts, and that special care needs to be taken to ameliorate its effects:

Researchers are in receipt of privileged information ... They have the power to distort, to make invisible, to overlook, to exaggerate and to draw conclusions, based not on factual data, but on assumptions, hidden value judgements, and often downright misunderstandings. They have the potential to extend knowledge or to perpetuate ignorance. (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999: 176)

Bridges (2002: 80) notes that researchers, especially outsiders, ought to think of themselves as the 'receiver of a gift' while Davis (1998: 329) describes 'employing tools which offer ... [young people] the maximum opportunity to

put forward their views' as amongst the key strategies that researchers can use to flatten the power gradient between researcher and young person.

On Tuesday 20 September 2004, I recorded in my field notes my surprise 'at the short amount of time it has taken to befriend young people and to be accepted into their lives ... which while positive for my research, seems to indicate some dysfunctionality in itself'. I was afraid that their openness was perhaps because of a lack of understanding on their part, or even worse, due to their keenness for material benefit (outings, lunches, and use of digital cameras). We repeatedly spoke about my need for them to be 'open' with me, as well as the need for me to protect their identity so that they would not get into trouble with parents, the law, or friends and romantic partners by disclosing incidents that were potentially dangerous. I also ensured young people had provided insufficient details if I was asked to testify in a court of law. As the research progressed many young people asked increasingly penetrating questions about my research including whether it would make me 'famous', 'rich', or get me a 'good job' or what it would do for them. I answered as truthfully as I was able and tried to explain my hopes for the ways in which this study may influence school practice, policy, community programmes and generally prick the conscience of privileged 'white' people. Many asked why I was only working with 'black' youth. I explained that young 'black' South Africans are often overlooked in ethnographic academic research because of the perceived difficulties of access, fears for safety, and the prevalence of existing stereotypes.

I was grateful for the level of freedom young people expressed in their discussions with me, and noted their repetitive use of the terms 'open' and 'free' in describing my rapport with them, as indicated by 19-year-old Tapelo when he said, 'You are open to me and so that is why it makes me free to talk with you'. I searched to remember what had made them think I was open. Young people accompanied me on errands on the way home, met my friends, and sometimes just came to hang out at my flat. Andiswa, a 15-year-old young woman, told me it was because I shared 'my life' with them. In my field notes of Tuesday 3 May 2005 I recorded a conversation about this unusual openness that characterized our relationship:

It was Andiswa's birthday today ... and so she, Luxolo and Andile and I sat around and chatted a bit at my house. Andile asked me 'Why do we tell you everything, Sharlene?' and I said that only he could tell me. He said he's been asking that question since he met me but hasn't come up with an answer. Andiswa said maybe it was because I told them things about my life too – so that she felt safe telling me about her life ... Luxolo said ... she did wonder what I thought about her drinking so much ... but said she didn't dwell on it for long because it didn't seem to matter, because she already knew me so well, and it was obvious that we were friends and would be for a long time to come.

I was experiencing Berger's (2001: 507) observation first hand: 'When researchers are open about their own personal stories, participants feel more comfortable sharing information, and the hierarchical gap between researchers

and respondents formerly embraced in ethnographic work is closed'. Similarly, Christians' (2005: 155–6 emphasis added) argues that 'in the communitarian alternative, *power is relational, characterized by mutuality*'. A year later when I returned to the field and Andiswa was answering a similar question concerning 'openness' in front of a symposium audience, she said that it was because I was like a 'plant' or a 'dog' and explained:

Andiswa: A plant just sits there, as does a dog. You can pour your heart out to it and it does not betray your secrets or judge you. It just listens. It was good to have someone to listen to us for a change, so that's why we told her *everything* [said with emphasis].

So while I readily accepted my role as a listener in these young people's lives, the red flag surfaced again. I had a nagging suspicion that I might be crossing privacy boundaries. I reminded young people that they ought also to be free *not* to talk to me about some aspects of their lives. They responded occasionally by telling me they did not want to continue the conversation. Lekho (age 17) didn't want to talk about her absent father; Thimna (age 19) and Thulani (age 16) both said they no longer wanted to talk about sex; Ingwazi (age 19) and Katlego (age 15) told me they had had enough talking about witches; and Nomonde (age 19) told me to stop pestering her about why she had fallen pregnant. So in spite of the close relationships we had built young people did feel free to *not* answer all my questions.

This mutuality is illustrated in three further incidents. Petty theft is common in township life, yet none of my belongings went missing in young people's company. Nomonde explained that they had spoken about stealing from me but decided that they would not 'because you do everything for us'. Luxolo expanded and told me that when Ingwazi got 'stabbed in the head' and I had gone to see him, 'It changed everything [for us]; we saw that you cared about us'. I don't think I was artificially friendly though. When young people failed to keep appointments, I complained. When disclosures were particularly disturbing I told young people how I felt. One afternoon during an interview 17-year-old Sipho told me that he 'smacked lots of girls... beat her up yah like – [with a] bottle, rock and yah, anything'. Afterwards as I was driving him home, I told him his story made me feel really sad. We drove home the rest of the way in silence. I believe these non-indulgent responses contributed to a mutual relationship, made us more equal and human to each other, built up mutual respect, and whittled away at the inherent power differential between us.

Few if any research projects speak of the financial cost of research, and I do so here for the sake of ethical transparency for others who might pursue research amongst vulnerable youth in the future, as well as to further illustrate the intentional ethics of reciprocity. Table 2 provides a basic budget of research expenses whilst in the field for a year. Many of the expenses (like modest lunches, a farewell party, and money spent on outings and camps) were

TABLE 2. *Research expenses incurred during field work*

	GBP	ZAR
<i>Research expenditure (July 2004 to June 2005)</i>		
Fuel	£600	R8,400
Interview lunches	£278	R3,892
Activities and outings	£108	R1,512
Three adventure camps	£500	R7,000
Workshop lunch	£17	R238
Farewell party	£33	R462
Batteries for cameras and recorder	£83	R1,162
Paper and printing	£25	R350
Disposable cameras	£23	R322
Digital cameras	£333	R4,662
School fees for three students	£44	R750
Gifts for key informants	£4	R60
Payment for youth translations	£3	R40
Total	£2,051	R28,850
<i>Cost per person</i>	<i>£55</i>	<i>R779</i>

Source: Author

done in the pursuit of power-flattening mutuality. I reflected often on how spending money on research participants differed from paying people for their participation which adds a sometimes problematic dimension to research (Russell et al., 2000). I was careful to ensure that young people had no expectation regarding activities or rewards. I tried to be generous rather than a paymaster. I discreetly paid three students' school fees because of their particularly dire family circumstances, an action that may not have been appropriate if the research topic was different, say, for example, exploring 'alternative learning pathways in South African townships'.⁴ These research expenses are modest and align with Tuhwai Smith's (1999: 10) challenge to those working cross-culturally to be generous, to treat people with dignity, and where possible to 'fix generators', a euphemism for contributing skills and resources to the community in which one works. From the perspective of reciprocity or mutuality I am sure that I have and will continue to benefit more from this study than young people have done. Over lunch a year later, Andiswa poignantly asked me whether they would still be seeing me when the study was completed, 'or will you have new friends?' cupping two fingers on each hand around the word 'friends'.⁵

Despite my best efforts to flatten the asymmetry of power that naturally existed, it emerged repeatedly especially regarding discussions of 'race' and Apartheid. One afternoon after a trip to Robben Island, Andile told me that he had not told me his views on Apartheid and 'race' because Xolile (age 20), another research participant, had told them not to talk about Apartheid in front of me because 'we mustn't offend you because you were being so nice to us and we didn't want it to stop' (Field notes, 25 January 2005). Andile and

Xolile's appreciation of the dynamic at work between me as researcher and them as research subjects, I am certain, played out in many ways during the course of this research.

Considering language and representation as an ethical strategy

As in the case with mutuality, the way in which young people are represented in research is also related to power. Representing the lives of vulnerable youth, whose lives are somewhat spectacular, and providing a written account of their voices in English, when most speak indigenous languages, is fraught with difficulty and extra care needs to be taken in order to achieve an ethics of parallax perspectives. As Butz and Besio (2004: 354) argue, the problem of representation, language and power is interconnected since 'our job is to represent our research subjects and that representing something inevitably establishes or enacts a power relationship'. Very early on in my research I began to understand the importance of representation and having young people speak *in their own voices and on their own terms* if my aims of a youth discourse of morality were to be realized. In keeping with an emancipatory framework, I desired a youth discourse, as far as possible unmediated by using 'the voice of the participant to give expression to the things which the researcher wants to say' or the 'ventriloquy' (Bridges, 2002: 82) of an adult, academic discourse – one that dominates the literature. I was haunted by bell hooks' often quoted indictment of colonizing discourses:

No need to hear your voice when I can talk about you better than you can speak about yourself ... only tell me about your pain. I want to hear your story. And then I will tell it back to you in a new way ... I am still author, authority. I am still the colonizer. (cited in Fine, 1994: 70)

The photovoice activity in which young people took photographs of the moral influences in their lives and then edited them, choosing which to present and which to delete, was one way in which I attempted to hand power back to young people. According to Butz and Besio (2004: 358) photovoice supports 'research participants' projects of self-representation' and the research subject becomes more than mere informant, they become a 'transcultural knower' (Butz and Besio, 2004: 355). To speak consciously of allowing young people to be 'transcultural knowers' is to breach the usual hegemonies of knowing.

Crossing language boundaries and barriers in research provided a further challenge. Although after a few months in the field I was able to speak basic *isiXhosa*, my language ability was not good enough for interviews. My exchange with 16-year-old Phindiwe about how she found the study represents young people's evaluation of how language had affected our conversation:

Phindiwe: No, no, no, it's not been difficult – but English – [shakes her head]
Sharlene: Would you have said a lot more to me if I could speak *isiXhosa* better?
Phindiwe: I have said a lot to you now.

Lekho picks up the theme of the difficulty of language, when she says: 'Everybody likes you. Yoh! But they hate the interviews most. Because you have to talk. Talking in English – [shakes her head]'. Young people's already colourful stories were made novel and amusing by their expression as second- or third-language English speakers. It would have been easy to represent these young people in ways which either 'orientalize' (Saïd, 1979) them or exploit the emotions of readers through the injudicious use of quotations and hence representation. Nobel laureate, J.M. Coetzee points out the dangers inherent in 'white writing' – 'white' people writing about 'black' lives. His criticisms extend to respected author Alan Paton. In a particular book, Paton has one of his characters translate a passage ostensibly from Zulu to English and does so with an 'artificial literalism [that] ... conveys ... a certain naiveté, even childishness, which reflects on the quality of mind of its speaker and of Zulu speakers in general' (Coetzee, 1988: 127–8). Alexander McCall Smith (2002 and later) is a further example of 'white writing' in his renowned fiction series *The No. 1 Ladies Detective Agency*. The way in which he represents Batswana speech in his novels, while amusing, serves to infantilize his characters and conveys the childishness, naivety and ignorance to which Coetzee refers.

In cross-cultural research, to use verbatim quotations from research participants, most of whom struggle with English, is to unfairly recreate the impression that these young people are childish, unsophisticated, and even unintelligent. For this reason, although I transcribed interviews verbatim, I chose to correct the frequently misused personal pronoun (he and she) and to elide long stammering associated with struggling to find the correct English word. I left the hesitations and struggles in the text when these reflect emotional rather than grammatical struggles. Differentiating between these two was surprisingly easy to discern in the context of conversation, although other decisions regarding interpretation were less clear and highlights the intractability of representation in research. These decisions were consciously taken in an attempt to represent young people fairly, given their investment in the study and both their and my language difficulties. Of course it may have been easier to first become fluent in *isiXhosa* prior to embarking on the research. However, translation too is fraught with representational challenges, and acknowledging my inadequacies as a researcher with respect to language ultimately provided a means of equalizing power. Young people were seldom intimidated by a *mlungu* who was dependent on their generosity to teach her *isiXhosa* or remained deaf and mute in their presence when they decided not to translate.

Allowing research participants to read through my field notes and to read their own transcripts served as a further way of allowing young people to control representations and diminish the power differential. Often they would debate with me what they read; how I represented them in my field notes or research report. This 'member-check' strategy (Lincoln and Guba, 1985), common in qualitative research practice, quickly became an ethical strategy in

an effort to fairly represent respondents. Christians (2005: 126) calls this 'restorying ... [a] co-joint construction of ... meaning', one that seeks to interpret rather than dominate. Of course, member-checking can be somewhat problematic since the age and educational levels of research participants usually result in the investigator's opinion dominating. To counter this criticism, it is useful to see member-checking as collaborative in which the aim is to ensure research participants' 'realities correspond with the interpretation brought forth by the researcher' (Cho and Trent, 2006: 321) rather than a technical negotiating of meaning. In any event attempts 'to honour participants' narrations while reading beyond them is no easy ethical task' (Talburtt, 2004: 89). Despite problems associated with member-checking, in this study its presence as a contribution to an ethics of parallax perspectives was essential.

Planning 'research-as-intervention' as an ethical strategy

The final ethical strategy that emerged from my study of youth morality concerns the extent to which vulnerable research participants ought to benefit from their participation in a research study. Besides the material rewards of participation I have already described, the ethical demands regarding research-as-intervention are contested. While many, like Tuihawai Smith (1999), suggest that research ought to give something back to research participants, others like Roger Jeffrey do not subscribe to this view. Instead Jeffrey argues that 'regarding only a combination of activism and research' as acceptable may be 'patronizing' and that 'the poor are entitled to be treated as people who can give their opinions, or explain their lives to other people without requiring always to be given something tangible as a reward' (2006: 101). His view of 'tangible reward' is frequently interpreted as material payment. However, understanding research as psychosocial intervention is one way in which 'giving back' can be non-patronizing while addressing 'the local ethics of immediate need' (Nama and Swartz, 2002: 295). The nature of emancipatory research seeks to ask participants what they want from the research process and from researchers rather than assume what they need. In this way, an intervention may be non-patronizing since it is negotiated among equals (as far as possible).

On reflection, this study offered research participants multiple forms of intervention. On one hand there were direct interventions in the form of overt advice-giving and specific referrals for help. I regularly encouraged young people (not oblivious to their circumstances) to reduce high risk behaviour especially regarding AIDS⁶, excessive alcohol use and housebreaking. There were also times I engaged in a form of 'whistle-blowing' (McNamee, 2002) – speaking to the school principal about abuses occurring in school (such as male staff supplying students with marijuana and soliciting sex from female students), which school staff were in a position to prevent. On the other hand, many

examples of intervention, and that young people perceived as valuable, were less formal. Although not explicitly planned, *listening* to young people became a primary intervention. It was in the process of being listened to by an interested adult, and being asked endless questions (in enjoyable environments), that young people spoke of experiencing the most benefit. This *talk-as-intervention* occurred over the course of three interviews, and in the many informal conversations that occurred while walking, swimming and sitting together. This sustained interest in their lives – the intentional building of relationships – was also experienced by youth as intervention.

At the conclusion of final interviews, I asked young people to reflect on their research experience. While it came as no surprise that they had enjoyed being involved, what was surprising were the ways many described what they had *learnt* and *felt* through their participation. So, for example, Katlego says 'it's been challenging ... talking about things that I don't talk about, even at home ... I know if I told them at home, they would flip'. Thando (age 19) said he felt 'light' after the interviews because 'it's the first time I've told someone my secrets' and Mandisa (age 18) that 'it's helped me ... if you have something and then you keep it, it's going to eat you like – it's nice to share it with other people'. This theme of participation being cathartic is perhaps peculiar amongst vulnerable youth and serves as a reminder of the dearth of mental health services available in resource-poor communities, as well as the absence of sympathetic adults in young people's lives. Furthermore, what young people claimed to have learnt was also interesting. Andiswa told me 'I was talking but at the same time I was thinking' while Thulani (age 16) claimed his participation helped him to 'know who I am – what I must do – when I grow up'. Mhoza (age 17) said 'it has opened our minds – to think about our life' and Thandi (age 16), 'You asked me things that I've never thought [about] ... you asked me important things you know?' These responses to the study concerned me (yet another red flag). I had not planned the study as an intervention; but had merely sought to ask questions. However, clearly in the asking of questions, young people – like students of Socrates in Ancient Greece – had constructed their own learning curriculum.

Along similar lines, teachers often came to tell me of the academic improvement they had noticed in the lives of some of my key informants. Xolile was doing assignments, Luxolo was attending school more consistently, and Andile seemed to be growing in confidence. Countless mothers would thank me for spending time with their children, telling me they appreciated my role in their child's life. A few young people who were not part of the research group came to me and asked to be included because others had told them it was good to talk to me even about 'the hard and personal things'. Others, like Thandi and Mhoza, alluded to the fact that I had introduced a critical consciousness into their lives. Many relayed that I was the first 'white' person with whom they had ever interacted ('I haven't lived with white people or talked to them'). This latter revelation, of having helped

them to see more clearly the issues of 'racial' difference (equal on one hand, but vastly differently-resourced on the other) raises issues of further ethical responsibility, a topic for a separate discussion.

On multiple levels this study contained elements of intervention. From the direct intervention of advice giving and referring, to reporting maltreatment and abuse, to allowing young people to talk and be listened to, and to offering young people opportunities to learn how to use digital cameras and participate in developmental activities (such as adventure camping). While it was never designed to be 'research-as-intervention', offering vulnerable youth opportunities for their own development in the course of a research study seems to be a reasonable 'giving back' within an emancipatory framework, and serves to demonstrate an intentional ethics of reciprocation.

Conclusion

In this reflection of an extended qualitative study of young people's moral lives in a Cape Town township, I have described six ethical strategies that may contribute to exceeding the ethical expectations of consent, confidentiality and child protection. I offer these strategies to deal with the unease I have felt in working cross-culturally, amongst young people made vulnerable by poverty, and because of a strong political grounding in emancipatory research – research that goes deep rather than 'ventriloquises' marginalized voices; gives back rather than exploits; and offers an opportunity for the usually powerless to *change* rather than merely *describe* their contexts.

Somewhat in opposition to Denzin's (2009: 148) argument that 'guidelines' and 'checklists' have no role in qualitative research, I offer these strategies with the view that they should be considered in appropriate measure with due regard to the nature of the research question. When Denzin qualifies his argument by saying 'we must resist the pressures for a *single* gold standard' (Denzin, 2009: 152 *emphasis added*), I am in strong agreement. The strategies I have described in this article are not 'single gold standards' but they are guidelines. Their usefulness lies in their ability to provide novice researchers with goat paths over rocky mountains and hiking pathways through muddy rivers, to show how broad ethical principles may be harnessed together into a coherent strategy and also how they are enacted during the course of a study. Qualitative research, especially ethnographic research, is too fluid to attempt to provide concrete tracks for those who follow. Nevertheless, a series of ethical questions may help researchers, especially those committed to emancipatory research projects, to navigate the many possible pathways available to them. In doing so, these researchers may not only avoid harm, but succeed in some measure to generate research that goes deep, produces knowledge in a democratic way utilizing an ethics of parallax perspectives, and gives back through employing an intentional ethics of reciprocation.

Stating the strategies I have described in this article as a series of questions that could be asked when researching amongst vulnerable groups might look as follows: (1) How have the chosen research activities allowed participant's voices to be heard polyphonically, in multiple ways? (2) In what way has this research been emancipatory and relational rather than dominating and oppressive? (3) Is there enough evidence of transparency and self-reflection to allow the reader to understand the politics of my involvement in this study? (4) In which ways have I succeeded or failed to develop mutuality, respect and trust in order to diminish inherent power differences? (5) How have my decisions surrounding language and representation contributed to or prevented a 'colonizing discourse'? (6) Where do I stand on 'research-as-intervention' amongst vulnerable groups, and what choices have I made to follow these commitments in this study?

Of course, in answering these questions it becomes clear that ethical strategies overlap, build upon each other and frequently raise as many dilemmas as they address. However, these questions also allow researchers to make their choices explicit, and to draw upon and combine strategies in intentional ways in order to meet research objectives and political intentions. It is my hope that this reflection will, in general, enlarge the discussion regarding the ways in which qualitative research addresses issues of vulnerability and emancipation, and specifically, assist researchers avoid the pitfalls and enjoy the benefits of 'going deep' and 'giving back'.

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NOTES

1. I place all 'racial' terms in quotation marks to signal the fact that 'racial' classifications are artificial categories, yet necessary for descriptive purposes in the context of South Africa's history.
2. The Collins English Dictionary (1986) defines 'parallax' as 'an apparent change in the position of an object resulting from a change in position of the observer'.
3. My faith formation was nurtured by a youth organization that taught me to reflect and act on issues of social justice based on the teachings of equality, dignity, and respect. Lincoln and Guba (2005: 169) write about the role of spirituality in human inquiry and conclude that the two are not incommensurate since both concern themselves with 'liberation from oppression and freeing of the human spirit, both profoundly spiritual concerns'.
4. With acknowledgment to an anonymous reviewer for this example.

5. I have kept in touch with about a third of these young people, some more frequently than others. Luxolo spent some time formally employed as my research assistant; I found a sponsor for Lekho to enable her to complete tertiary studies; Andile frequently helps me with research in a paid capacity; and I have helped others find both jobs and mentors.
6. Nama and Swartz (2002) describe a number of occasions in which it becomes ethically necessary to intervene in the lives of people living in conditions of poverty. Potential infection with HIV is one such occasion.

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