

Compromised or Not: The Challenges of Ethics in Qualitative Research

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ABSTRACT: Ethical issues in research have been a challenge to many researchers. While unarguable, depending on the type of research one pursues, that there are always ethical issues to observe, it has been a challenge to know the proper ethics associated with a particular research. Those in the natural sciences and to some extent, behavioural sciences have always controlled subjects in their experiments. Are all researches involve control or manipulation of subjects? What do we owe to our research participants? This review study highlights the ethics in qualitative research, tracing the historical development of such a practice. As such it explores the relevant of ethics in research.

Keywords: ethics, social research, qualitative research, behavioural sciences, informed consent

1.0 Introduction

Bernard (2006: p. 26) considers the importance of ethics in science and says that ‘ethics is part of method in science, just as it is in medicine, business, or any other part of life’. In investigating people’s experiences, the researcher enters a relationship with those she or he studies. The ethics of social research have to do with the nature of the researcher’s responsibilities in this relationship, or the things that should or should not be done regarding the people being observed and written about. This is not significantly different from what we do in other relationships. We try to be polite, treat people with respect, and do not do or say anything that will harm them. Good manners are a good beginning, but actual research scenarios may require guidelines that go beyond common courtesy. Below are some of the commonly used methods in qualitative research although this is not going to be discussed in full. What I will achieve here, is to mention some of these methods. Among them are participant observation (PO), in-depth interviews (IDI), documentary research (DR), focus group discussion (FGD) and participatory approaches (Okpoko & Ezeh 2011; Haralambos, Holborn & Heald, 2004; Haralambos, Holborn & Heald, 2008; Bernard, 2006).

In this article, my deliberately restricted aim is to understand the challenges of ethics in qualitative research. In doing this, I examine the history of ethics in research. Finally, I pay particular attention to the basic principles of ethics as it affects qualitative research.

2.0 History of Ethics in Research

A historical account of the origin of modern research ethics started with the crafting of regulations during the Doctor’s Trial of 1946 – 1947 which was part of the trial of Nazi war criminals (Dung, 2014). During the trial, 23 German Nazi physicians were reported to have carried researches with concentration camp inmates to (a) test the limits of the human body by exposing victims to extreme temperatures and altitudes as well as (b) test how quickly a human being could be euthanatized in order to carry out the Nazi racial purification policies most efficiently. The doctors were then accused of conducting “experiments” which tortured, brutalized, crippled, and murdered thousands of inmates (University of Minnesota 2003: pp. 6-7) cited in Dung (2014). The Nuremberg Military Tribunals found that the physicians had corrupted the ethics of the medical and scientific profession and had frequently and consciously debased the rights of the subjects. Sixteen of the twenty-three physicians/administrators were found guilty and imprisoned, and seven were sentenced to death. The trial was therefore aimed at protecting human subjects involved in research projects.

To facilitate the prosecution of the doctors for their detestable actions, ethical guidelines for the conduct of research commonly known as the Nuremberg Code were developed. The Code consisted of ten basic ethical principles that the accused violated. The code of ethic makes it mandatory that:

- Research participants must voluntarily consent to research participation
- Research aims should contribute to the good of society
- Research must be based on sound theory and prior animal testing
- Research must avoid unnecessary physical and mental suffering
- No research projects can go forward where serious injury and/or death are potential outcomes
- The degree of risk taken with research participants cannot exceed anticipated benefits of results

- Proper environment and protection for participants is necessary
- Experiments can be conducted only by scientifically qualified persons
- Human subjects must be allowed to discontinue their participation at any time
- Scientist must be prepared to terminate the experiment if there is cause to believe that continuation will be harmful or result in injury or death (University of Minnesota 2003) cited in (Dung, 2014).
The Nuremberg Guidelines provided the basis for further refinement of the laws to promote responsible conduct of research with human subjects as a focus of protection. The second most initiative was the Helsinki Declaration that was developed by the World Medical Association in 1964 and has undergone periodic review since then (Dung, 2014).

3.0 Why Ethics?

Bernard (2006) notes that the biggest challenge in social research is not how to select the participants but how to select them ethically. He points that there are consequences attached to this but one should determine if one is ready to live with those consequences. This highlights the principle challenge in doing social research. Verdugo (1998) notes that ethical rules are very vital in social research for the following.

First, some of these norms promote the aims of research, such as knowledge, truth, and avoidance of error. Second, since research often involves a great deal of cooperation among many different people in different disciplines and institutions, many of these ethical standards promote the values that are essential to collaborative work, such as trust, accountability, mutual respect, and fairness. Third, many of the ethical norms help to ensure that researchers can be held accountable to the public. Fourth, ethical norms in research also help to build public support for research. People are more likely to fund research project if they can trust the quality and integrity of research. Finally, many of the norms of research promote a variety of other important moral and social values, such as social responsibility, human rights, animal welfare, compliance with the law, and health and safety (Verdugo, 1998).

4.0 The Rudimentary Ethics: Some Exploratory Exposition

Today most researchers, irrespective of their discipline or methodological alignment, know that when working with human subjects, firm steps must be taken to guard the dignity and safety of the research participants. However, the wide acceptance and application of this ethical awareness is a relatively new development. As recently as the 1970s, highly unethical social and medical studies were being conducted in the United States. In one of the most troubling examples of unscrupulous research, a group of 399 African-American men afflicted with syphilis unknowingly became participants in a medical experiment (Jones, 1981: 1–23). From the 1930s to 1970s, the physicians assigned to these men deliberately did not treat them for their ailment, even after penicillin was developed and could have been used as a cure. Instead, the patients were secretly experimented on to examine the effects of untreated syphilis. By the time this U.S. Public Health Service study was exposed and subsequently terminated, many of the patients whose condition had gone untreated for years had either died horribly or become more severely ill (Marvesti, 2004; Green & Thorogood, 2004).

Instances of unethical research are not limited to medical experiments. Among social scientists in the United States, a well-known example of unethical research is Humphreys' *Tearoom Trade* (1970). Humphreys studied anonymous homosexual encounters in semi-public places. Specifically, he was interested in the background of men who had sex with other men in public restrooms. After positioning himself in a restroom in a city park, he gained the trust of the men who frequented it by acting as a lookout for them while they engaged in sexual activities. Humphreys secretly recorded their license plate numbers, and with the help of the police discovered who they were and where they lived (Humphrey, 1970).

Months later, he visited the men in their homes disguised as a medical survey researcher. He gathered additional information about these men and their families and subsequently published his research in a book that was widely praised before questions were raised about its ethics. One of the focal findings of his work was that many of the men in his study were married and of middle-class background – a discovery that was made possible through the covert incursion of the subjects' privacy (Marvesti, 2004).

Such flagrant abuses of research subjects in the name of science have led to the establishment of specific codes of conduct. While these may vary across disciplines and national boundaries, there are a number of general principles that most researchers would agree with. The following presents a brief review

of these principles (i.e., voluntary participation, protection of research participants, potential benefit to participants and guidelines on the use of deception) (Marvasti, 2004).

4.1 Who is to participate?

Participation in a research project should be voluntary; you should not psychologically or physically coerce your subjects to take part in your research. Let us consider a number of setups that run the risk of violating this principle. Suppose a sociologist, Professor Johnson, (Marvasti, 2004; Green & Thorogood, 2004) asks his students to fill out a short answer questionnaire for a course on social stratification and poverty. The required assignment involves writing about your personal or family experiences with poverty. You are supposed to answer questions like: 'Have you and your family ever experienced economic hardship? If so, describe how you felt about it?' 'In your view, what has been the psychological impact of such an experience on you?' 'If you have not personally experienced financial difficulties, you may answer these questions about a relative or an acquaintance.' Professor Johnson informs that excerpts from the survey questionnaires will be used anonymously for a research project about college students' attitudes toward poverty. Has the principle of voluntary participation been violated in this case? Some would say the answer is yes. Given that the assignment is required, the students' decision not to participate most certainly will hurt their grades. They have to participate regardless of how they feel about their personal accounts being used for research purposes. On the other hand, if Professor Johnson offered several assignment choices, only one of which was the autobiographical one, then the decision to partake in the project is voluntary. Alternatively, Johnson might make the research voluntary by announcing that the answers may not be used without your consent (Marvasti, 2004; Green & Thorogood, 2004).

Similarly, the principle of voluntary participation can be violated when you lure the indigent into a study by offering them monetary rewards. For example, to get an interview with a homeless person, a researcher might offer them five dollars. Is this ethical? Many would argue that it isn't because asking the poor to participate in a study in exchange for money is the moral equivalent of asking a starving person to answer a few questions in exchange for a plate of food. What is the solution? One possibility is to solicit interviews without any rewards. Another approach is to contact their service providers and ask if they know of anyone who is willing to be interviewed.

How about when you are observing people in public places such as malls or restaurants? Do you need to approach each patron for permission to observe them? The general consensus is that what people do in public places is by definition there for all to observe. The same guideline applies to public statements (Marvasti, 2004; Green & Thorogood, 2004).

If in a published newspaper editorial, I refer to my personal experiences, you don't need my permission to use words that are already public domain (obviously, you have to cite the author and the source). What if the interviewee is a child or someone who is mentally incapacitated? In these cases, the recommendation is to gain consent from a parent or a guardian before proceeding with the research.

As these examples indicate, it is sometimes difficult to assess the degree to which the subjects' participation is completely voluntary. While a strictly legalistic interpretation of the phrase 'voluntary participation' might be useful in some cases, you may ultimately have to rely on your own judgment and sense of morality to determine if the person you are researching is fully aware of the implications of their involvement in your study (Marvasti, 2004).

4.2 Are the research participants protected?

Even if your respondents voluntarily take part in your study, they may not be in a position to fully appreciate the potential harm they could suffer from their participation. For example, after obtaining permission from members of a support group for the chronically depressed, a researcher proceeds to conduct interviews about the sources of their mental illness. One of the questions that come up during the interview is whether or not the respondent has been a victim of child abuse. Specifically, the researcher asks, 'Have you been sexually or physically abused by a relative or an acquaintance? If so, please describe how this happened and when?' Suppose the respondent tries to answer this question and, in the process, has to recall a very painful past. After the interview, the respondent becomes even more depressed and tries to commit suicide. Is the researcher to be blamed for this unfortunate event, given that the participation was completely voluntary (Marvasti, 2004; Green & Thorogood, 2004)?

In this example, it is likely that the respondent did not know the consequences of participating in the study. Given the sensitive nature of child abuse, perhaps our researcher should have taken precautionary

steps to terminate the interview if the respondent appeared overly emotional. At the very least, the research participants should have been informed in advance about the types of questions they would be asked and reminded that they have the option not to answer certain questions or to end the interview whenever they wish. In theory, researchers should take every reasonable measure to protect their subjects from harm, but in reality, it is impossible to anticipate every risk. One reason for this is that your study might affect respondents in different ways. In the example above, for some participants talking about their past might indeed be therapeutic, whereas for others it might be traumatic. In the end, it is your responsibility as a researcher to minimize potential harm as much as possible.

This means that in some cases you may have to abandon your research idea altogether because the risk of harm is too great. For example, psychologists may find it very interesting to study the effect of social isolation on children as this would teach us a great deal about the importance of socialization. However, the thought of separating innocent children from all their loved ones is unconscionable no matter what the scientific merit of the study.

4.3 Concealing identity

An important part of protecting your research subjects is safeguarding their privacy; revealing the identities of your respondents could harm them. For example, if you were researching homosexual couples who preferred to keep their lifestyle secret from their relatives, disclosing their names would seriously damage their family relationships. Or suppose you were interviewing high school students about drug use and they reported that they experimented with marijuana. If your respondents were exposed, they could be expelled from school and possibly face legal charges. Secrecy is also a worry when dealing with more conventional topics. For example, in ethnography of a hospital, the nurses might disclose their opinions about the physicians they work with (Marvasti, 2004; Green & Thorogood, 2004).

A nurse might gripe about how a certain doctor is always late for her/his appointments. Revealing the respondent's identity in this case may result in her/his dismissal from work. Confidentiality and anonymity are two aspects of the privacy issue.

Confidentiality means that the identity of the respondent will not be disclosed to anyone. So, when you refer to a particular research participant in your writing, you keep their identities hidden by using fictional names. You should also try to disguise other identifying information, such as where they live or work. For example, if you are doing your research in Gainesville, Florida, you might refer to the location as 'a small city in the south eastern United States.' Or if your data was collected at a hospital named Bethesda Memorial, you should change the name to something like 'Clairmount Memorial.' Overall, confidentiality implies that, except for the researcher, no one else will know the identity of the participants.

Anonymity (Marvasti, 2004; Green & Thorogood, 2004) means that even the researcher does not know the identity of the respondents. In qualitative studies where you observe people in various settings and interview them face-to-face, complete anonymity is impossible – in most instances you meet research participants in person. Nevertheless, certain steps can be taken toward providing subjects with limited anonymity. For example, if the interviews are taped, do not label the cassettes with the respondents' actual names. Either use fictional names or organize your tapes using randomly assigned numbers. Similarly, you can create a set of pseudonyms for all your research participants and use them in your notes instead of their real names. It is likely that over time you forget what their real names were and remember them only by the fictional names you assign to them.

4.4 What will the research participants gain?

We rely on research respondents to provide the raw material for our analysis and reports. They share with us their time and social knowledges, but usually they are not financially rewarded for their contributions. So, how do we pay them back? The ethical concern here is to ensure that the research-subject relationship is mutually beneficial. We don't want to exploit subjects or respondents, taking from them without giving anything back. To make this arrangement more equitable, the research project could be designed in a way that benefits the subjects and their communities (Marvasti, 2004; Green & Thorogood, 2004).

For example, let's say you plan to study how children construct ethnic or racial identities for themselves and others by positioning yourself at a day-care centre as a volunteer and observing how children interact with one another on the playground, which is precisely what Van Ausdale and Feagin did in their book *The First R: How Children Learn Race and Racism* in 2002. Their study provides disturbing, but eye-

opening, accounts of how young children use racist epithets in reference to their peers. How was this project beneficial to the research participants? Van Ausdale and Feagin reason that in the end their work indirectly benefits the children by informing parents and educators about potential problems with the way their charges learn about and practice race and ethnicity. Sociological studies that more explicitly encourage respondents' full participation in all phases of the research process with the goal of bettering their lives are referred to as 'participatory research.' As Small notes:

Participatory researchers are openly and explicitly political. Their ideology emphasizes large scale structural forces, conflicts of interest, and the need to overcome oppression and inequality through transforming the existing social order. The lack of access to useful and valued forms of knowledge by oppressed or disenfranchised people is viewed as a major problem that can be overcome through the research process (1995:944).

As a whole, qualitative study can be beneficial in three important ways (Silverman 2001: pp. 271–81). First, they could help increase awareness, and stimulate debate, about public policies. Research on the health care system, for example, has provided much useful information about needed improvements.

Second, qualitative research could make people more aware of their choices. In the example above, Van Ausdale and Feagin's research encourages another choice for constructing children's racial identities, one that is more inclusive and tolerant. Finally, qualitative research provides 'new perspectives' on old problems. The ethical principles of voluntary participation and protecting and benefiting the participants are sometimes addressed through a formal protocol, which is briefly reviewed in the next section.

4.5 Are the research Participants informed?

Addressing these basic ethical issues in working with human subjects sometimes requires that researchers use what is referred to as an 'informed consent'. This includes written or verbal statements that provide research participants with a general description of the research project along with its potential harms and benefits. Marvasti (2004) notes that some academic institutions in the United States ask all researchers to make use of the informed consent procedure under the guidelines of the office of Institutional Review Boards (IRB). An IRB is a committee composed of representatives from various departments in a university and is charged with reviewing all research projects involving human subjects. Before allowing a study to proceed, IRB might request further clarification or changes to the design and implementation of the research. Let us consider the elements of a written informed consent (Marvasti, 2004; Green & Thorogood, 2004).

4.5.1 What structure is the consent form?

A written consent form should address all the ethical concerns described earlier. Namely, it should emphasize that:

- Participation is voluntary.
- No harm will come to the participants (if there is any risk of harm, it should be clearly described).
- The participants' privacy will be protected (steps that will be taken to ensure protection of privacy should be listed specifically) (Marvasti, 2004).

Think of the informed consent as a contract that postulates your ethical responsibilities to the respondents. Marvasti (2004) notes that if your research is conducted under the supports of an academic institution in the United States and the IRB has approved your project, violations of the informed consent agreement may have legal ramifications for you and your school.

4.5.2 What are the constraints of the informed consent model as applied to qualitative research?

The informed consent approach is very useful in specifying ethical boundaries for researchers. However, these guidelines are based on the assumptions of quantitative, survey research, where questions are asked from a known sample with very little variation from one respondent to another. The problem is that in qualitative research sometimes the interview questions and the focus of the project itself changes in the course of the study. Depending on the circumstances, one interview may be very different from another. This is especially true for in-depth interviews in which follow-up questions emerge spontaneously in reaction to respondent's comments. Since one cannot anticipate the exact direction the interview will take, it is impossible to inform fully the respondent about the focus of the study in advance. Similar problems arise in ethnographic studies, where in the course of observations one comes in contact with many people in many settings. In general, in the context of qualitative research, two factors impede the full implementation of informed consent guidelines:

1. It may be difficult to define precisely the characteristics and number of research participants in advance, and

2. The focus of the study and the related research questions may undergo changes over the course of the project (Marvasti, 2004).

These challenges have led some qualitative researchers to raise fundamental questions about the feasibility of informed consent. For example, Lawton (2002) in her study of dying patients at a hospice (a medical/residential facility designed for the care of the terminally ill), underscores the many ethical concerns that informed consent guidelines fail to address. Specifically, she asks how informed is informed consent? Lawton makes the case that many of the dying patients she studied were not alert enough to fully understand the purpose of her research. At the same time, she notes that it may be necessary to continually remind research participants of the informed consent agreement since in prolonged studies, such as ethnographies, the participants may be observed many times in many situations for different purposes. Overall, while the principles of informing and protecting respondents play a significant role in quantitative and qualitative research, there may be differences in the way these guidelines are implemented for the two approaches.

Quantitative research is more inductive, it starts with a set of clearly stated questions and hypotheses and proceeds to data collection and analysis. Consequently, quantitative or survey researchers are in a position to inform their respondents from the start about exactly what they plan to study and how (Bernard, 2006).

By contrast, qualitative research tends to be more deductive, proceeding from observations to general statements. For qualitative researchers, it is more difficult to completely inform participants about the purpose and the specific direction of the inquiries at the onset of the research project (Bernard, 2006).

4.6 Battling researchers values and biases

Should researchers allow personal or political values to enter their work? In this regard, according to Silverman (2001: pp. 259–66), sociologists can assume three different roles. First, there is the position of the ‘scholar.’ In this capacity, the researcher is interested in science for the sake of science and judges the study’s relevance and ethics based on his or her own moral principles. As Silverman suggests, this position is best represented by Max Weber, who ‘insisted on the primacy of the individual’s conscience as a basis for action’ (2001: p. 261). The second research role is that of a ‘state counselor.’ Here, the goal is to work closely with interested policymakers. In this role, sociologists might be viewed as social engineers who support state bureaucrats in a joint effort to create a ‘better’ society.

Finally, there is the ‘partisan’ role, where the sociologist sides with a particular group. In Silverman’s words, ‘the partisan seeks to provide the theoretical and factual resources for a political struggle aimed at transforming the assumptions through which both political and administrative games are played’ (Silverman, 2001: p. 265). The partisan role is best captured in an often-quoted statement by Becker in which he asks sociologists, ‘Whose side are we on?’ For Becker, sociologists should take the side of the ‘underdogs,’ or the oppressed.

4.7 Data Fabrication

Another serious ethical breach a researcher can commit is publishing falsified data. Sound, reliable research progresses only to the degree that the researchers are honest. If researchers knowingly published a project using falsified data, they might be banished from the academic community (Verdugo, 1998).

5.0 Conclusion

This paper reviewed the ethics of social research as they apply to qualitative methods. These ethics can loosely be defined as the dos and don’ts of how we treat our research participants. A number of general principles were described. It was emphasized that we should ensure that participation is voluntary, no harm is to be done to the respondents, the research participants should benefit from the research, and that their privacy should be protected. One way of addressing all these concerns is through the informed consent process whereby verbal or written statements are shared with research participants to inform them about the topic of the study, its potential benefit or harm, and the specific steps taken to guard their privacy. Some limitations of the informed consent guidelines were briefly discussed. In particular, qualitative research is difficult to fully describe the study to the respondents from the start, because the questions and themes emerge deductively over time. I concluded the paper with Silverman’s three research roles: the scholar, the state counsellor, and the partisan, and suggested that as an alternative to asking ‘whose side are we on?’ researchers could consider the specific audience for whom they are writing.

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