

On the Politics of Studying Ethics and Girlhood

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There is probably no topic associated with doing fieldwork with girls and young women that evokes more concern than the issue of ethics. For many members of university research ethics boards (REBs) the very term girls in the title of a project sets off alarm bells, and when the work is participatory and visual there is often a heightened concern in relation to what girls might be talking about, screening, photographing or drawing. There are, of course, good reasons why researchers need to be vigilant in seeking to do most good and least harm in all research involving human subjects. At the same time, however, this heightened concern about working with girls and young women should also cause us to reflect on what our vigilant attitude does and some of the potentially harmful outcomes some attitudes may have. For example, do we see girls as victims or agents? When? At what age? Under what circumstances? What harm might we do if we refuse to see that girls can be both?

Close to two decades ago Gesa Kirsch, in her book, *Ethical Dilemmas in Feminist Research: The Politics of Location, Interpretation and Publication* (1999) posed these same questions in relation to feminist research with women. Kirsch raises concerns, applicable, I think, to research with girls, about the possible vulnerabilities of participants, highlighting for example the significance of intimacy that might characterize qualitative feminist interviews in which participants might reveal more about themselves than they should. She also, however, talks about the vulnerabilities of feminist researchers who may be taken in or otherwise manipulated in the research setting. As researchers we might also expect too much in relation to the time and effort that young participants might be able to devote to a particular study. How, for example, do we think about payment or other compensation for time, particularly in contexts in which girls might have other responsibilities? To what extent do we just carry out research with the same easy-to-



access populations over and over again because of the difficulty of reaching girls who are out of school or who are employed as domestic workers or who are involved in the sex trade? How far are we willing to go, as researchers, to adjust budgets in order to create meaningful contexts for girl-led participation in conferences or in policy forum events? And are there ethical obligations only in working with live girls and young women who are literally in front of us or do we also have responsibilities to ensure the fair and just depiction and interpretation of girls in history?

I would like to thank April Mandrona of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design for taking on the guest editing of this Special Issue, and the contributors and reviewers who have all helped shed light on a host of questions, themes, and case studies that are typically buried in REB applications and research proposals and which need to be part of much larger and more public conversations. I intend to make sure that the Research Ethics Officer of my university receives a copy of this Special Issue, both in recognition of the conversations that need to be expanded, but also in acknowledgement of the difficult work that has already been undertaken.

Reference

- Kirsch, Gesa. 1999. *Ethical Dilemmas in Feminist Research: The Politics of Location, Interpretation, and Publication*. Albany, NY: State University of New York.