Emancipatory archival method

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SPECIAL SECTION

Emancipatory archival methods: Exploring the historical geographies of disability

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the use of emancipatory research principles in archival research and contends with the suitability of academic conventions that characterise ethical practice when the research goal is to elevate the voices of marginalised historical groups. Drawing on a case study of Le Court Cheshire Home, England (1948–1975) to address a critical gap in the literature, I highlight some ethical dilemmas I encountered when working at the nexus of historical geography and geographies of disability. This paper demonstrates what an emancipatory research approach means for an archival study of disability, using examples to illustrate how ethical decisions impacted all stages of the research design and the write-up of findings. I argue that ethics should not be envisaged solely as an approval process completed at the project's outset. Rather, the explorative nature of archival research necessitates that ethics should be an iterative undertaking, with archival sources having the potential to shape both the content and conduct of the research.

KEYWORDS
archival methods, disability, emancipatory research, England, ethics, historical geography

1 | INTRODUCTION

Emancipatory research methodologies rose to prominence in the 1990s, prompting scholars to address the power imbalances deeply rooted in disability research. Earlier studies were critiqued for perpetuating the marginalisation of disabled people; emancipatory approaches prompted a transformative shift, questioning the ethics of positivist research models that reinforced a medicalised interpretation of disability and failed to represent disabled people's perspectives (Stone & Priestley, 1996). Scholars were encouraged to critically reflect on the relevance of their work to disabled people's lives and to support emancipatory methodologies to empower disabled people to become active agents in the production of research. Geographers took forward these approaches and, while many researchers do not explicitly define their methodologies as 'emancipatory', the core principles remain pervasive across the discipline.

Emancipatory methodologies not only represented a new way of doing research but also were deemed more 'ethically justifiable' (Barnes, 2008, p. 461). Given the scarcity of research on the historical geography of disability, it is perhaps unsurprising that there is an absence of research that considers the applicability of emancipatory principles for archival

disability research. This paper addresses these gaps and argues that the issues of power, representation, and relevance indicative of an emancipatory approach are no less important for archival research. While institutional guidance may be lacking, reflexive engagement with archival sources can unlock the answers to the moral dilemmas associated with archival geographical research.

The discussion centres on Le Court Cheshire Home in Hampshire[1] (hereafter Le Court), the focus of my doctoral research. The research was funded through a University studentship where Leonard Cheshire had already been identified as a case partner. The topic provided opportunities to draw on methodological debates in disability studies and historical geography – the former renowned for a sustained ethical discourse, the latter having considerable scope for further engagement with research ethics (Moore, 2010). In working at the nexus of these seemingly incompatible fields, this paper provides a reflexive commentary on how to navigate ethical dilemmas. First, the paper outlines the core principles and traces the origins of the emancipatory approach, illustrating the close connections with Le Court. Second, the paper uses specific examples to demonstrate how an emancipatory approach can be reimagined in the context of a historical geography of disability. I argue that an 'emancipatory' archival methodology requires (1) a reflexive approach to ethics, (2) a commitment to determining research relevance, and (3) attention to the politics of representation.

1.1 | Le Court case study

The unique history of the Le Court case study provided an opportunity to critically investigate how emancipatory principles could be translated into archival research design. Le Court was the first Cheshire Home created by Leonard Cheshire, a UK charity (sharing its name with the founder) that offers a diverse portfolio of support for disabled people. When the charity was established in 1948 it exclusively ran homes; by 1975, there were 65 Cheshire Homes in the UK and more than 60 international homes. The homes were designed for 'the physically disabled in need of residential care ... free from mental disorder and infectious disease', with an initial focus on young adults (Le Court Admissions Policy Discussion paper, 1978). The thesis explored the Le Court residents' experiences making home in residential care. The word 'home' symbolised the type of environment Le Court sought to foster, as opposed to the 'institutional' settings many residents previously lived in. The Homes emerged in response to a gap in provision, yet by 1975 disabled activists (including one former Le Court resident) generated a radical new conceptualisation of disability, which later became known as the social model of disability (Shakespeare, 2010). The model presented a direct challenge to residential care provision and provided the ideological premise that underpinned disability studies. The case study predates the emergence of this scholarly field, but the residents' campaign to push the boundaries of what constituted home, at first within Le Court and later in the wider community, was a catalyst for the broader disability movement in the UK.

2 | THE ORIGINS OF EMANCIPATORY RESEARCH

Research ethics are intimately connected to the history of Le Court. Worth argued that non-disabled researchers often feel 'intimidated by the mandates of the disability rights movement' (2008, p. 311), referencing an influential article, 'Parasites, pawns and partners' (Stone & Priestley, 1996). The 'parasite' metaphor derives from the Le Court residents' experiences engaging with Miller and Gwynne from the Tavistock Institute of Social Research between 1966 and 1967. The residents invited the researchers to Le Court to gain new insights on community living but felt that Miller and Gwynne's publication, *A Life Apart*, betrayed the residents and acted against the interests of disabled people (Hunt, 1981). *A Life Apart* concluded that the ultimate purpose of residential institutions was 'to cater for the social dead during the interval between social death and physical death' (Miller & Gwynne, 1972, p. 80). Classifying residents as 'socially dead' certainly did not reflect the active role many residents adopted in the Le Court community. In *A Life Apart*, residents were repeatedly referred to as 'inmates, cripples and parasites', with resident Paul Hunt arguing that this should instead be applied to the researchers, who were guilty of exploitation, serving 'their own professional interest as parasites, making a living for themselves out of the problems of an oppressed group' (Hunt, 1981, p. 46). The discouraging outcome of the study prompted disabled activists to lead the campaign to reconceptualise the way disability was understood. As disabled scholar and activist Finkelstein summarised, 'it was clear that if there was to be a social interpretation of disability we would have to produce it ourselves' (1992, p. 1). The publication of *A Life Apart* represented a critical juncture in the ethics of disability research, which was reflected in scholarship and activism in the following decades, culminating in the formation of the field of disability studies. Studies began to challenge the ethics and efficacy of existing research and

advocated more inclusive and empowering methodologies. The imperative to critically examine the conduct and purpose of my work was therefore heightened as the residents at the centre of the study were key protagonists in shifting debates about the ethics of disability research.

2.1 | What constitutes emancipatory research?

The value of emancipatory research was persuasively expressed in the subsequent literature. Oliver identified the discord between existing research and disabled people, who came 'to see research as a violation of their experience, as irrelevant to their needs, and as failing to improve their material circumstances and quality of life' (1992, p. 105). Stone and Priestley distilled this into an emancipatory research paradigm with six core principles, including that research should be 'of practical benefit to the self-empowerment of disabled people and/or the removal of disabling barriers' (1996, p. 706). Emancipatory approaches have inspired a rich, diverse and creative body of scholarship centred on participation, inclusion, and co-production (Grundy et al., 2003; Hammer, 2013; Kitchin, 2001; Macpherson & Bleasdale, 2012; Povee et al., 2014; Sitter, 2014). These terms are often used interchangeably, but Zarb (1992) argued that important distinctions exist; while participatory research may be a 'prerequisite', emancipatory research can only truly materialise when disabled people are self-empowered. For Zarb, emancipatory research is best envisaged as a set of guiding principles, designed to challenge how research is produced, while Barnes (2004) views emancipatory research as a 'process' where studies continually advance knowledge. The emancipatory approach fundamentally changed the source of authority in the research process by prioritising the expertise of disabled people (Davis, 2000), yet there remains considerable debate regarding the extent of participant involvement and whether these emancipatory ideals transpire in practice (Danieli & Woodhams, 2005; Fudge Schormans et al., 2019; Holt et al., 2019; Rix et al., 2020). Although there is a noticeable absence of emancipatory historical geographies of disability, historical geographers have applied participatory research philosophies to archival work more generally, suggesting it requires a commitment to forwarding 'the agenda of the people whose lives we study' (Delyser, 2014, p. 93) and can involve supporting the preservation and curation of archival collections (Bressey, 2014) or engaging with enthusiast communities (Geoghegan, 2014).

3 | DISCUSSION

Through applying emancipatory principles, researchers can strive to redress research power imbalances by co-producing knowledge and facilitating participation. Moreover, by researching issues relevant to disabled people's lives, 'emancipation' can be pursued through applied research that has the potential to stimulate social change. Emancipatory research and historical geography are not necessarily mutually exclusive but are problematic nonetheless, and several questions remained unresolved in my doctoral research. Namely, how could I relinquish control over the research process when I would never have the opportunity to speak to the 'research participants' directly? What could a study on a network of residential homes contribute to the disability rights movement? How could I avoid perpetuating the power imbalance between researcher/participants when extracting material from the archive? As Boyer (2004) and Moore (2010) have argued, the characteristics of each archival collection prompt careful consideration of unique sensitivities. The following discussion furthers these debates, illustrating how a focus on disability activism opens up new avenues for archival methodological innovation, prompting a dynamic engagement with ethics throughout the research process, from the initial ethical clearance review through to the writing-up stage.

3.1 | Reflexive ethics: questioning the ethics of ethics

The first opportunity to apply emancipatory principles arose when completing the University ethical review. The initial ethical clearance checklist posed a series of questions about the characteristics of the human participants and methodology to determine whether a more comprehensive ethical submission was required. My research engaged with human experiences, albeit these were 're-animated' (Mills, 2013) through letters, articles, photographs, and films authored by residents between 1948 and 1975, rather than direct interaction with individuals. It remained unclear if the authors of the letters and articles in the archive were deemed 'human' participants for the purposes of the approval process. Conversely, if I subscribed to the view that I was merely dealing with documents, did approval even need to be gained?

Gagen identified the 'quiet exclusion' of historical research from traditional ethical approval processes, posing ethical conundrums for researchers who are required to question 'the ethics of ethics' (2021, p. 41). This was certainly true

of my research as the demographic group in focus, e.g., adults in care, were deemed a 'vulnerable group' as per the checklist, and therefore a contemporary study would have required a comprehensive ethics review with measures to protect participants. This application of vulnerability seemed ethically questionable for the case study. During the 1960s, Le Court residents campaigned for representation on the Home's management committee (obtaining representation in late 1965), which had previously comprised non-disabled people who did not live in the Home. The residents′ campaign to redefine their place in the management of the Home was premised on being respected as independent individuals capable of making decisions about matters which intimately affected their everyday life, not as vulnerable people. As Nuwagaba and Rule note, research protocols often treat disabled people as one homogenous group who are 'uniformly vulnerable' (2015, p. 256).

My first engagement with ethics was hereby characterised by uncertainty. Ostensibly, a comprehensive ethical review was only required for living human participants and a desk-based archival research project was deemed inherently low risk. Ethical approval was obtained relatively easily (Einwohner, 2011), despite unresolved moral quandaries. Although this discussion is specific to this project, it prompts consideration of the ways in which institutional ethical frameworks shape how researchers engage with their subject material. As Fogel et al. assert, 'How does the passage of time reduce our obligations as researchers to abide by the ethical principles?' (2010, p. 91). While archival research may be more detached from human lives than face-to-face methods, researchers have an obligation to handle these traces of past lives with care (McGeachan, 2016). The assurances built into ethical approval processes, such as informed consent, anonymity, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw, offer limited guidance as to what constitutes good ethical practice for historical geographers of disability.

Questioning what constituted ethics was not merely a question of process but also of purpose. Namely, to what end should ethics be applied? Assuming vulnerability and applying a protectionist approach to ethics would contravene the principles of emancipatory research and fail to elevate the residents′ voices. In lieu of comprehensive institutional guidance, a reflexive and iterative ethical process was implemented. Each new archival source deepened my understanding of the best way to serve the interests of the historically distant research participants. Dynamically questioning the ethics of ethics throughout the research process is crucial for an archival project. Unlike research with 'contemporary' human participants, where the conditions of engagement and data collection can be carefully planned, archival exploration can unearth unexpected and unanticipated finds that may prompt an ethical rethink. In this case, a commitment to ethics requires reflexivity that extends beyond the initial approval to all aspects of the research.

3.2 | Determining relevance: Forwarding the residents′ agenda

Second, emancipatory influences were embedded in the fieldwork strategy to establish a focus that was relevant to Le Court residents from 1948 to 1975. Although a broad set of research questions were devised prior to visiting the archive, these were not finessed until a significant volume of archival sources had been explored. The archive housed a vast range of material, including the founder's personal correspondence, marketing material, management and trustee meeting minutes, alongside films and magazines produced by residents. Recognising that my impression of the Homes would be influenced by the process through which I encountered the archive, I started my fieldwork with a comprehensive review of the *Cheshire Smiles*, a magazine written and edited by disabled residents. The *Cheshire Smiles* began as a Le Court house publication, but as the readership grew it became the magazine for the global network of Homes. Textual analysis of editions from 1954 to 1975 provided a consistent point of reference through which to contextualise other archival sources. Residents′ films were also consulted to guide the initial impressions of what life was like in the Home. The Le Court Film Unit, 'the first film unit ever to be manned from wheelchairs' (Leonard Cheshire, 1979), produced films on assistive technology and attitudes towards disability. Sitter (2014) identified the growing interest in participatory video as an emancipatory research method in the 2000s, yet here were residents actively narrating their experiences through the medium of film as early as the 1960s/70s. The *Cheshire Smiles* and films were just two platforms through which residents′ voices transcended the immediate Home, serving as networks to generate a discourse that prompted broader activist awakenings.

The residents′ lived experiences residing at Le Court informed the focus of the thesis and the conceptualisation of 'home' throughout. Rather than approaching the archive with a preconceived notion of what was important, an inductive approach was used to identify themes that were relevant to residents. Formulating an intentional searching strategy that mediated my interaction with the archive gave primacy to the residents′ perspectives, as opposed to the representatives of the charity who were entrusted with managing the Home at the time. Archival sources such as management committee

minutes may have included details about the Home that the residents would not have been privy to at the time, so I was eager to establish what it was like to live in the Home from the residents, rather than reading *about* the residents through third-party accounts. This approach deliberately sought to circumvent the power systems that may have tempered the residents' voices by foregrounding the residents' perspectives and enabling me to retrospectively ascertain the interests, and promote the agenda of the residents at that time. This strategy complemented Stone and Priestley's (1996) vision for emancipatory research. Although the work could not 'practically benefit' disabled people today, it could share the history of self-empowered residents who campaigned to better their immediate home environment and challenged preconceptions about disabled people's place in society, thus elevating the status of these marginal yet seminal historical themes.

3.3 | Writing up the research: the politics of representation

The third interpretation of an emancipatory approach involved critical reflections on the politics of representation when writing up the findings. There is a rich vein of research using emancipatory/participatory methods, but limited discussion regarding how these principles should be applied when writing up research findings, or indeed how historical research participants can be represented 'ethically'. Tensions arose when striking a balance between anonymity and agency, pertinent given the strong theme of resident activism in the findings. Pseudonyms are commonly considered a hallmark of ethical research (Allen & Wiles, 2016), enabling researchers to protect participants' identities (Lahman et al., 2015). Viewed through the lens of the emancipatory paradigm, the decision to anonymise represents the researcher's power to 'strip a name' to a number or acronym (Lahman et al., 2015, p. 449). Archival research adds another layer of complexity as 'historical participants' cannot consent to traces of their lives being used for research, never mind by what name they are identified (Moore, 2012). Questions surrounding anonymisation become even more problematic when researching disability, as institutional guidelines commonly advocate the use of pseudonyms for research with vulnerable groups or sensitive topics. While technically this categorisation relates to Le Court, the connotations of 'a care home' in contemporary society do not reflect what Le Court symbolised in the research time period. In short, deinstitutionalisation in the 1960s and 1970s influenced the growth of community care, providing more options for disabled people beyond residential care facilities. This temporal dimension is significant as the Le Court resident demographic is likely to be dissimilar to contemporary care home populations.

Taking influences from a feminist ethics of care, Moore advocated a more situated approach, reorienting debates on pseudonymisation in archival research 'away from an assumption of the universal/ist ethical good of anonymity, towards a politics and ethics of the *question* of naming' (2012, p. 331). Scholars have critiqued the ubiquitous assumption that identities need to be protected, deeming this overarching stance paternalistic (Allen & Wiles, 2016; Moore, 2012; Wiles et al., 2008), which has particular resonance to the aforementioned resident campaign for representation on the Home's management committee. Residents condemned the original system, arguing it was modelled on 'paternalistic' institutions for populations dissimilar to Le Court. Residents required support with everyday tasks but rejected the view that they were incapable of making important decisions or needed to be 'looked after'.

Once again, the archival material guided the way the findings were expressed, with the strong theme of representation shaping decisions about ethics. Although I could never gain consent from residents, I decided *not* to use pseudonyms and worked in accordance with the archives data protection agreement to avoid sensitive medical material and to avoid causing substantial damage or distress. Pseudonymisation would support the view that the residents warranted protection, subsequently undermining the core research aim by further marginalising the very voices I was seeking to elevate. Many of the residents were recognised figures in activist circles and the materials consulted (such as the *Cheshire Smiles* magazine) were designed for publication, so it was reasonable to conclude that the authors intended their views and names to reach a wider public audience. Furthermore, even if pseudonyms were used, it could be possible to decipher the identity of the author based on other sources openly available.

The write-up stage also prompted careful consideration of the ethical way to convey a historical geography of disability activism from within a charity-run residential home. Emancipatory research advocates for research to be of 'practical benefit' to disabled people (Stone & Priestley, 1996), and while disability rights campaigns are diverse and multifaceted, it is fair to say that residential care provision is far from the lobbying call of activists today. At one historical moment, Cheshire Homes were an alternative to 'chronic sick/geriatric hospital wards', yet eminent resident and activist Paul Hunt noted that 'the great majority of people would not choose an institutional setting if a viable alternative was available' (1972, p. 16). Leonard Cheshire has faced criticism from some who have argued that by virtue of having a large network of residential homes, the charity actively contributed to 'the segregation of disabled people from society' (Clark, 2003,

n.p.). The archive also received criticism after announcing it had received National Lottery Heritage Funding in 2015, with doubts surrounding the charity's ability to speak on behalf of disabled people (Paulley, 2015). The negative connotations associated with care are similarly reflected in the academic literature, with care 'viewed as central to disablist structures within disability studies' (Power, 2008, p. 834). Even though Leonard Cheshire is a diverse organisation with a broad remit, the mere existence of residential services is, for some, contentious. To show deference to these debates, while simultaneously appreciating the richness of the archival stories, it was incumbent on me to carefully represent Le Court in my writing. Engagement with the archive revealed that the unique ethos of the Home was a product of the complex assemblages of multiple actors, including residents, staff members, the founder, and volunteers. This reinforced my view that attribution was important to offer a more nuanced account of what Le Court symbolised.

To avoid subsuming achievements at the Home under the charity's name, individual contributions were acknowledged as such wherever possible. To speak of the charity as one homogenous entity would undermine the efforts of all individuals engaged with its work. Echoing the powerful sentiments of former Le Court resident Philip Mason:

> I believe this story needs to be told and its significance recognised in order that Peter Wade and Paul Hunt as well as their many unnamed associates, their fellow residents and their supporters, can take their place in the history of the disability movement ... These are our heroes. Let us not forget them.
>
> (1990, n.p.)

Each archive may stipulate specific conditions for reproduction that may dictate whether pseudonyms are required. Nevertheless, where there is no explicit policy this paper calls for scholars to carefully assess the ethical and political significance of naming when determining whether to anonymise or use pseudonyms. This perspective adds a new dimension to debates about emancipatory methodologies by emphasising the importance of attribution when working with marginalised disability histories. Recognising the work of individuals makes space for 'absent voices' (Dyck, 2000, p. 82) and absent names in the history of the disability rights movement. This is significant, given the lack of awareness in popular discourse about the notable figures at the helm of the disability movement in the UK, with far less recognition compared to other social movements.

4 | CONCLUSION

This paper has demonstrated the complexity of conducting research that is inspired by emancipatory principles while utilising archival materials. I have argued that there is value in reflexively considering ways to creatively engage with historical material, borrowing from contemporary methodological debates. A commitment to ethical reflection is arguably more important in historical geography, given the lack of institutional guidelines to support rigorous ethical practice. Disability studies has a rich body of critical methodological literature, which prompts serious reflection when re-imagined in the context of an archival project. This paper has sought to pave the way for more critical in-roads in exploring the possibilities of emancipatory research practices when engaging with marginalised historical geographies. I have argued that an emancipatory archival approach involves a sustained commitment to ethical reflection. In my case, the residents' perspectives contained within the archival materials not only shaped the content of the research project but also guided how I approached the research. Ethical considerations shaped every stage of the project, from determining what constituted ethics, to approaching the archival material, to deciding how individuals were identified in my writing. Decisions were reached based on a careful balance of maximising the benefits of the research while minimising harm. This discussion is specific to the historical geography of disability, yet has broader applications by considering how 'traditional' ethical conventions can further marginalise historical voices and narratives.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The focus of the paper is methodological, sitting within the ethics in/of geographical research sector of the journal. There are a small selection of archival sources referred to, and this data is available from the Leonard Cheshire Archive. Restrictions apply to the availability of this data, which were used under data protection and copyright agreement. Data are available from the author with the permission of the Leonard Cheshire archivist.

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ENDNOTE

[1] The home permanently closed in 2007.

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