

# Five unwritten rules to avoid uncertainty in academic research

... and why I detest them...



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## Overview

Why this topic?

Rule 1

Rule 2

Rule 3

Rule 4

Rule 5

Final thoughts

All photos by CESESMA, featuring young researchers in Nicaragua, 2007-2015, taken and reproduced with permission of CESESMA and the young researchers featured.



## Why this topic?

I'm not really an academic.

I'm a playworker, an activist, a facilitator



From 2001-2012 I worked in Nicaragua,  
Central America



Helping child  
workers defend  
their rights



Supporting their struggle for  
the right to education



Part of this struggle was developing new ways to research the underlying issues...

... ways for children and young people to do research.



We saw research as part of a strategy to make things happen – to drive social change in defence of children’s rights...

... Linked to social action



In 2012 I returned to Ireland.

I learned about the professional practice of research

In 2016 I was awarded my PhD.



- In 2021, I found myself employed in a research project in the health sector.
- It felt like an alien world.
- While I embrace uncertainty, the unknown, risk-taking, innovation, new ways to do things...
- ...in my new environment, this seems to make people uncomfortable.

Adapting to the health research context was uncomfortable.

I felt myself a misfit.



Then I got the call from Interweaving.  
The invitation said:

*"As a key speaker, you are able to choose whatever you want to present about uncertainties and adaptation."*

A rare chance to analyse more closely what makes me uncomfortable, and why I feel like a fish out of water in certain research contexts.

## Health warning

The following talk contains:

1. Personal opinions
2. Self-regard
3. No literature review
4. Lack of objectivity
5. No academic rigour
6. Wilful disrespect for evidence-based science
7. A dose of frustration and bad attitude.

Listeners are advised that being infected by these ideas can cause serious damage to a career in academia

## Rule 1: Follow the instructions/protocol/template/formula/guidelines to the letter

(Do it exactly the way everyone else does it and don't try to innovate)

In Nicaragua, I was getting children involved in research to generate knowledge about their lives and the challenges they face in defending their rights; using this to push for social change.





Research was part of a battery of advocacy approaches: direct action and public events, community theatre, media, local radio, lobbying, networking etc.

(Shier, 2010; 2014)



Working alongside children and young people, picking up on their ideas, collaborating, facilitating, supporting.

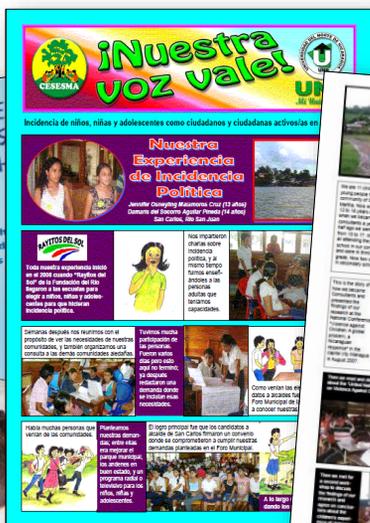
Always ready to try something new and different.



Developing new approaches, new ways of doing research.  
Using creativity and imagination.

(Niñas, Niños y Adolescentes Consultores/as, 2012)

(Young Consultants of Santa Martha, 2010)



(Matamoros et al, 2011)



(CESESMA, 2012b)

My return to Ireland was a shock. Strange new experiences like:

- Pressure to use well-established, previously validated tools and methods, and to follow instructions rather than innovate or experiment.
- Publishing a research protocol: Everything you're going to do already determined and set out in detail (and made public) before you start: Closing down spaces for initiative or creativity.
- Reliance on digital technology – computer applications that ensure the application and its algorithms determine what you can and can't do. (Covidence, Qualtrics).
- Ethical approval framework as a straight-jacket, with no divergence tolerated.

## **Rule 2: Make your own personality invisible, and write yourself out of your research entirely.**

(Using the "I" word is a sign of scholarly weakness)

Impersonal third-person writing is valued in academia because:

1. It is presumed to demonstrate objectivity
2. It is said to maximise authority
3. It shows respect for the conventions of the academy itself.

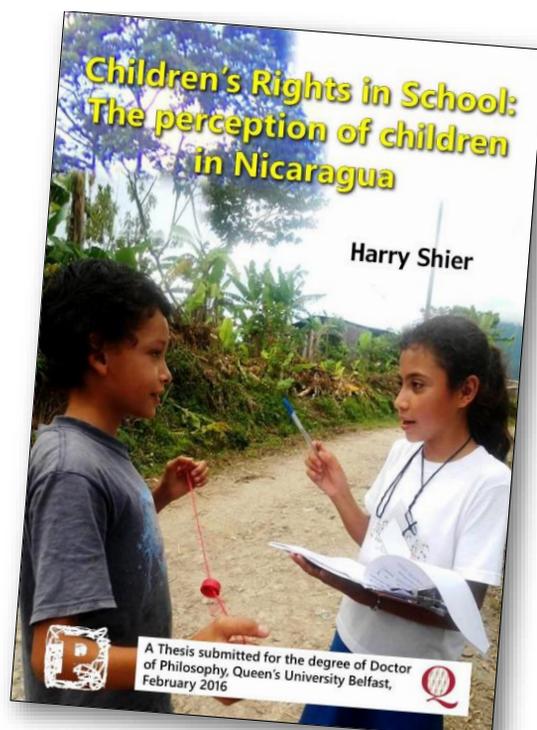
"Eradication of the self is therefore seen as demonstrating a grasp of scholarly persuasion, as it allows the research to speak directly to the reader in an unmediated way." (Hyland, 2001)

### **Look at my own PhD research**

Me being me, and not someone else, made a difference:

1. To the data I was able to access (both who I talked to and what they told me);
2. To the way that data was analysed, the findings that emerged and the conclusions drawn;
3. To the writing up and publishing of the findings.

(Shier, 2016)



### **6 reasons why it made a difference:**

1. My professional networks in Nicaragua;
2. My personal interest in and commitment to the 'children as researchers' approach;
3. My attitude to working with children formed through long experience and informed by human rights;
4. My long-term immersion in Nicaraguan society and culture;
5. My understanding of how my identity affects the dynamics of power in my relations with others;
6. My being bilingual in English and Spanish.



(Shier 2022b;  
Horgan and Kennan 2022)

### **Two viewpoints:**

"The (social) sciences usually try to create the impression that the results of their research have objective character. In this view, scientific results are – or at least should be – independent from the person who produced the knowledge."

(Breuer et al, 2002)

"As qualitative researchers, we construct in our minds the natural experiences we observe and the analytic connections we make with our data. There is no 'truth' external to us waiting to be discovered."

(Saldaña, 2015)



## Rule 3: Ethical approval is more important than ethical behaviour

How do academic researchers understand the meaning of the word "**ethics**"?

Is "**ethics**" is about the way we treat the people we work with, under-pinned by a concept of "doing the right thing" – whatever we understand that to be?



Or is "**ethics**" about obtaining "ethical approval" from a university bureaucracy?



Guillermin and Gillam (2004) call the one on the left "**ethics in practice**", and the one on the right "**procedural ethics**".



"There is a tendency to place great faith in the ethics review process; the assumption is that if a research project gains ethics approval, the research, and by implication the researchers involved, are inherently ethical...

However, this perception lacks any solid base, because of a lack of evidence about how research ethics is understood and practised by ethics committees or by researchers".

"Despite the considerable time devoted to ethics review, ethics committees and research guidelines were not seen as valuable resources for researchers undertaking research in the field.

In the actual undertaking of research practice, it was their past professional experience and personal values that researchers considered most useful resources when encountering ethical problems."

(Guillermin et al, 2010).

In my own work, this has been brought into focus with the issue of **"Anonymity or Recognition"**

How can we harmonise the dissonance between the guarantee of anonymity we are required to give those children who engage in our research, and children's desire to be seen, heard, identified, recognised and valued for what they contribute?

**Research subjects**  
must be guaranteed anonymity



**Research contributors (co-researchers or advisers)** are entitled to credit and recognition

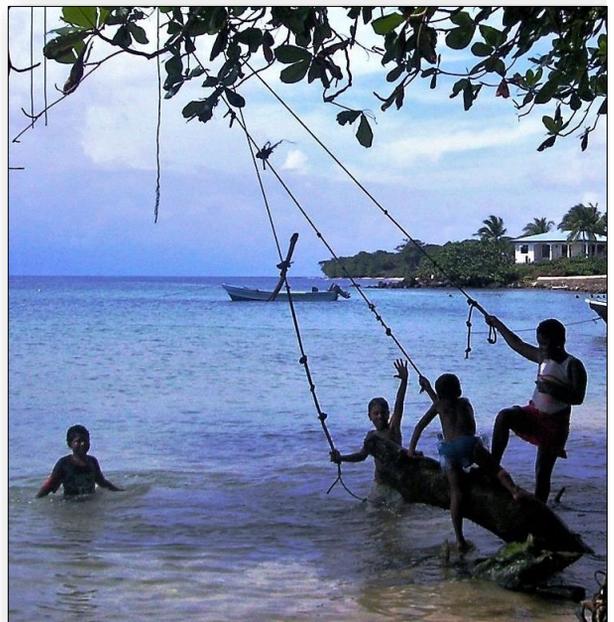
(Shier, 2021)

## Rule 4: Don't take risks

I started my career as a playworker.  
In playwork, what happens is what the children want to happen.  
Much of it spontaneous, not planned at all.  
You don't know what's going to happen.  
(Shier 2017)



(Shier, 1984)



“In all life there is risk, and when one is more alive,  
there is more risk”.

(Henrik Ibsen )



We dare not take risks in our modern academic world, because of the pervading culture of finding someone to blame for every mischance, and seeking compensation.

Researchers, like medics, have a primordial duty to “do no harm”.

But when harm does occur, whether by commission or omission, our contemporary culture demands that someone must be found to take the blame and someone must be punished. (*Furedi, 2018*)

Thus rules 1-3 all function to eliminate risk:

1. Follow the instructions to the letter and don't deviate.
2. Don't let your own personality show.
3. Never diverge from what has been "ethically" approved.

We can see the double purpose of the university ethical approval framework.

- Its first purpose is to protect those involved in research and ensure they come to no harm.
- Its second purpose is to make sure that the reputation of the university comes to no harm. (*Hedgecoe, 2016*)

## Rule 5: Avoid researching with vulnerable groups, and avoid sensitive or stressful topics

Researchers are under pressure to avoid researching with so-called "vulnerable groups".

- University ethical review frameworks often directly or indirectly steer researchers away from research with so-called vulnerable groups. (*Taplin et al, 2021*)
- "Vulnerability" can be confused with lack of competence. (*Carter, 2009*)
- Labelling entire groups as "vulnerable" leads to unnecessary blanket protections and restricted opportunities. (*Bracken-Roche et al, 2017*)

So that:

“A growing body of literature argues that well-intentioned gatekeepers may be further marginalising vulnerable populations, by denying them the opportunity to make an informed choice or receive benefits associated with research participation, perpetuating power imbalances and keeping members of those populations hidden and further excluded from participation.”

*(Powell et al, 2020, p. 327)*

“This may mean that worthwhile projects with children are never realized and children are denied their participatory rights and voices remain unheard”

*(Coyne, 2010, p. 452),*

Leading to: “The least sensitive, and possibly least useful, research being designed, funded, reviewed and conducted on the least vulnerable children”

*(Carter, 2009, p 862).*



Behind this paternalistic/protectionist approach may be untested assumptions that vulnerable people will find engaging with sensitive subjects hurtful or harmful.

However, this notion is contested. Some examples:

- Research participants have stated that they found involvement in research into sensitive and painful issues to be **a positive and helpful experience** (e.g., bereavement or the death of a child), and did not want the sensitivity or painful nature of the topic used as a reason to block their participation.

*(Scott et al, 2002)*

- In Palestine, the topics adult researchers considered too sensitive to discuss with young people were the very topics young people felt they needed to address.

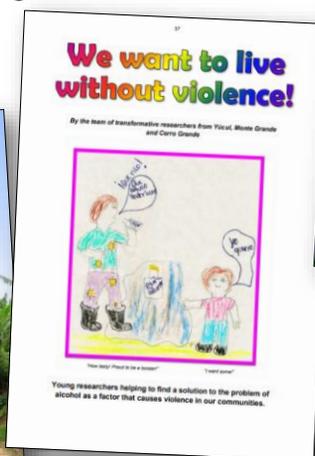
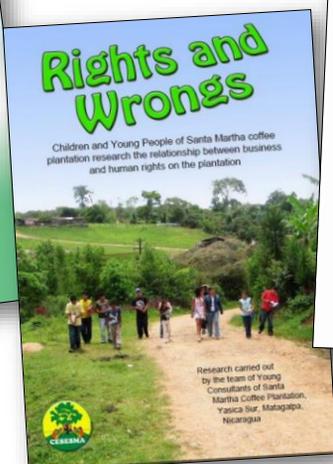
*(Jiménez, 2021)*

In my own work in Nicaragua, there are numerous examples of children choosing to research topics considered by adults to be sensitive or taboo:

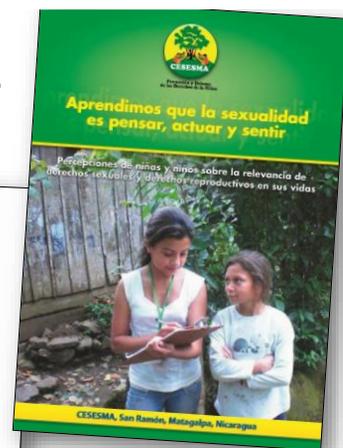
Business and human rights on the coffee plantation  
(Young Consultants of Santa Martha, 2011)



Violence against children  
(CESESMA, 2009)



Alcohol and violence in the community  
(Transformative Researchers from Yúcul, Monte Grande and Cerro Grande, 2012)



Children's knowledge of sex and sexuality  
(CESESMA, 2012a)

## Final thoughts

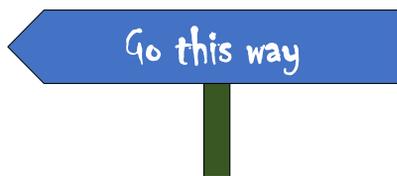


My problems with these unwritten rules can be seen as tensions.  
The rules push me one way and my own mind-set pulls the other.

Go this way

No, go that way

Over the years, my thinking has changed. Now I believe that what at first seem like 'tensions' or polarities can be reconfigured as complementarities – using the ancient Chinese Yin-Yang concept.



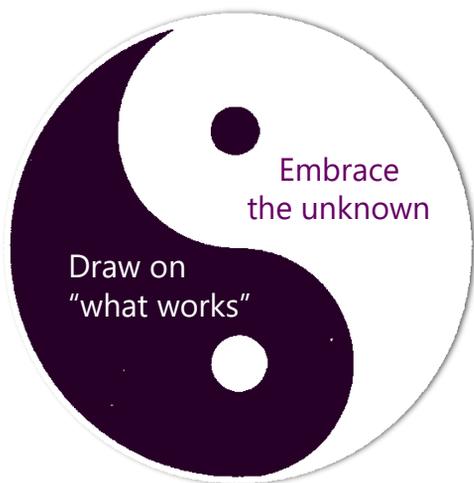
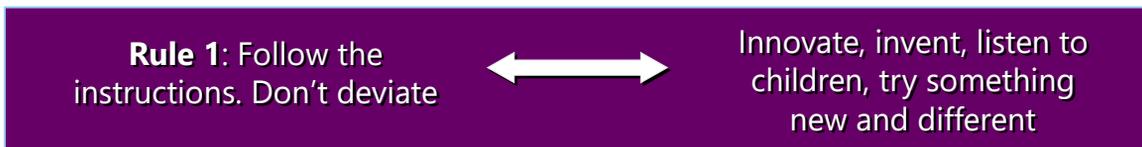
Instead of 'tensions' or contradictions to be navigated...



We can understand how both are part of a more complex reality, and how they can be integrated.



We can apply this thinking to my 5 Rules...



Drawing on what we know will work can help us progress, but it shouldn't tie us down.



**Rule 2: Make yourself invisible** ↔ **Identify yourself, because who you are is important to your research**



We can still do good academic writing, while acknowledging and reflecting on the significance of our own identity as a researcher.



**Rule 3: Focus on ethics as procedure** ↔ **Focus on how we treat those we work with**



Ethical review can help us fix things we've overlooked and improve the way we work. But it is no substitute for critical reflection on how we treat people in practice.



**Rule 4: Don't take risks** ↔ **Assess and be aware of risks. Take the risks that are worth taking**



If we are aware of risks, assess and monitor them, we can make wise decisions about which ones are worth confronting.



**Rule 5: Avoid vulnerable groups** ↔ **Defend everyone's right to speak out and be heard**



Rather than silencing vulnerable people "for their own good", we can prioritise their right to be heard, and create the right conditions for this to happen.





Trócaire Lenten Family collecting box, 2006



Ivania (right) in 2011, aged 13, as a member of a team of young researchers investigating domestic violence in their community. (Ivania's story is in Shier, 2022b)

# THE END



Thanks for listening

[www.harryshier.net](http://www.harryshier.net)

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All works by Shier or CESESMA are available at [www.harryshier.net](http://www.harryshier.net)

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