DIGITAL ETHNOGRAPHY AND YOUTH CULTURE: METHODOLOGICAL TECHNIQUES AND ETHICAL DILEMMAS

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ABSTRACT

Conducting research with children and youth has become increasingly challenging in recent years. At times these difficulties come in the form of restrictions by Institutional Review Boards, funding agencies, and parents. Additionally, changes in youth culture and behavior, specifically regarding online activities and digitally mediated communications, impact the access that researchers have to children and youth communities in significant ways. In this chapter, I propose that the use of an emerging methodological technique, digital ethnography, may provide researchers with new data sources on children and youth culture. Digital ethnography combines ethnographic techniques of observation, participation, and interview with content analysis to collect rich data about online behavior, norms, expectations, and interactions. This technique not only provides researchers with sources of data that allow insight into youth culture by acknowledging the increasing importance of online and digital

interactions in youth culture but may also address some of the concerns raised by IRBs and other interested parties about conducting research with children and teens. This chapter provides practical and ethical considerations of this method, as well as a discussion of limitations of data collection and access as it highlights new ways of studying youth culture, using emerging data collection techniques in innovative research projects.

INTRODUCTION

Seeking to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the social world and the experiences of those who inhabit that world is central to sociologists' goals. Many of us want to give voice to the silenced and to promote equality and social justice. My goal is, in part, to act as a conduit to provide the marginalized with a venue to share knowledge and wisdom with the world. However, even for those who seek to be conduits of wisdom, we must always negotiate politics of power in relation to our participants. Thus, all researchers have to navigate complex ethical and methodological waters in order to seek and share knowledge. While this is the case with all research, it is especially important when conducting research with children and youth. Therefore, it is immensely important that the worlds of children, their voices, and their wisdom be shared.

In order to better understand contemporary childhood, it is essential to understand the role that technology plays in everyday lives (Taylor, 2006; Thomas, 2007). This area, while focusing on new technologies, is still rooted in existing theoretical works on human interaction, such as the work of Erving Goffman, Herbert Blumer, Marshall McLuhan, and Quentin Fiore. Technology scholar Pinch (2010) notes that by utilizing Goffman's framework of the study of everyday life, it is possible to better understand the links between materiality and performance in social interaction. He explains "the staging of the interaction, the mediation of the interaction, and its performance depend crucially on the detailed material and technological arrangements in place" (Pinch, 2010, p. 414). The relationship between performance of identity and social interactions, which Goffman identifies as materially dependent, also shapes more abstract ideas about the self and its relationship with the social world.

This notion is also articulated by Blumer (1969), who argues that people respond to each other's actions based on the meanings that each individual assigns to their own actions and the actions of others. These meanings are developed, generated, nuanced, and reinforced through social interactions in everyday life. Technologies of communication are spaces where meaning is shared and interactions performed (McLuhan & Fiore, 1967). McLuhan and Fiore (1967) state that the means of transmission transforms and reshapes messages received. The messages that shape our interactions and our performances of self are, in turn, fundamentally shaped by the *means* by which they are transmitted. Thus, a contemporary youth culture, embedded in technological infrastructures of modern communication, has unique characteristics that can best be understood by technologically informed methodological techniques. One such technique, digital ethnography, allows researchers to better understand the digital world of young people and addresses similar ethical and logistical challenges faced by offline researchers, while also creating new logistical and ethical challenges of its own.

Conducting qualitative research with children and adolescents may result in ethical questions that are both similar to, and distinct from, those that can arise when working with adult populations. Certainly, issues of consent, confidentiality, risk and benefits assessment, and respect for persons − such as those outlined in the Belmont Report (1979) and used as a starting point for research ethics by many scholars − apply to young people, as well as adults. However, differences exist that arise from the imbalance of power between youth and adults. This power imbalance manifests itself with children and adolescents in different ways, but it is present in interactions between both of these groups and adult actors. The inherent power imbalance between researcher and participant is complicated by the cultural norms that shape interactions between adults and youth. Therefore, additional power dynamics must be considered; for example, the role of parents and teachers as gatekeepers, overseers, and expectant data consumers can have significant impacts on both the data collected and the experiences of and risks weighed by participants.

As a scholar of youth culture and technology, I have come across many of the same challenges that other researchers who study children, adolescents, and young adults face. My interest and research in the use of communication technology, and the need to use emerging methodological techniques (specifically digital ethnography) have resulted in a web of ethical and practical challenges that includes finding innovative solutions to existing ethical and methodological problems. This chapter will begin by

introducing digital ethnography, an emerging methodological technique for qualitative scholars, and provide some examples of how it may be used in conducting research with children and youth. Next, I outline some of the challenges faced by researchers of children and youth, and then consider the role that digital ethnography can play in meeting some of those challenges. I conclude by discussing how digital ethnography brings about new challenges of its own.

CONDUCTING DIGITAL ETHNOGRAPHY
WITH YOUTH

Sociologists who study childhood, adolescence, and youth culture have long struggled with ethical dilemmas and practical limitations regarding their work with children and youth. One such challenge is best illustrated with the words of Bogdan and Taylor (1975) in their charge to conduct research by "going to the people" (p. 3). Going to the people has always been difficult for those scholars who seek to study youth. Young people generally live their lives behind a wall of bureaucratic inaccessibility, governed by a cultural norm of paternalism. They exist within a web of power imbalances and cultural practices that push the boundaries of adult understanding (in the case of young children) and validate intrusive controls the limit the possibility of trust (in the case of teens). This difficulty is rendered even more challenging by the rise of technology. Contemporary young people grow up in a world of technological integration, where Internet culture and text messaging fundamentally shape personal communication. Researchers seeking to understand the worlds of young people today must understand their online lives, as well as their offline experiences. While teens are perhaps most deeply integrated into techno-communication, increasingly younger children view techno-mediated communication, Internet communities, and digital spaces as a normal and necessary part of their daily lives.

Teens and young adults participate in social interaction using technologically mediated devices (such as social media sites and text messaging) at high rates. According to research conducted by the Pew Internet and American Life Project, about 95% of US teens 12−17 go online regularly, about 80% have a cell phone, and about 81% are on social media sites (Madden et al., 2013; Madden, Lenhart, Duggan, Cortesi, & Gasser, 2013). Rates are lower for children under the age of 12, though about 75% of

children use the Internet regularly, and by age 10 average over 45 minutes of time online every day (Gutnick, Robb, Takeuchi, & Kotler, 2011). Due to high rates of usage among 12−17 year olds and increasing rates of Internet access to children under the age of 12, youth conduct a significant portion of their social lives in digital spaces. This means that offline methods are increasingly ineffective in getting a complete picture of children's social and cultural environments. Recent methodological innovations in the field of digital ethnography have emerged as potential means to collect data on online behavior. As a methodological technique, digital ethnography allows qualitative researchers to "go to the people" in online spaces, virtual communities, social media sites, and game spaces to collect data from research participants. This is particularly true for adolescents and teens that consider their online and offline worlds to be effectively one world. This is not to say that digital ethnography is without limitations and ethical complexities. However, it does provide access to a part of the social world that is growing increasingly important in understanding childhood and adolescence and, in doing so, changes the nature of some of the age-old challenges faced by researchers of youth and youth culture.

Digital ethnography is a multi-modal qualitative research technique that seeks to understand digitally mediated communication, communities, identities, and norms, while acknowledging the complex liminal relationship between offline and online environments by following the objects, texts, and bodies that inhabit such spaces (Leander & McKim, 2003; Walker, 2010). Researchers conducting digital ethnographic research, much like their counterparts in the offline world, use a variety of methods to collect data. Methods may include email and video or text chat interviews, video data collection, and participant observation in social networking sites, blogs, listservs and interest sites, other online communities, MMO[1] game spaces, and many others (Gunter, Nicholas, Huntington, & Williams, 2002; Murthy, 2008; Viégas, 2005). Digital ethnography brings together the elements of interview, observation, interaction, and participant observation that are common methodologies to study traditional offline communication and adapts them to digital mediums of communication.

Like any research activity, digital ethnographers begin by locating and gaining access to the field site. This can involve finding discussion boards, listservs, social network sites, or other areas of connection and communication. Researchers negotiate access to the field site, which can occur in a number of ways. Most often, access is granted through simply clicking to a public website, or alternatively signing up and creating a username, profile, etc. (Mann & Stewart, 2000). Like offline ethnographers, a digital

ethnographer must be flexible and adapt to collect data in ways that acknowledge the specificity of the environment, fulfills the goals of the research, and respects the agency of participants. Additionally, digital ethnographers must be able to define and redefine the "field" as they engage in research that may take them to different parts of the online world and even into the offline world (Marshall, 2007; Walker, 2010).

Digital Ethnography in Practice: The Real "Virtual World"

To better illustrate the process of conducting digital ethnography as a method, I am going to discuss my research on teens, young adults, and the role of technology in establishing and maintaining friendships and romantic relationships. Like many digital ethnographers, I employ multiple methods and utilize diverse field sites to collect data. I began my project by conducting traditional interviews with participants that focused on the social lives of teens and young adults. We discussed topics such as how relationships are established and maintained and how communication and connections are understood and imagined. Yet, my participants quickly showed me what really mattered; how technological communication is experienced and normalized, interpreted and internalized by individuals and peers. Most significantly, they revealed how relationships are reshaped and reformed through emerging experiences that integrate both face-to-face and online communication into a messy, deeply interconnected whole.

As I developed a better understanding of the social world of teens and young adults, it quickly became evident that it was essential for me to observe participants in settings where techno-mediated communication occurred. For this population, that meant I needed access to social media sites. In order to better understand the stories being told to me via interview, I chose to engage in digital participant observation. I began the process by asking participants for permission to access their online social activities. While participants engaged in a wide variety of social network sites, Facebook was almost universal among them. So, I set up a new Facebook profile to use as an entry point into the field and began connecting with participants. This excerpt from my early fieldnotes demonstrates the wide variety of topics and issues that were posted on the Facebook newsfeed by users.

> Participants are posting about a variety of topics. Today, I have seen posts about:
> upcoming social plans, going shopping, the upcoming election, a fight with a boyfriend,

an announcement that one of my participants' father has passed away, fears about one person's inability to get a job, pictures from a recent party, planning a vacation, and complaints about homework. Some of this is "everyday life" and some of it is intensely private. All but one of my posters has multiple posts, and many of the posts have dozens of responses for a single day.

Like any social science researcher, my early experience in the field focused on understanding the field itself, as well as learning relevant social expectations. While I had previous experience with Facebook, I wanted to better understand the role it played in interpersonal communication among young people. Therefore, I worked to map my field site in order to identify the important virtual places for communication.

I focused on two specific components of Facebook most relevant to understanding interactional social processes. First, I analyzed user profiles, which provided descriptive information such as demographics, interests, likes, and dislikes. Profiles functioned as a kind of textual introduction and I used content analysis techniques to collect data from this personalized online space. Textual analysis techniques, such as content analysis and representational analyses, are commonly used by digital ethnographers alongside more human subject-focused research techniques, due to the nature of digital spaces (Bassett & O'Riordan, 2002). Second, I observed Facebook newsfeeds, which allow users to post messages, photos, and links. I observed the content of the posts as well as interactional data, including comments and use of Facebook's "like" function. This process required some ethical consideration; while I had permission from my participants, I was effectively observing conversations in which one partner, the commenter, was unaware of the data collection process. Furthermore, due to the age of participants and the nature of Facebook, commenters and those responding to posts were often under 18 and identifiable, and while parental consent for the use of Facebook could be inferred, participation in data collection was not. That said, since the conversations were being held in a virtual "public" space where participants could not reasonably expect to be unobserved, I treated it as offline researchers might treat observation in a semi-public space, like a busy school or community center. However, in concession to the unique nature of social media sites as a liminal public/ private space, I maximized confidentiality by creating pseudonyms, avoiding direct quotes (which could be searchable in some cases), and paraphrasing my fieldnotes.

The practice of collecting data as fieldnotes in digital ethnography has some distinct differences from face-to-face research. Some data collection involved capturing and recording postings, message threads, and other

digital data. In addition, I also kept extensive fieldnotes on observations and interactions, similar to techniques used in participant observation. I followed my participants online over the course of six months, generating hundreds of pages of postings and fieldnotes. I focused on observing online interactions and behaviors, with the intention of better understanding the development of adolescent and young adult friendships and dating relationships. Beyond the initial contact and ongoing interviews, I minimized overt contact with participants, thus avoiding impacting their daily lives.

My research yielded several significant findings. Specifically, this project suggests that what technology and social media have done for contemporary young people is create a persistent means of viewing social networks and social interactions that allows them to establish and maintain distant connections or "weak ties" (Granovetter, 1973), more easily. It has enhanced the social collective, modified the experience of connectivity, and transformed the social network. This research allowed me to better understand the social pressures within peer networks for connectivity, and how such pressures shape youth relationships. I was also able to analyze the implications of how demand for social connectivity influences participants' understandings of their intimate relationships. The data I collected were limited in many ways, but they provided me with insight on the role technology plays in friendships and romantic relationships that I could not have gained in any other conceivable way.

ETHICAL DILEMMAS: IRBS, CONSENT, CONFIDENTIALITY, AND POWER

There is little question that understanding the experiences of children and youth is essential to gaining a better understanding of contemporary society. Yet, researchers who work with children and youth face significant challenges in gaining access and collecting data on the lived experiences of participants. While individual researchers may undergo specific challenges depending on research design and population demographics, many researchers who work with those under the age of 18 will typically have issues in the following areas: gaining university approval via Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) who are concerned with risk to participants, negotiating access to children and youth by gaining consent from both adults and children themselves, maintaining youth confidentiality in the face of powerful adult actors, and/or navigating power relationships between researchers and participants.

Risk and Institutional Resistance: IRBs

IRBs are the federally mandated institutional bodies charged with oversee-
ing and assessing the potential risks of research conducted with human sub-
jects (Opsal et al., 2016). Minimizing risk in conducting research is a widely
accepted ethical practice, but risks can be over- or under-estimated by
IRBs, investigators, and parents in relation to children and teens. Risk is
also a deeply contextual concept, with perceptions of risk varying widely
between groups of participants. The risk a given study poses to children's
well-being may be understood very differently by parents, investigators,
and child or teen participants themselves. In order to develop effective proj-
ect designs, researchers must navigate these concerns (Freedman, Fuks, &
Weijer, 1993).

   IRBs are typically housed within the administrative structure of institu-
tions of higher learning in the United States. Most researchers who engage
in data collection with human subjects are somewhat familiar with IRBs and
the code that governs them, a federal policy known as the Protection of
Human Subjects, or the "Common Rule." The Common Rule was estab-
lished in 1991 and codified in separate regulations by 16 Federal depart-
ments and agencies.[2] Most colleges and universities in the United States use
a variation of the Common Rule as a basis for the development of their own
policies and procedures. Furthermore, colleges and universities conducting
research that depends on federal funding are generally expected to comply
with versions of the Common Rule and additional protections codified by
the Office of Human Research Protections (OHRP), a subset of the
Department of Health and Human Services regulations, Policy 45 CFR part
46, subparts A−E. Of most concern to scholars of children and youth is
OHRP 45 CFR part 46, subpart D, which outlines the limitations and poli-
cies surrounding research conducted with those under the age of 18. The
OHRP requires that all research conducted with children be evaluated as
non-exempt by IRBs, with a few select exceptions for pedagogical research
conducted in the classroom (Office of Human Research Protections, 2013).

   Social scientists, in general, and qualitative researchers, in particular,
have expressed significant frustration with IRBs in recent years, suggesting
they are inconsistent, obstructionist, and lack understanding of social scien-
tific methods (Johnson, 2008; Murray, 1998; Oakes, 2002; Ross, Ferrell,
Presdee, & Matthews, 2000; Shea, 2000). In part, this is because IRBs have
grown stricter in recent years (Oakes, 2002). This may be due to increasing
pressures on IRBs from the OHRP, in which infractions may result in the
suspension of all federally funded research at the institution, fines up to

a million dollars, and legal action against supporting institutions, IRB members, and principal investigators (Office of Human Research Protections, 2016a, 2016b). Researchers who work with children face particular scrutiny from IRBs as a result of this overall tightening of human subject research regulations. Most institutions require extensive documentation and procedural designs in order for academics to conduct research with children (Lincoln & Tierney, 2004; Ungar, Joffe, & Kodish, 2006). Therefore, getting approval for research with children, even research that involves minimal risk to participants, can be very difficult. Many institutions require a full board review for work with children, often demanding changes and imposing limitations on researchers that can impact the quality of data collection (Opsal et al., 2016).

Conducting research with children and youth in online contexts may invoke a wide variety of responses from IRBs. While research guidelines for conducting online research do exist (Humans Subject Review Board, Attachment B, 2013), they have not been fully integrated into the current policies and procedures of many IRBs. Nevertheless, these policies provide significant latitude to researchers collecting data online. Essentially, if research is conducted in online public spaces, especially spaces that do not require any kind of approval or intervention from a gatekeeper to access, they may constitute virtual locations of public behavior. Public behavior, even that of children, may be exempt from the research evaluation process. According to OHRP Advisory Committee Recommendations,

> If individuals intentionally post or otherwise provide information on the Internet, such information should be considered public unless existing law and the privacy policies and/or terms of service of the entity/entities receiving or hosting the information indicate that the information should be considered "private." (Attachment B, Regulatory Considerations QI, para 2)

Based on this recommendation, data collected from blog posts, discussion boards, MMOs, and some social media sites may be considered public behavior and not subject to IRB evaluation. As a result, IRBs may view online research, especially that which is conducted in online "public" spaces, as exempt. For example, research conducted in online game spaces targeted at children, such as Whyville (Fields & Kafai, 2007), may pose little risk to participants in the eyes of IRBs. Publically available MMOs targeted at children that are strictly monitored by parents or organizations, such as Club Penguin or Fanlala, allow young children to engage in online activities with little risk, enabling researchers to collect useful data. However, due to the strict restrictions on interaction, the information

gathered can be quite limited. Still, engaging in observation of virtual play-rooms may create a navigable balance between researchers and IRBs.

Teens, compared to younger children, participate in a wider variety of online activities and may provide a richer source of data for researchers in online contexts. Certainly, teens who post anonymously in discussion boards and chartrooms may inadvertently be included in research conducted under the current policies of public observation. Teens may also strategically participate anonymously in online spaces. Some communities, especially fan or interest communities, function as semi-public spaces that encourage profiles that provide personal data but not names. Here, participants may share their age and other demographic data but utilize pseudonyms. Thus, researchers may know that teens are under 18 and subject to special protections, and not have access to identifiable data. The current federal recommendations suggest that as long as identifiable data is not available, research may be conducted on teens over 13 (Humans Subject Review Board, Attachment B, 2013). IRBs that follow these guidelines may allow for research with populations who are inaccessible offline, due to requirements for parental consent or limitations on confidentiality granted to participants. For example, a study by Subrahmanyam, Smahel, and Greenfield (2006) explored the online constructions of sexuality in both monitored and unmonitored teen chat rooms. The logistics of gaining IRB approval, parental consent, and participant assent to study conversations about sexuality among teens in an offline context may be daunting. Furthermore, participant behavior in face-to-face observations are likely to be significantly impacted by researcher presence. However, in the case of unmonitored online teen chat rooms, issues of risk are minimized due to lack of identifiable information and minimal bias caused by researcher interference. Still, IRBs are not the only area of difficulty researchers face, as changing social norms about childhood and parental rule of children can also play a role in researcher access to youth, and indeed, may play a role in the decisions of IRBs as well.

Consent, Assent, and Challenges in Online and Offline Research

Aside from risk/benefit evaluations, scholars who work with children and youth are faced with additional challenges regarding consent. Research with children and youth is complicated by the bureaucratic and social expectations of parental permission. Generally speaking, researchers who wish to conduct research with children and youth must get permission from

parents or guardians, as well as assent from youth participants themselves (Ungar et al., 2006). However, this practice can be problematic, especially when researchers face ethical dilemmas that arise from dissent about the nature of participation.

Parents and institutional actors, such as schools, youth organizations, and so forth, often function as gatekeepers, limiting researchers' access to children. This is certainly the case with adults who embrace the idea that they should have complete control of children's actions and information about the children and youth in their care. Some parents find the idea that researchers view child consent and privacy as equally important to adult consent very problematic (Thomas & O'Kane, 1998; Ungar et al., 2006). Parents or institutionally legitimated overseers can sometimes reject child and youth participation outright without considering the desires of or bene-fits to participants. This both undercuts the value of child and youth auton-omy and deprives potential participants of personal choice. Perhaps even more problematic, adult gatekeepers can assume or even require youth par-ticipation, usurping children and teens of their fundamental rights to con-sent (Heath, Charles, Crow, & Wiles, 2007).

A colleague of mine shared an excellent example of this phenomenon recently. She was conducting research on the impact of gaming on teen aggression. Over the course of one interview, she discovered that a 14-year-old participant did not want to participate in the study. However, his par-ents were very interested in his participation, and in fact were requiring him to participate. When my colleague suggested they end his participation, the participant declined. He explained that he would be punished by his parents if he refused to participate, and so asked that he be allowed to continue. Faced with an ethical dilemma involving coercion of a research participant, the researcher attempted to limit harm by reminding the participant that he could refuse to respond to any or all questions, and she would still consider him a participant. This allowed the participant to effectively withdraw assent, while protecting him from external coercion and harm.

In contrast, when conducting research in virtual spaces, getting consent from any participants can be difficult. In particular, the logistics of online research make collecting and coordinating parental consent and child/teen assent very difficult. When conducting social research in certain virtual spaces (e.g., public discussion sites or massive multiplayer game sites that include hundreds or even thousands of participants) getting consent from all participants, regardless of age, is essentially impossible. An offline equivalent would be conducting research in sports stadium. A researcher might observe or interact with participants in data collection, but the

logistics of informing everyone of researcher presence and getting informed consent is impractical.

Some spaces provide ready access to child or teen assent, but asking for parental consent may be more complex. For example, teens who participate anonymously or via avatars in online social spaces may be willing to participate in interviews or allow observations, but unwilling to provide parental contact information, especially if this requires giving out their real names. Further, among participants who are recruited through teen-only or teen-focused spaces and use their real names (and thus provide researchers with identifiable information), many may be unwilling to assent to research participation if their parents are notified about their online activities.

Negotiating issues of consent and assent in online spaces, especially for teens, is deeply rooted in issues of power. Online spaces may provide teens with a place of power and legitimacy in their social participation (De Ridder, 2015). Especially, when age is not explicitly discussed, participants in online spaces may engage in disruptions of traditional adult/child power dynamics. During a study I conducted a few years ago on online food trends and fads, I came across just such a discussion. Participants in a public food blog were discussing the issue of food allergies and the growing number of schools that forbid children to bring peanut butter to school for lunch. During the discussion, Participant D stated that she was a teenager and suggested that children and teens be included in decision making about such food policies at school. Participant C, a parent, responded by claiming that Participant D "is too young to understand such things and to should leave discussion to adults."

Participant C relied on adult/child power imbalances to undercut the legitimacy of contributions made by Participant D. Participant D took part in several discussions on other topics in the discussion board and, until she disclosed her age, was not treated differently by other participants. Such experiences demonstrate the way in which online communities can disrupt power imbalances. Participants may be reluctant to view themselves as children who must gain parental permission, particularly when engaging with researchers in spaces where they have come to expect a certain amount of power and autonomy in their interactions.

Adult Perceptions of Child Privacy: Confidentiality

One of the most contentious issues researchers face when working with children or youth is confidentiality. A number of scholars explore the fact

that power imbalances between children and adults can lead to breaches in confidentiality (Christensen, 2004; Morrow & Richards, 1996; Thomas & O'Kane, 1998). Institutional or parental expectations pertaining to the privacy of children is one such area of concern. Parents or institutions may expect to have access to data collected from child or youth participants as a matter of course. Since contemporary culture and legal precedent (especially in the United States) give parents and guardians complete access to all information collected formally about children under their guardianship, they may also assume information will be made available to them in the context of research. Furthermore, institutions such as schools may include a normalized culture that assumes data regarding children under their supervision will be shared among adult overseers. Christensen and Prout (2002) provide an example of such a case:

> In the staff members' interactions with the researcher they always formally acknowledged the promise of confidentiality but in their everyday encounters some of the teachers would make attempts to reinterpret, modify and undermine it by building a sense of common interest between themselves and the researcher as adult professionals. In this process it was as if a promise of confidentiality to children could be bracketed out, or superseded, by establishing another tacit agreement that it was not to be taken all that seriously. (p. 486)

Normalizing surveillance of children and youth by adults can lead to ethical dilemmas regarding confidentiality and disclosure for researchers. This is further complicated by the legal and ethical requirements about protection and harm that are specific to vulnerable populations such as children; when confidentiality is promised to children and youth by researchers, exceptions often apply. For example, children or youth who are interviewed are commonly promised confidentiality, but explicitly or implicitly this promise is nullified if the child discusses certain topics, most often abuse or neglect (Mahon, Glendinning, Clarke, & Craig, 1996). This can legally and practically nullify the child's right to privacy, and advising children and youth of these exceptions can undercut perceptions of the legitimacy of promised privacy on other topics.

Digital ethnography provides some important tools to protect youth confidentiality due to guidelines on parental consent and the lack of identifiable information. Yet, some challenges do exist — first, children and teens often have limited access to privacy regarding their engagement in online activities. Parents, teachers, and other authority figures often embrace a view of teen and child privacy that is characterized by specific, and differing, rules regarding online activities (Thomas, 2007). For example, a parent who would not ask a researcher to provide details about a face-to-face

interview with a teen participant may feel entirely justified in reading an interview conducted via chat or email, since parents believe the control of youth access to technology is an acceptable risk management strategy (Staksrud & Livingstone, 2009). There is significant evidence that contemporary parents are increasingly restrictive of teen behavior and more inclined toward surveillance, both online and offline, than in the past (Ungar, 2009). Current research suggests that while youth demonstrate both risk avoidance behaviors and demonstrate strategies for coping with risks online, some institutional actors may focus on restricting risk by limiting or ending access to online spaces (Staksrud & Livingstone, 2009). Additionally, teens may view promises of confidentiality with justifiable suspicion. In particular, teens who engage in identity play, changing their identity characteristics in online spaces, or who are members of marginalized groups, such as sexual minorities, may view researcher assurances of online confidentiality as disingenuous (Thomas, 2007).

A particularly difficult situation that can arise in research with teens is related to gaining trust. Teen participants may demand that researchers promise confidentiality before they agree to participate in research. However, they often lack trust in researchers' ability and willingness to actually maintain the promised confidentiality, especially with regard to parents, teachers, and other authority figures. This can lead to participants who "police" their responses carefully, afraid to share accurate information for fear of being reported to parents or other authorities (Pascoe, 2007). This can shape research experiences and outcomes in significant ways. This challenge is highlighted in the recently released UNICEF Global Child Rights Online Research Toolkit, which notes "Also challenging is researching sensitive issues of agency, sexuality and risk in contexts where children's lives — and what they can tell a researcher — may be heavily circumscribed by adult norms and values" (Livingstone, Byrne, & Bulger, 2015, p. 17). Even when teens are not engaging in explicitly harmful activities, they may see such exceptions as undercutting the legitimacy of promised confidentiality.

Research conducted in online spaces that are public, and where identifiers about children and teens are not available, can provide rich data without compromising confidentiality commitments to children and youth. The role of parental rule in such research designs is located within the daily activities of parenting through monitoring and controlling child and teen access to such sites. Since most of the time data collection involves observation of peer interaction and very little direct researcher interaction, and generally involves little risk to children, researchers can collect online data and protect identities through confidentiality strategies, for example, using pseudonyms.

Negotiating Power, Identity, and Insider/Outsider Status

Issues of power, which are present in all forms of research, are important to consider when conducting ethical research with children. Researchers and laypeople alike may profess they do not "get" technology and the role it plays in the lives of young people, yet they remain deeply confident in their ability to understand the meanings behind its uses (Palfrey & Gasser, 2008). In my research, I am frequently faced with scholars who profess both their own ignorance of the norms of youth culture and, at the same time, their absolute confidence in their ability to judge its value. The presumption that we, as a society, "get" the experience of youth culture and the meanings behind technology is similar to the way researchers can sometimes presume "insider" knowledge without fully addressing social differences and inequalities between themselves and research participants (Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002).

Both teens and children experience complex issues of power dynamics in their relationships with adult researchers. That being said, it is worth noting that differences in age can have significant impacts on both legal and institutional norms, as well as the research experience itself. Research conducted with children and teens share many of the challenges previously discussed. However, there are some unique aspects regarding participants and the social and cultural milieu in which they exist which make working with young children very different from teens, especially when considering power dynamics and power differentials.

Research conducted with young children can be significantly impacted by communication abilities and the limited understanding and access adults have to insider perspectives regarding childhood (Christensen & Prout, 2002). Due to the nature of child cultures, adults are fundamentally "outsiders" in children's worlds. When dealing with the presence of a powerful outsider, children may change their behavior or limit their interactions with researchers and one another (Christensen, 2004). Researchers can also face a host of challenges in building rapport, including issues associated with language abilities, power negotiations, and establishing trust (Punch, 2002).

Childhood scholars face challenges negotiating the inherent power relations between child participants and adult researchers. Children in contemporary society are encouraged to seek approval from adults, a practice that significantly impacts their responses to interview questions (Christensen, 2004). While parents have moved away from authoritarian structures, and children are increasingly comfortable responding to questions and engaging with adults (especially in the middle class), children's opportunities to

engage in research are largely structured by adults (Hill, 2006; Lareau, 2011). Thus, children, especially those under 12, are not used to being encouraged to express themselves without experiencing behavioral feedback and controls from adults (Christensen & Prout, 2002). Further, children may provide incorrect data in an attempt to please adult researchers. This dynamic may be enhanced when research with children occurs in the context of school environments, locations where providing "correct" answers are emphasized (Christensen, 2004; Christensen & Prout, 2002). Even when utilizing participant observation methods power relations are at work, since child-centered play is shaped by the presence and *potential* intervention of adults (Hill, 1997). As a result, childhood researchers may have difficulty achieving the level of non-interference that is necessary to get the best data from participant observation in and of children's worlds (Mandell, 1988). Digital ethnography provides techniques that allow researchers to limit the impact of insider/outsider identity in their interactions with child and teen participants. These techniques can allow researchers to "blend in" with their target populations in ways that are unprecedented, thus allowing for data collection that is less disruptive to child worlds.

If research conducted with children, either online or offline, fails to consider children as "social actors" in their own right — people who have valuable and unique experiences to contribute — it fails to move beyond viewing children as passive objects of study. Instead, we must strive to view children as active participants in both the social world and in the research process (Christensen & Prout, 2002; Woodhead & Faulkner, 2008). Like adults, children can contribute diverse attitudes and experiences to both research topics and to the experience of research itself (Hill, 2006). However, passivity frameworks can lead to the acceptance of assumptions about the nature of childhood and the abilities and capabilities of children (Hill, 2006; Punch, 2002) that result in biased or limited understanding of the participants and their experiences. Online researchers can fall prey to this problem, but since observations of online child spaces are less direct, some researchers may find it easier to avoid making assumptions about child capabilities by placing themselves in virtual distance from participants.

One might imagine that conducting research with teens and young adults would be similar to conducting research with older adults, and thus avoid some of the issues inherent in conducting research with children. However, in some ways, conducting qualitative research with teens involves even more potential risk to participants than other groups, even children (Raby, 2007). Teens may be navigating complex relationships with parents and peers that are rooted in rebellion and resistance to adult-imposed

boundaries. Teens can be engaging in "adult" experiences such as sex, violence, social networking, and relationship building, but are doing so with the legal and social limitations of being "underage." Sharing these experiences with outsiders is risky and can have wide-ranging consequences (Thomas, 2007).

Furthermore, participants are generally more aware of those risks and, following, less trusting of adult researchers' abilities to ameliorate such risks. Researchers who hold the status of "adults" will retain some degree of outsider identity regardless of their immersion in youth culture. While navigating the issue of insider/outsider identity is a key consideration in any research protocol, it takes on a powerful dimension when conducting research with teens. Researchers can be perceived by teens as proxies for parents, thereby limiting their access to youth culture due to suspicion (Raby, 2007; Schelbe et al., 2015). Additionally, participating in social research may have implications for teens in regards to peers; specifically, peer perceptions of the research process. Teen gatekeepers who provide legitimacy and entrance to teen social worlds may be especially vulnerable to researchers who inadvertently and negatively influence the standing of participants within their peer cultures (Heath et al., 2007).

In order to minimize harm and maximize access, researchers can engage in a number of strategies, most often presenting themselves as "least-adults," a kind of insider/outsider identity that makes it clear they are researchers, but avoids presenting themselves as proxies for parents, teachers, or other authority figures (Mandell, 1988; Pascoe, 2007; Thorne, 1993). Online research provides a particularly effective means for researchers to present their least-adult selves to research participants. Even when participants are intellectually aware that the researcher is an adult, the lack of visible reminders of adult status in online communication can allow researchers to become immersed in their least adult identity and, in doing so, become less visible to participants while observing online interactions.

CONCLUSION

The ethical issues discussed in this chapter may complicate the practice of qualitative research with child and youth populations. Project implementation challenges and bureaucratic roadblocks can result in the loss of valuable knowledge as researchers struggle with IRBs, parental or institutional control, and power dynamics. Still, for those who are committed to including the voices of children and youth in the sociological quest to better

understand the nature of society, such challenges can be overcome. In our determination to achieve this goal, qualitative scholars have continued to develop innovative and emerging methodological strategies to better engage important populations and collect data that enhances our understandings of the social world. Among those techniques, digital ethnography has shown great promise in providing access to the techno-mediated lives of young people.

When faced with challenges from IRBs, parents, and questions about the legitimacy of confidentiality, contemporary scholars of childhood and youth face a quandary. How do they minimize risk, involve parents and teachers, protect participants' privacy, and guarantee willing and informed assent, all while navigating the shifting social and cultural norms around childhood? Many scholars view children and teens as actors with basic human rights; but this must be situated within the institutional structures that can impede agency and limit youth autonomy (Heath et al., 2007; Morrow & Richards, 1996; Pascoe, 2007; Thomas & O'Kane, 1998; Woodhead & Faulkner, 2008). Institutional structures, specifically age-based educational divisions, as well as age specific market fragmentation, have created a cultural division between children and teens, generally viewed as those 13+ and those below 13. Childhood and the teen years have become culturally distinct life stages, with teens occupying a constructed liminal space as a result of artificial extensions of childhood (Epstein, 2007). Despite its artificial nature, scholars who work with youth are forced to navigate this cultural norm. Working in online spaces, where age is often hidden, challenges this construction and encourages researchers to reconsider the relevance of such groupings. Furthermore, changing behaviors related to the techno-mediation of social life among young people, with teens acting as a vanguard, forces researchers into an increasingly blurred online and offline world.

Digital ethnography provides access to the worlds of children and teens in ways that are minimally intrusive and have low risk. A carefully designed and ethically conducted digital ethnography on children and youth addresses risk concerns by IRBs. Additionally, this type of research allows entrance into increasingly important components of contemporary childhood and youth culture via online and virtual environments. Digital ethnography provides a methodological tool that expands how scholars of childhood and youth culture can engage in data collection with their participants. My study of relationships and friendships in the digital world is only one possibility for such methodological innovations. Scholars have studied adolescents and everyday life, game play, the transmission of

specialized knowledge among children, bullying in children and teens, teen sexuality, and much more (Fields & Kafai, 2007; Leander & McKim, 2003; Patchin & Hinduja, 2006; Subrahmanyam et al., 2006; Taylor, 2006). Digital ethnography gives researchers access to the increasingly complex and important area of online social life. For scholars of children and youth it is a tool that provides deeper insight into an increasingly techno-mediated youth culture. As a method, it also provides solutions to some of the more persistent challenges faced by scholars of children and youth.

Despite its utility, digital ethnography does not sweep away the challenges of working with children and youth; instead, it brings up new ethical concerns. Issues of confidentiality and the protection of identity require thoughtful consideration by researchers, especially in the face of technological accessibility to private information and data. Additionally, research conducted with youth online is shaped by the nature of technological designs, which can impact the comprehensiveness and quality of data collection. Still, this method is a tool that helps to expand our understanding of the increasingly techno-mediated nature of contemporary youth culture. This research challenges and disrupts some of the age-old boundaries between childhood and adulthood and in so doing transforms, if not fully overcomes, the barriers to conducting research with children and youth in contemporary society.

NOTES

1. Massive Multiplayer Online (MMO) is a genre of online gaming sites.
2. Department of Agriculture (7 CFR Part 1c).
Department of Energy (10 CFR Part 745).
National Aeronautics and Space Administration (14 CFR Part 1230).
Department of Commerce, National Institute of Standards and Technology (15 CFR Part 27).
Consumer Product Safety Commission (16 CFR Part 1028).
Agency for International Development (USAID) (22 CFR Part 225).
Department of Housing and Urban Development (24 CFR Part 60).
Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice (28 CFR Part 46).
Department of Defense (32 CFR Part 219).
Department of Education (34 CFR Part 97).
Department of Veterans Affairs, Office of Research Oversight, Office of Research and Development (38 CFR Part 16).
Environmental Protection Agency, Research and Development (40 CFR Part 26).
Department of Health and Human Services (45 CFR Part 46).
National Science Foundation (45 CFR Part 690).

Department of Transportation (49 CFR Part 11).
Social Security Administration (20 CFR 431) ("Federal Wide Assurance," 2016).

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