Implementing continuous consent in qualitative research

Fride Haram Klykken (iD)

Institute of Education, Faculty of Psychology,
University of Bergen, Norway

Abstract

This article examines ways of approaching informed consent as a relationally constituted process in qualitative research practices. It argues that a researcher's operationalization of informed consent should be coherent with the overall epistemological framework of the project. Based on empirical examples from an ethnographic inquiry in an educational setting, the principle of informed consent is discussed as a reflexive and ethical tool throughout the inquiry, including its pre-fieldwork, fieldwork and post-fieldwork phases. Strategies of explicitly and implicitly (re) negotiated consent and dissent are discussed and illustrated by drawing on some of the recent discussions of continuous consent practices. The article's conceptualization of a continuous, situated and relational approach to informed consent is also supported by the concepts of *response-ability* and *thinking with care* in research ethics.

Keywords

Research ethics, reflexivity, informed consent, educational research, video ethnography, relational ethics, fieldwork relations

Introduction

Facilitating free and informed consent is a key ethical standard to consider when conducting social research. The principle of informed consent was formalized to help create research relationships that are founded on 'trust and integrity' (BSA, 2017) and aims to safeguard people's freedom to decide whether or not to participate in research. An important criterion for consent's validity is that an individual's decision is voluntary and based on clear, unambiguous information about what engagement in the research will entail. This recognition of participants' free will has been incorporated into ethical guidelines and regulations in many countries and institutions (Beach and Arrazola, 2019). The background for regulating ethical procedures is histories of harmful, covert research,

Corresponding author:
Fride Haram Klykken, Institute of Education, Faculty of Psychology, University of Bergen, Christies gate 13, Bergen, 5015, Norway.
Email: fride.klykken@uib.no

which disregarded research participants' integrity and judicial rights, within both medical and social research (Wiles, 2013).

When qualitative researchers attend to and discuss informed consent, emphasis is often on the recruitment phase, before the fieldwork or data collection has begun (Gallagher et al., 2010). In this phase, researchers obtain formal access by sharing information and soliciting individuals' consent to participate in the research project. Researchers' reflexive accounts of the practice usually focus on how each individual participant's decision has materialized in the form of a written contract. Such ethical evaluations include discussions of who is capable of consenting and how much information was given and in what form during this initial phase (Alderson and Morrow, 2011). The recent changes to EU regulations on data protection (Regulation (EU) 2016/679, 2016) have contributed to increased emphasis on contractual agreements of consent during recruitment. Critics argue that this practice is insufficient for governing people's integrity and freedom when taking part in qualitative research (Connor et al., 2018; Smette, 2019). Some have cautioned that in specific cultural and socio-economic contexts, signing contracts might involve insecurity, suspicion, fear or exclusion for participants (Wynn, 2018). Challenges with written informed consent for participants who do not have the capacity to consent themselves have also been discussed (e.g. Heath et al., 2007). Others have argued that the main function of informed consent is to document the researcher's plan to protect participants' privacy and thus to legally protect the researcher and their affiliated institutions rather than the participants (Gallagher et al., 2010; Homan, 1991).

This article will reflect on and contribute to the ongoing debate about the role of informed consent in qualitative research. Drawing on my own experiences from conducting a participant observation study, I will discuss how my learning throughout the research process caused me to rethink my understanding of informed consent. The article explores how we can sustain knowledgeable and voluntary involvement in research participation. I begin by drawing up an epistemological argument for the need to reconsider the current consent practices in qualitative studies. This highlights an overlap between the type of knowledge a research study is designed to produce and the perception of knowledge that is inherent in the understanding of informed consent in the respective study. Next, the article describes the research project on which the discussion is based. Then, drawing on empirical examples from the study, the article explores ways of approaching informed consent as a processual and relational practice. Potential ways of using the principle of informed consent by applying the ethical concept throughout the inquiry are then discussed, including its pre-fieldwork, fieldwork and post-fieldwork phases. A practice of continuous, situated and relational approach to informed consent is conceptualized, supported by the concepts of *response-ability* and *thinking with care* in research ethics (Busher, 2019; Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017).

Why do qualitative researchers need to reconsider current practices of informed consent?

Informed consent represents an ideal for research conduct in which the people taking part in a study have a clear understanding of the research project and its risks, including what the researcher is doing in the field. The principle thus indicates that researchers should

share relevant knowledge with participants when inviting them to participate in the research. In this sense, the concept of informed consent is inherently connected to assumptions about how knowledge is created. The formalized standard of informed consent is often described in terms of *giving* information to and *obtaining* consent from research participants. These expressions indicate that increased understanding is a result of a transfer of information. Furthermore, the criterion of soliciting consent at one specific point in time, in the form of a signed contract, suggests that knowledge is contained and remains stable once integrated. For this reason, a strategy for consent based on standardized criteria is intimately tied to a perspective on knowledge production as a transaction between individuals (Cargill, 2019). In contrast, the majority of contemporary qualitative frameworks take the stance that research knowledge is developed within the context of a human-to-human relationship (Denzin and Lincoln, 2018). Rather than a static and individualized product, most social research considers knowledge to be developed throughout the research by a social collective that includes the researcher and participants. Ultimately, such an epistemological stance recognizes knowledge as co-produced, processual and situated in particular relational practices (Beach et al., 2018; Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015).

Following this, conducting qualitative research whilst adhering to the standardized practice of informed consent means relating to two dissociated frameworks for knowledge production (Dennis, 2019; Guillemin and Gillam, 2004). Even though the inconsistencies between the two are evident, both require researchers' engagement and consideration. Several authors have discussed the challenges that emerge as a result of their incompatibility (Connor et al., 2018; Heath et al., 2007; Okyere, 2018; Perez, 2019; Roulet et al., 2017; Smette, 2019). One example is that when juggling procedural ethics and the particularities of micro-ethics as two separate practices, the researcher may end up treating informed consent as 'a necessary evil, instrumental in nature, separate from research itself' (Hamilton, 2009: 86), performed only to satisfy institutional and legal obligations. Furthermore, the legally required and easily available prescriptive standards may automatically become the primary ethical focus, with the risk that future researchers will choose only a minimal, anticipatory engagement with the principle of informed consent (Hammersley, 2009). By leaving the antecedents of ethical standards unchallenged and the micro-ethics unattended to, we risk losing sight of important in situ relational work (Traianou, 2019) and end up diluting the participants' human right to integrity in our research (Heath et al., 2007).

There appears to be a growing awareness in the field of qualitative research that the current individualized, pre-fieldwork practice of informed consent is insufficient (Delamont and Atkinson, 2018). An important task for ethical research is, therefore, to explore meaningful ways of connecting the two spheres (Gillam and Guillemin, 2018; Stutchbury and Fox, 2009). This article expresses apprehension about the reductive potential of standardized, anticipatory ethics. It explores potential ways to account for researchers' responsibility to protect participants' integrity when initiating research relationships. With the acknowledgement that research knowledge production is a joint and ongoing activity, what concrete paths can be taken to work towards and account for informed consent as a more integrated part of qualitative research? The scope of this article is, therefore, to connect ideas of research as a co-constituted and situated practice with the principle of informed consent: How can we approach 'knowledgeable' consent

from a relational and processual understanding of social research, acknowledging that informed ethical decisions are not made in isolation, but take place as a continuous co-production?

The study

The examples in this article are drawn from an ethnographic study that inquired into everyday educational activities in a Norwegian upper secondary classroom. In the research project, I adopted a new materialist theoretical framework (Fox and Alldred, 2015), conceptualizing material relations as an important part of knowledge making in educational practices. By engaging the empirical data with new materialist theories, the project explored teaching as a collectively negotiated, affectively and materially situated phenomenon (Fenwick et al., 2011). The overall aim of the project was to contribute to the recent discussions on the roles of the body and the wider physical environment in both teaching and learning situations, as well as in the research (De Freitas and Sinclair, 2014; Taylor, 2018).

For the study, I recruited a class of 23 students and one teacher studying the subject 'The Media Society'. I followed their activities for approximately 40 lessons over a period of 3 months. I used participant observation to generate the empirical material, including video and audio recordings, field notes, informal conversations and interviews with students and teachers. The use of two pocket-sized video cameras and one audio recorder facilitated the explorative nature of the study, as I could easily move the equipment to follow the activities that unfolded in the classroom (Heath et al., 2010). Furthermore, the recordings allowed for micro-level analysis of both discursive and material interaction in the teaching situations (Knoblauch and Schnettler, 2012).

Following the theoretical framework, I paid close attention to material-discursive processes both while observing activities in the classroom and in the broader ethnographic fieldwork (Dennis, 2018). This, in turn, led me to inquire into the active roles played by research tools. From the perspective of new materialism, the recording equipment can be considered a participant in the research relationship (Santiago de Roock, 2020), co-producing specific forms of relations in the classroom. As the next section will show, the physical presence of the recording equipment sometimes prompted participants' talk and actions. This gave me unexpected but fresh insight into their reflections about the research and their own participation in it, which in turn highlighted both the limitations and the productivity of the principle of informed consent.

Pre-fieldwork informed consent

In the field, I followed the students and their teacher in their ordinary classroom interactions. My focus was on whole-class situations and group collaborations and not on individuals. The participant students were aged from 17 to 18 years and thus themselves capable of consenting to participate in the project or not.[1] Besides being young people in an educational context, the participant group was not classified as particularly vulnerable participants (Busher, 2019). I also did not consider the main theme of the study, the materiality of group interaction in teaching situations, to be of a sensitive nature. The study,

like many social research projects, thus posed a relatively low risk of predictable harm to participants (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004).

When planning for soliciting consent, I combined advice from qualitative methods literature, the research community and my own previous experiences with the official guidelines and checklists (NESH, 2016; NSD, 2020). For instance, I used the recommended template letter for informed consent but adjusted explanations of how participants' privacy and anonymity would be protected to the age group in question (Busher, 2019). In the process of gaining access to the field, I strived to fulfil the formal ethical requirements and guidelines regarding informed consent and to address the asymmetrical power relations that are present in the recruitment of young people in school settings. I distributed information sheets to the gatekeepers, teachers and their students, and visited schools to talk with potential participants about the project in person. Whilst there, I redistributed printed information about the project, along with consent contracts, and asked the students to read these and to consider taking part. Later on, when one class had agreed to participate and signed the forms, I considered the phase related to informed consent more or less complete.

However, observations and interactions with participants after the actual fieldwork had begun made me rethink the role of informed consent in my research. The following conversation took place between two students in a video editing room. I had left the room to see which activities were taking place in the other groups. Meanwhile, the two students were working together on a computer when, for a moment, their conversation transformed into playful beatboxing and singing. After this, they both burst out laughing, and then became quiet, returning their attention to the computer screen in front of them. Then, moments after, in close succession, both glanced at the research camera and then at each other:

> **Student 1:** You know that (.) she [the researcher] will write down this (.) and this (.) and this as well? [smiling]
>
> **Student 2:** [Maintains a serious facial expression. Replies quietly] And then she will tell the teacher, and I will get a 'two'. [The lowest grade.]
>
> **Student 1:** What did you say?
>
> **Student 2:** E:m: [Glances at the camera, and back at the computer screen] Never mind.

In this short interaction, we see the two students articulate diverging accounts about participation in research and how it affects them. Student 1 appears at ease with being recorded and playfully weaves the future transcription of the recording into the conversation. Student 2 replies with a serious expression and an explicit concern about grades and how the recordings will affect them. The conversation in this video footage took me by surprise, as I felt I had clearly informed the students that their teachers would not have access to the recorded material. Both students were present at the time of the distribution of information, and both had signed the consent contract.

There are multiple potential reasons for why Student 2 did not display knowledge of the project in the way I believed I had communicated it. First, in any person's already

busy day-to-day life, detailed information given about a research project in the distant future could easily be forgotten, misunderstood, misinterpreted or ignored (Gallagher et al., 2010). Second, in the context of formal education, children and young adults are regularly asked to listen before being questioned to reproduce what they have learned in class and to have their answers assessed and graded by teachers. If a young person in a school setting feels they do not have a clear understanding of the research project, the stigma attached to declaring this status might cause the student to hesitate to tell the researcher so (Gallagher et al., 2010). Previous experiences may also lead young people to not always believe what adults tell them. Third, this verbal exchange could also be part of the students' casual banter more than an expression mirroring their 'true' understanding. Hazel (2016) found that participants strategically utilized the presence of the research tools and their understanding of the research project in their negotiation of social identity construction. From this point of view, the situation can be seen to illustrate how the two students strategically made use of their research participation as an opportunity to display, for example, their knowledge of the research in a joke or to express a general worry about grades to a friend.

The standardized pre-fieldwork practice of getting informed consent proved useful as a way to connect with the field and begin the open-ended negotiation of access (Riese, 2019). Sharing my own fragmented understanding of the research, including my intentions for and ideas about future consequences of the study, was a productive starting point for conversations and reflections during the fieldwork. Nevertheless, as the above example highlights, there are some important limitations to pre-fieldwork informed consent. Informing and soliciting consent during recruitment only assumes that individuals have the capacity to produce a stable and unambiguous understanding of the research, even though it has not yet taken place. However, participants will continue to observe and evaluate the research project as it unfolds, whilst making decisions throughout on how to respond and strategically make use of their participation. In other words, the participants co-create and shape the ways that they understand and perform the research relationship, as it unfolds as part of their everyday context (Dennis, 2018). From such a collaborative perspective on research knowledge, participants are not at the receiving end of 'information' but are actively co-producing their own understanding as well as the research knowledge itself. Consequently, neither before nor during the fieldwork do any of the persons involved in the research 'possess' clear and unambiguous knowledge about how the research will unfold. This understanding of the research process calls for more situated and processual ways of respectfully evaluating participants' knowledgeable decisions. One way to approach research from such a relational ethical framework (Flinders, 1992) is to consider consent as an ongoing relational negotiation.

Continuous negotiations of informed consent and dissent

The first pre-fieldwork steps of the consent process can be described as an explicit and formal dialogue about informed consent. Even though the *standardized* procedures of pre-fieldwork consent are insufficient, I will argue that the *principle* of informed consent is vital as an ethical tool in the complexity of qualitative research and its relations. In what follows, empirical examples from my study are discussed as various types of ongoing

negotiations of consent. The discussions draw on some of the recent conceptualizations of processual, 'in-field' consent (Gallagher et al., 2010; Heath et al., 2007). In the literature, continuous consent has been described both as a more formally motivated practice of documenting direct and indirect re-negotiations (Mueller and Instone, 2008; Wendler and Rackoff, 2002) and as a more informal and fluid practice, motivated by viewing research as an inherently inter-relational and situated process (Bhattacharya, 2007; Bourke and Loveridge, 2014; Plankey-Videla, 2012). In what follows, 'in-field' informed consent is discussed as a continuous practice supported by concepts from both of these approaches, but primarily sharing the motivation of the latter.

Explicitly (re)negotiated consent and dissent

When I arrived in the field, I was struck by its affective intensity. The classroom practices I aimed to study were not 'tidy entities' but rather a messy, interdependent web constituted by students and teachers in the middle of their busy everyday lives. In the 4 weeks that passed since the participants' initial agreement, small or large changes could have occurred in their lives. Such changes could alter how the participants felt about being part of the research project, in particular since it involved introducing video and audio recording equipment into their classroom. In the early days in the field, I therefore decided to ask the participants for permission again. For example, when following smaller student groups up close, I would ask if it was ok to place the camera with them and remind them that they could turn it off at any point. Asking participants again, whilst in the field, can be seen as an example of explicit maintenance and renegotiation of informed consent (Plankey-Videla, 2012; Wendler and Rackoff, 2002), or *explicitly (re) negotiated consent*.

In another situation, the students were giving presentations in front of the whole class as part of an assessment. Many students had previously expressed high levels of anxiety about this form of assessment, so I decided to remind them that it was still voluntary to participate in the research and that it would be no problem for me to turn off the camera. After this reminder, one student came up and told me that he would prefer if I did not record his presentation that day. This decision to withdraw illustrates a case of 'informed dissent' (Bourke and Loveridge, 2014) or *explicitly (re)negotiated dissent.*

During fieldwork, the participants had been able to see, for example, how I as the researcher was acting within the classroom with the equipment. After these experiences, their understanding of what participation in this particular research means was likely to be different from when they initially consented. When directly asking about consent at this point, decisions to re-consent or dissent were therefore arguably more informed, or knowledgeable in a different way, than during recruitment. However, this form of reasoning around ongoing consent repeats the same epistemological principles of the standardized informed consent procedures. The decision can only be 'more' informed in the sense that it is based on 'increased' knowledge about the in-situ research relationship. There can still not be any better understanding about future consequences and risks posed by the research at large. Moreover, arguing for a continuous practice of informed re-consent and dissent in the form of individuals' agreements based on the logic of transaction and predictability, only repeats the epistemological problems of the standardized ethical procedures.

There are, however, other ways to understand the role of an explicit dialogue about participation in the research relationship. Giving participants the choice to permanently or temporarily withdraw during fieldwork can contribute towards a mutual understanding of the active role that participants play in the research. Following a relational ethical framework, research is perceived as a collaborative relationship (Beach and Eriksson, 2010; Ellis, 2017). This means that we depend on participants' active assistance as well as 'a shared affinity' in our cooperation (Flinders, 1992: 107). Explicitly renegotiating consent with participants while in the field can thus be seen as a way of configuring and confirming the research relationship as an open-ended dialogue.

Openly placing an interest in participants' well-being above the interest in the aim of the research itself can contribute to the continuous building of trust (Smette, 2019). For example, the participant who decided to opt out during their presentation only did so temporarily and from that particular situation. The same student did not withdraw in other situations and decided later on to take part in a group interview. To provide explicit opportunities to consent or dissent to take part in the research, with genuine room for refusal, can be a way to signal respect and build affinity within research relationships.

Whilst in the classroom, I felt a tension in my interests as a researcher. I wanted the participants to continuously make informed decisions of consent and therefore be aware of their participation in the research. On the other hand, I did not wish to disturb the activities that I had generously been allowed to observe or to draw unnecessary attention to my own and my equipment's presence. Therefore, as time went by, I became more hesitant in explicitly asking for re-consent. An explicit consent dialogue can signal regard for participants' personal integrity as well as affirm the collaborative role participants play in the research. However, the directness of an actively sought, ongoing practice of informed consent can also signal a lack of cultural sensitivity and rapport (Flinders, 1992). Furthermore, as both Okyere (2018) and Perez (2019) demonstrate, formal and explicit dialogues of consent can be counteractive by reproducing power structures rather than fostering trust in the research relationship.

Implicitly (re)negotiated consent and dissent

Throughout the fieldwork, the participants engaged with the research equipment and me in a variety of ways. Sometimes our presence was ignored. Other times, I was casually greeted or asked questions, for example, about how my project was going or what kind of things I was looking for. Some also developed the habit of playfully greeting the camera as they entered the classroom in the morning. On one occasion, a student spoke to the camera as they moved it with a group from one to another part of the classroom, telling it, 'You can come with us'. Through such actions, some participants expressed an awareness of being recorded and being part of the research and simultaneously implied acceptance and inclusion of the researcher and the research tools in their everyday classroom practice. These responses can be seen as consenting through various modes of cooperation and engagement with the research (Gallagher et al., 2010). Such questions, invitations and other forms of interactions can be interpreted as informal 'implied continued consent' (Mueller and Instone, 2008) or *implicitly (re)negotiated consent*. In another

situation, however, only moments after I placed the camera with a group of students, one student got up and sat by another table. The student had formally consented to participate, but this withdrawal from the recorded situation could be interpreted as a non-verbal indication of dissent (Bourke and Loveridge, 2014; Heath et al., 2007) or *implicitly (re) negotiated dissent*.

These moments of interaction generate insight into how participants continue to explore and produce new understandings of the research relationship (Whiting et al., 2018). Through paying particular attention to these (dis)engagements, I learned about the research relationship, including the participants' orientations towards participating in the research. This attentive involvement creates space for participants to negotiate access and shape the ongoing research relationship. For example, after the participant's withdrawal away from the camera, I adjusted my actions and position in the field by keeping a respectful distance from that particular student. To attend to continuous informed consent can therefore mean to listen to both 'what is said and unsaid' (Bourke and Loveridge, 2014) and to be receptive to the explicit as well as implicit ways of consenting and dissenting to 'doing-being-observed' (Hazel, 2016).

The participants' responses continuously affected my choices in the field, such as who to follow and the ways I interacted with participants. Initiating both an explicit and implicit dialogue with participants can thus be useful as an ethical tool for the researcher in their effort to listen, attune and align to the participants and their understanding and interest in the research participation as a whole. This continuous responsiveness in research has been conceptualized as a *response-ability* (Beach and Eriksson, 2010; Pearce and Maclure, 2009). Such a response-ability cannot be achieved through the employment of anticipatory ethics but needs situated, reflective and relationally attuned ethical labour (Busher and Fox, 2019). By striving for openness and sensitivity to participants' responses, the research practitioner incorporates a space for these voices to be heard. As the next section highlights, this inter-relational work can be valuable, especially in the later research phases, when opportunities for explicit and implicit negotiations over consent and dissent are absent.

Post-fieldwork articulations of informed consent and dissent

As outlined, explicit and implicit dialogues about consent influenced the development of the research relationship in the field. However, between such direct and indirect negotiations, there were longer stretches of time in which the participants displayed little or no response to the researcher. The participants appeared busy with their school lives and either ignored my and the research equipment's presence or forgot it altogether. After finishing fieldwork, I conducted group interviews, in which I could de-brief the participants and discuss unresolved issues of consent with them (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015). However, later on, when I reviewed the video data, new issues concerning participation and informed consent emerged. Since I had left the field and the class I had been observing had left school, I had no opportunity to discuss these issues with the participants. This prompted a post-fieldwork reflexive and ethical evaluation (Gillam and Guillemin, 2018).

The case of recording on-screen interaction

The activities I observed for my study were lessons on the topic of 'media and communication', and there was often a strong presence of electronic screens and digital technology in the classroom. For example, the students used various types of recording equipment in their own school projects. The students were actively encouraged by the teacher to use computers and mobile phones to access online resources, including learning platforms as well as social media. The activities using these digital devices were generally subject-specific, but 'off topic', socially motivated use of the same technology also occurred. For example, during class, students would interact with not only teachers and co-students, but also other people (e.g. friends) and companies (e.g. browsing online shops or playing computer games). In the recorded material, it became evident that such off-topic and on-topic activities were tightly intertwined. Any subject-specific activity could swiftly turn into private interaction and the other way around. This quick switching of activities in the technologically dense classroom, combined with my use of video recording for the research, provided me with some ethical dilemmas relating to participation and informed consent.

During the analysis of the visual material, I discovered that the screens of the participants, including mobile phones and computers, would regularly appear in plain view of the recording cameras. With time, the tight interweaving of personal and subject-related interactions in the digital as well as the physical classroom became analytically interesting for my inquiry. However, I soon realized that I had not brought up this interest in the on-screen activities, in neither the information sheets I distributed, nor the debriefing group interviews. The video recordings thus allowed me as a researcher to inquire into aspects of the school activities that I had not discussed with the participants. The research equipment looked similar to the students' devices in the media classroom environment, and I often left the cameras in the same spot for longer periods. Therefore, it could be easy to forget their presence. This made me question whether the students themselves were sufficiently aware of the recording equipment and of their own screens' visibility, and how closely their private and subject-specific activity intertwined. In this post-fieldwork phase, I thus realized that I had no strong points of navigation from which to decide whether the participants had consented with knowledge, to take part in the research in that particular way.

This recognition prompted another question: Would it be ethically sound to analyse something that I suspected the participants had not consented to? In this process, I became interested in the gestures of consent and dissent described above. I searched the recorded material as well as the field notes for episodes of participants' interaction with the research camera and looked for explicit or implicit articulations of the participants' positions. For example, there were several incidents of students deliberately displaying their screens by holding their mobile phones up close to the camera. This could suggest that the visibility of the screens in classroom interaction was unlikely to be of equal surprise to the participants as to me. However, I also found other more subtle gestures indicating dissent. For example, while I followed the students in one group, they sometimes appeared to communicate digitally, in silence. Discreet glances towards the camera indicated that they shielded their conversation from being recorded. This suggests that they

wished to protect their private sphere, and the digital device was a way to keep it out of the reach of the researcher's eyes and ears. The participants thus displayed some signs of being aware of the on-screen aspect of their classroom practices. At the same time, they appeared to draw boundaries for my access to certain parts of their social sphere in the classroom via the use of digital devices.

In this post-fieldwork case of considering informed consent, I combined the above observations with the fact that I had not explicitly made the participants aware that their on-screen activity could be observed and analysed. I decided to consider this a case of informed dissent, to avoid 'imposition' (Flinders, 1992: 107) on the participants by making in-depth, detailed descriptions of the on-screen practices. Should the participants read such descriptions in an article, they may conceive that I have 'betrayed' the trust they placed in the research relationship, and this in turn could damage public trust in qualitative research.

In this way, I continued the ethical work with informed consent after leaving the field, through a reflexive immersion in the research collaboration. The way in which participants interacted with the researcher and the research equipment became a guide to inform my ethical decisions in situations in which consent status was ambiguous. The sum of formal and informal responses was helpful in suggesting how students position themselves in the research. Through a context-specific tracing of explicit and implicit dialogues with participants, new boundaries for the research relationship were negotiated. Informed consent was thus a fruitful reflexive tool in dialogue with the relational knowledge I had gained from the research engagement.

Constructing post-fieldwork articulations of informed consent and dissent from the verbal and non-verbal responses in participant–researcher interactions, is an analytical and imaginative ethical response. This reflexive work with consent can thus be understood as a form of *thinking speculatively* (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017) with the principle of informed consent. The attempt to construe the participants' expectations of the boundaries of the research relationship remains vague, with uncertain assumptions of informed consent and dissent (Homan, 2001). However, here it is important to note that the pre-fieldwork practice of informed consent, in which I shared my predictions of the actual path of the research and its consequences, was equally 'an exercise in creativity' (Cassell cited in Flinders, 1992: 103).

The case of indistinct boundaries in the research–participant relationship

During the fieldwork, I was puzzled by the ways participants sometimes appeared to explore and play with the presence of the recording equipment. Some students took photographs of the research camera with their mobile phones. Another student walked up close to one of the cameras and displayed their naked belly. In both instances, the participants appeared to take charge of the situation and relate to the camera not only as a research tool, but also in a manner similar to how they acted towards peers' and their own lens-based devices. During an intense group discussion, one student turned to the camera and said, half smiling: 'I'm only doing it for the camera'. In another situation in which a student and teacher were engaged in a heated discussion, another student commented to a co-student while smiling and nodding towards my camera: 'This is good content'. My

Importantly, to protect participants' integrity means to acknowledge their agencies and competences to make decisions on partaking in research. However, one way to better foster these values is to decrease the focus on protecting individual autonomy and increase our ethical deliberations on trust in the research relationship (Stutchbury and Fox, 2009). One example of this can be to value both explicit and implicit dialogues about consent with participants.

Conclusion

Even as we consider research knowledge to be a creative co-production, the relations within a research project need to be cared for, and the ethical responsibility for navigating the limits of the research relationship lies with the researcher (Ellis, 2017). Puig de la Bellacasa (2012) presents a non-idealized concept of care, defining it as 'inseparably a vital affective state, an ethical obligation and a practical labour' (197). From this approach, a practice of caring is understood as a 'thick, impure involvement in a world' (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017: 6). The question, then, is not how to care *more*, but *how* to care. The *ways* in which we care for the relations we engage in when we produce research knowledge make a difference. This requires us to account for the ethical consequences of such relational work with 'engaged curiosity' (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017: 92) rather than following recipes of moral obligations.

Engaging the concept of care with the concept of informed consent allows me to account for consent practices as an affectively charged and non-idealized engagement, and to approach ambiguous and creative aspects of research engagement with curious attentiveness. Following this, I propose that one way to 'think with care' about the integrity of both the research and its participants is through the fostering of response-ability in the research relationship and through a continuous, reflexive engagement with the principle of informed consent. This can, for instance, be done through the situated ethical work of explicitly and implicitly (re)negotiated consent and dissent, as well as through speculative articulations of informed consent and dissent.

ORCID iD

Fride Haram Klykken https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4070-3782

Note

1. According to Norwegian ethics guidelines (NESH, 2016) and data protection laws (NSD, 2020).

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Author biography

Fride Haram Klykken is a PhD candidate in the Department of Education at the University of Bergen, Norway. Her research interests include material aspects of educational practices, qualitative methods and research ethics.