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# Ethics in Qualitative Research and Evaluation

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## Abstract

- *Summary:* The article approaches questions of research ethics with three emphases: first, the process of research; second, ethical questions raised by qualitative research; and third, precedent and stimulation from the work of writers outside the usual boundaries of social work.
- *Findings:* The ethics of qualitative research design pose distinctive demands on principles of informed consent, confidentiality and privacy, social justice, and practitioner research. Fieldwork ethics raise special considerations regarding power, reciprocity and contextual relevance. Ethical issues raised by the analysis and dissemination of qualitative enquiry emphasize questions concerning narrative research, outcomes and justice, and the utilization of research.
- *Applications:* Social work needs a culture of ethical awareness, a review of ethical approval, an awareness of the ethical issues posed by practitioners' involvement in evaluative research, and an understanding of the ethical dimensions of different parts of the research process.

**Keywords** ethics evaluation qualitative research

I have written this paper with three linked purposes. First, social work research will be more ethically sensitive and methodologically persuasive when founded on a clear appreciation of the relationships between ethics and methodology. I am aware of the concerns that there may be an unhelpful trend towards what Hammersley has labelled 'ethicism', a tendency for broader methodological questions to get absorbed in a reductionist way into ethics (Hammersley, 2000). I hope to protect against that risk by emphasizing the reciprocity between methodology and ethics. Second, there has been steady and welcome recent attention in several Western countries to broad considerations of standards and governance in government-sponsored qualitative research.<sup>1</sup> It is timely to explore how the research ethics aspects of these developments may integrate with social work and human services. Third, it is probably true to say that there is a continuing drive in a number of Western countries towards the increased

institutionalization of research ethics decision-making. I want to provide a basis to counter reasonable concerns that these processes may become increasingly medicalized, with the probable consequence that decisions regarding social-work research ethics will become less rather than more ethically sensitive.

Medical research ethics no longer provide a fixed reference point in relation to which social-work research ethics can be located. For example, in the United Kingdom, the spate of concerns over consent for storage of body organs, developments in genetics and linked innovations in technology, and new problems in privacy issues have destabilized confidence in the ethical regulation of medical research and led to wide-ranging proposals for standards of research governance (Department of Health, 2000). For example, the Department of Health (London) produced extensive guidance and requirements on 'Good Practice in Consent' in November 2001 based on the principle that 'Patients have a fundamental legal and ethical right to determine what happens to their own bodies'.<sup>2</sup>

Within social work an argument has emerged for partially distinguishing social work and medical ethics issues (see, for example, Tanner and Shaw, 2000). Tentative efforts to develop a generally accepted code of social-work research ethics are one response to these trends (Butler, 2000). Although these developments are helpful, the approach taken in this article is rather different. First, rather than promote codes of ethics I want to focus on the process of research, and second, instead of taking the conventional ethical problems of randomized control trials as a benchmark, I will focus on ethical questions raised by qualitative research. Third, although my primary interest is in human-services research, I have deliberately looked for precedent and stimulation to the work of writers outside the usual boundaries of social work, especially those working in the evaluation field. Social-work research and practice has occasionally been marked by a sentimental tendency to insularity, and a misplaced assumption that the defence of social work requires unduly distinctive claims for the profession.

In case this approach is misunderstood, a few caveats are in place. First, I am not arguing that codes of ethics are out of place, nor am I arguing for a solely inductivist position. But I am concerned that reliance on codes alone risks compartmentalizing ethical aspects of research, and shutting them off into a preamble to research. Second, neither am I aiming to repeat the claim sometimes made, that qualitative research is somehow more ethical than quantitative research. No research strategies are especially privileged. To borrow a phrase from Ernest House, quoted below, qualitative researchers do not live in a state of methodological grace. But the ethical challenges of qualitative enquiry are easily neglected if the agenda posed by the methodological concerns of control, technology, and large datasets remains normative. Third, I have written this article with little or no explicit distinction between qualitative research ethics and qualitative evaluation ethics. Kushner would not agree. In a thought-provoking discussion of evaluation ethics he commences from the

position that evaluators 'frequently seek to impose a moral and ethical order on the field of our inquiry. We set the rules. In so doing, evaluation creates an ethical space – that is, a space defined by a temporary suspension of normal ethical assumptions' (Kushner, 2000: 151).

In so far as evaluation is explicitly about reaching judgements of worth and merit, day-to-day ethical concerns may well be rather different from less evaluatively oriented enquiry. But I would prefer to wait until the case has been more persuasively made. Qualitative researchers will usually find they have as much to gain from writers on evaluation ethics as evaluators can gain from them.

## Qualitative Research Ethics

Naivety about ethics is itself unethical. If Lincoln and Guba are correct, there are definite grounds for concern that ethical practice in research is routinely compromised.

Respondents' values *are* systematically disregarded as mere opinions with no foundation in scientific knowledge. Purposes of research *are* systematically withheld from subjects on the grounds that were they to know them, the 'technical adequacy' of the study would be compromised . . . Protected personal information *is* accessed when the researcher believes it useful to his or her larger search for truth. (Lincoln and Guba, 1989: 225)

The concerns raised here are about the day-to-day processes of ethical decision-making rather than broader ethical principle. Yet even at the more general level there are different approaches to research ethics. Kvale (1996) has posed three ethical models as providing the broad frameworks within which researchers reflect on these issues, as follows.

- Duty ethics of *principles*, from which perspective research ethics are driven by universal principles such as honesty, justice and respect, that in certain circumstances can become moral absolutes, regardless of consequences.
- Utilitarian ethics of *consequence*, which prioritize the outcomes of actions and entail a cost-benefit pragmatism, and can mean that ends are regarded as justifying means.
- Value ethics of *skills*, which stress a contextual or situational ethical position, with the emphasis on researchers' moral values and ethical skills in reflexively negotiating ethical dilemmas.

The third position resonates with characteristic social-work positions. However, it is important to note that there is a range of positions within a value ethics approach, and it is not necessarily incompatible with adopting aspects of either a duty ethics or ethics of consequence position. A recent example of a value ethics position in social work can be seen in Denzin's recent application of his earlier argument for a feminist communitarian ethical model for social-work research (Denzin, 2002: 30–3).

Although appreciation of these frameworks is essential, I want to explore a way into the issue by locating social-work research ethics in a human-services context. Developments in technology, genetics and private-sector services are currently posing fresh questions for research ethics in the fields of health and human services. The exponential growth in the possibilities for data-linking and secondary analysis, the emergence of major banks of private-sector data, the challenges posed by cybersecurity and the problems of genetic privacy triggered by developments in applied genetics all pose new ethical questions of considerable scale and complexity. Yet within human-services research there has been slight attention to ethical issues, and the ethical questions posed by qualitative research have been still more disregarded (see Peled and Leichtenritt, 2002, for a recent review of ethics in qualitative social-work research). This is due in part to the divergent ethical tilt of models of research ethics based on the custom and practice of medical research, compared with those posed by qualitative research. There is a range of areas where attention is needed, and for most of these qualitative research imparts a distinct twist to the direction in which solutions may be sought. Table 1 suggests starting-points where discussions of the issues can be pursued.

For example, Lincoln and Guba argue that ethics are part and parcel of the paradigm position held by the researcher. They conclude that conventional (positivist) science has ethically failed. They believe that the alleged failures of ethical decision-making summarized in the quotation at the opening of this section suggest three lessons. First, 'much depends on the moral boiling point of the individual enquirer; different enquirers will make different decisions even when confronted with similar circumstances' (1989: 226). Second, 'inquirers have managed to find many apparently sound reasons for avoiding "wisdom ethics" – the ideal ethical practices – in conducting their research' (1989: 226). Finally, they argue that nothing inherent in conventional modes of social-science research either mandates or rewards ethical behaviour.

The main thrust of their argument is directed to the third problem: what they describe as the ethical tilt of the conventional paradigm. The essence of their case is that the conventional paradigm holds an absolutist view of truth, assuming that unassailable knowledge can be obtained. 'With such a metaphysical warrant for the search for truth in hand, the social scientist is free to argue convincingly that his or her research requires and justifies deception . . . Presumptions about the nature of reality reinforce – and indeed require – treating human subjects as though they were objects' (1989: 226–7).

They believe that the naturalistic paradigm – while not free from its own ethical dilemmas – is more ethical than the conventional. Because it has no underlying premise about the way things really are, deception is 'absolutely counterproductive' (1989: 230). Also, the relationship between researcher and respondent is one between equal partners with equal voices. The respondent therefore keeps control of the process.

Table 1 **Ethical issues in qualitative social work research**

|  |  |
|--|--|
| What are the ethical issues distinctive to a particular research <i>paradigm</i> ?                                       | Johnson, 1995; Lincoln and Guba, 1989; Shaw, 1999  |
| How can the principle of <i>informed consent</i> be adequately stated and protected in qualitative research?             | Eisner, 1991; Kayser-Jones and Koenig, 1994        |
| What are the central elements of an ethical <i>research agreement</i> ?  | House, 1980  |
| How can the principles of <i>confidentiality and privacy</i> be adequately stated and protected in qualitative research? | Eisner, 1991                                       |
| What are the particular ethical questions posed by qualitative <i>practitioner</i> research?                             | Archbold, 1986; Kayser-Jones and Koenig, 1994      |
| Are there special ethical questions posed by different qualitative <i>fieldwork methods</i> ?                            | Harrison and Lyon, 1993; Stacey, 1988              |
| Are there special ethical questions posed by qualitative research with different <i>service user groups</i> ?            | Kayser-Jones and Koenig, 1994; Shaw, 1999: 167–169 |
| How can ethical decisions in qualitative research be <i>locally contextualized</i> ?                                     | Altheide and Johnson, 1997; Johnson, 1995          |
| How should relations of <i>power</i> be handled ethically in qualitative social work research?                           | Acker et al., 1983; Stacey, 1988                   |
| What ethical issues are posed when a qualitative researcher adopts an advocacy role?                                     | Archbold, 1986                                     |
| What ethical questions are posed by the analysis, reporting and uses of qualitative research?                            | Finch, 1985, 1986                                  |

The argument helps to reinstate ethical issues as central to research and evaluation. However, several questions are raised by their analysis.

1. Are Lincoln and Guba justified in adopting the position that some paradigms are more ethical than others?
2. It is a matter of judgement whether the ethical problems of naturalism are preferable to those of conventional research ethics. For example, Lincoln and Guba's argument for the ethical superiority of naturalism seems to be compromised by their own acknowledgement that 'confidentiality and anonymity obviously cannot be guaranteed' in naturalistic enquiry (p. 233).

3. Lincoln and Guba unhelpfully collapse positions with which they disagree. They treat positivism and realist post-positivism as one and the same in their critique. However, the two hold very different positions regarding the possibility and nature of objectivity. Their critique of absolutism loses part of its force once we recognize this distinction.
4. Is it apparent that naturalistic enquiry guarantees freedom from deception? It has a certain rhetorical plausibility, but several commentators have asked whether ethnography may be more prone to deception than traditional methods of enquiry (e.g. Stacey, 1988). In addition, while egalitarian relationships do counter deception, one problem is that much ethnographic, interpretive research makes a dualist distinction between stable researcher constructs and unstable, contingent respondent constructs. Heap has suggested that this is morally suspect, in that 'respondents will be treated as metaphysical fools, dumb dualists, while the otherwise honest and forthright evaluator knows the truth: it's all constructions, nothing is real' (Heap, 1995: 59; Shaw, 1999: 56–8).
5. Debates about the ethical implications of divergent research methodologies have tended to be insulated from empirically based appraisal. For example, Peled and Leichtentritt's review of ethical issues in qualitative social-work research illuminates the apparent fact that qualitative researchers in social work rarely frame their research around Lincoln and Guba's criteria (Peled and Leichtentritt, 2002).

No research methodology is ethically privileged, and formulations of ethical principles are no different for quantitative and qualitative methodologies. However, there are particular ethical questions presented by qualitative research. Indeed, the goal of pursuing knowledge within ethically challenging contexts has long been the dilemma faced by ethnographers. The dilemma of being at once the 'snooping stranger' and the 'good friend' (Jarvie, 1982) is a special challenge for many forms of qualitative research. More positively, what is likely to be viewed as compromising the integrity of randomized control trials can also be viewed as nurturing the integrity of the research relationship in qualitative enquiry. These familiar dilemmas are helpfully explored by relating them to the research process.

## Design Ethics and Social Justice

Ethical problems of research have usually been discussed as roughly synonymous with the ethical problems of (quasi-) experimentation. The influence of the agenda flowing from medical research has often strengthened this ethical standpoint. The experience and reflection of qualitative researchers and evaluators has fortunately rescued us from that myopic perspective on research ethics.

House (1993) has distinguished several areas in which ethical problems face the evaluator. These include withholding the nature of the evaluation research

from the participants; exposing participants to acts that would harm them; invading the privacy of participants and withholding benefits from participants.

### Informed Consent

Take, for example, the first of these problems. The principle of informed consent has often been appealed to, in order to protect participants against this abuse. Qualitative researchers and evaluators are faced with at least three difficulties in this area.

First, covert evaluation is 'a particularly dangerous example of covert social research, because the findings are not being used merely to illuminate our knowledge of the social world, but potentially to change it' (Finch, 1986: 203). This may be partly countered by bottom-up forms of research, where participatory and user-led research strategies are often aspired to. However, there remains a second problem, which Stacey (1988) has called the delusion of alliance, and another problem that participants may reveal more than they intend. In traditional research it is probably relatively clear to the participant when the evaluator is working and when (s)he is having time out. The participants are likely to assume that when they are in informal settings the evaluator is having time out. But this is not likely to be the case in qualitative research, and the participants face the risk of unwitting disclosure.

Informed consent in qualitative research is often hazardous because it 'implies that the researcher knows *before* the event . . . what the event will be and its possible effects' (Eisner, 1991: 214). This is often not the case in qualitative research.

Finally, some participants may be less sophisticated than others in raising issues.

Do researchers have an ethical responsibility to serve in a dual role: first, as researchers with a project aimed at satisfying their research purposes, and second, as advocates for the practitioners, raising questions that the researchers know should be raised in order for practitioners to make a competent assessment of the risks? (Eisner, 1991: 217)

### Confidentiality and Privacy

Problems of confidentiality are also sharper in qualitative research. Quantitative evaluators can often deal with confidentiality issues through the sampling process, and through technical safeguards when the data is analysed. We may decide to guarantee the privacy of disclosures. But there are two difficult questions. First, do all research participants have equal rights to privacy; and second, does a commitment to privacy cover all circumstances?

We have already noted Lincoln and Guba's concession that 'confidentiality and anonymity obviously cannot be guaranteed' in naturalistic enquiry (Lincoln and Guba, 1989: 233). Maybe not. But qualitative researchers should not underestimate the ethical risks this brings. William Whyte's classic study *Street Corner Society* has gone through four editions over a period of almost 60 years (Whyte, 1993). By the time of the 1981 edition Whyte felt comfortable to reveal the



location of the study as the North End of Boston, and also the names of some of the main characters, such as Doc. Despite the passing of time, Whyte was criticized by both surviving members of the street corner gangs, and also by academics (see for example, Richardson, 1992). His chastened conclusion is worth noting: 'If I had to do it all over again, what changes would I make? I would not have identified any individuals with their real names. I knew I could not hurt Doc, long dead, but it never occurred to me that his sons would be upset' (Whyte, 1997: 33–4).

Does the right to privacy cover all circumstances? We may feel fairly clear what we would do if we saw a teacher sexually fondling a young child. But what about blatant incompetence by a professional practitioner? Or incidents which we judge to be clear examples of racism? The response is less clear-cut. The school or agency may already know. Also, whistle-blowing during the research may forfeit the opportunity for whistle-blowing in the final report. Less usually, what should the evaluator do if he/she encounters outstanding but unrecognized accomplishments by someone who may have a reputation as a poor or difficult practitioner by managers? The general point is much the same as that raised regarding consent: 'do researchers have an ethical responsibility to foster fair treatment of those they observe?' (Eisner, 1991: 219).

One context for this paper is the wish of research commissioners and funders to develop ethical standards for direct decision-making and broader principles of research governance. However, the problem of applying ethical principles to the detailed conduct of qualitative research and evaluation still remains. House believes that the balancing of principles in concrete situations is 'the ultimate ethical act' (1993: 168). For example, it is possible that adherence to ethical principles may prove detrimental to programme effectiveness (Lewis, 1988). A hospital manager may decide to lessen workloads to limit burdens on staff, and so reduce the number of patients that can be seen. Reflecting on his own experience of ethical mistakes, Eisner concludes:

We might like to secure consent that is informed, but we know we can't always inform because we don't always know. We would like to protect personal privacy and guarantee confidentiality, but we know we cannot always fulfil such guarantees. We would like to be candid but sometimes candour is inappropriate. We do not like to think of ourselves as using others as a means to our own professional ends, but if we embark upon a research study that we conceptualize, direct, and write, we virtually assure that we will use others for our purpose. (Eisner, 1991: 225–6)

### Evaluating for Social Justice

The issues of social justice for evaluation have been addressed patchily, although there is a growing literature. Evaluators 'do not live in a state of methodological grace' (House, 1991: 245), and justice considerations impinge on decisions regarding research design. I will briefly consider just two approaches, briefly outlining the key ideas, suggesting an example and noting the issues that each approach poses.

1. **Justice as fairness** One of the clearest examples of this position is that held by House. He believes that none of the dominant theories of justice is entirely satisfactory as a basis for evaluation. He advocates a moral basis of evaluation resting in principles of moral equality, moral autonomy, impartiality and reciprocity, without being sure how they are to be balanced against each other in every situation. None should have particular priority and decisions should be made in pluralist fashion, with considerations of efficiency playing a part but with justice as prior. In other words, he offers a strong dose of John Rawls, and also of more intuitionist approaches, with a slight dash of utilitarian efficiency.

He develops the example of negotiating a fair and demanding evaluation agreement (House, 1980: Chapter 8), in which all participants should meet the demanding conditions that they:

- not be coerced;
- be able to argue their position;
- accept the terms under which the agreement is reached;
- negotiate; this is not simply 'a coincidence among individual choices' (1980: 165);
- not pay excessive attention to one's own interests;
- adopt an agreement that affects all equally;
- select a policy for evaluation that is in the interests of the group to which it applies;
- have equal and full information on relevant facts;
- avoid undue risk to participants arising from incompetent and arbitrary evaluations.

House defends this reformist position. In response to critics who say he is biased to the disadvantaged he responds, 'It seems to me that making certain the interests of the disadvantaged are represented and seriously considered is not being biased, though it is certainly more egalitarian than most current practice' (1991: 241-2).

2. **Constructivist justice** The constructivist shift in sociology has led to a more reflexive stance on justice issues in research. Some explicit work on justice from a reflexive stance has been undertaken by Johnson and Altheide (Altheide and Johnson, 1997; Johnson, 1995). They reject contemporary theories of justice. Johnson argues that a reflexive theory of justice should include the following emphases. Justice is:
  1. a struggle – 'our struggle to live with virtue in our social and communal lives' (Johnson, 1995: 199);
  2. fundamentally emotional: our judgements stem from our experience;
  3. developmental, changing over time, and changing standards as we change in time and place;
  4. gendered: our struggles include 'an abiding concern with how to live peacefully and productively with the members of the other genders' (1995: 201).

5. personal: 'The pursuit of justice lies not in our words and our theories but in our concrete actions to help other people' (1995: 201);
6. a matter of social interaction: 'We typically join together with others . . . Justice is communal and processual' (1995: 202);
7. our effort to 'figure out what is going on in the world' (1995: 202);
8. selfish: 'Selfishness is the foundation for altruism' (1995: 203).

This approach pushes us to an empirical concern with 'how justice is constituted, communicated and experienced in everyday life' (Altheide and Johnson, 1997: 184). The main focus of criticism of constructivist and interpretist positions has been on their relativism and hence their potential political complacency. Recent postmodern writing – for example that from a feminist perspective – has sought to integrate relativist and justice-based approaches (Fawcett et al., 2000). Postmodern positions of this kind implicitly acknowledge the weight of earlier criticisms of relativist interpretive research. Greene summarizes this criticism as follows:

Questions about the political and moral aims of interpretivism are the most deeply disquieting. The essential relativism of interpretivism argues for no particular role in the world. There is no commitment . . . to reinforce the status quo or to challenge it, to condone racist or sexist practices by one's silences or to actively seek to redress observed inequities, to remain neutral on issues of political beliefs or to openly advocate for a chosen ideology. (Greene, 1992: 43–4)

### Practitioner Research

Ethical questions take a particular form in qualitative practitioner research. For example, the principle of consent includes an assumption of voluntary participation. Practitioner research can make voluntary participation more difficult to ensure. It may be jeopardized if service users fear that refusal to participate will compromise the quality of care they will receive.

Furthermore, problems arise when the practitioner-researcher role is not well understood by service users. In such cases the service user is likely to see the social worker as primarily a practitioner, and may be less likely to exercise appropriate restrictions on self-disclosure to the practitioner-researcher (Archbold, 1986). The relationship between the practitioner-as-researcher and the respondent service user raises further ethical questions. For example, life-history interviewing has much to offer social-work practitioner research (Bowen, 1993; Martin, 1999). But 'life history interviewing is invasive, old hurts or traumas may be reopened . . . The truth does not necessarily set one free' (Miller, 2000: 104). In addition, people may agree to take part in life-history interviews in the belief that the process may be reciprocal – useful information for the researcher and therapeutic for the service user – when in reality it may prove one way.

Finally, ethical issues arise over the relationship between practitioner research and advocacy. This has sometimes been discussed in terms of whether

ethnomethodological indifference may be necessary. Kayser-Jones and Koenig summarize the dilemma in their consideration of ethical issues in qualitative research with older people. 'The need to document the failure to provide adequate treatment for residents . . . in order to effect policy changes, is an important justification for not intervening . . . Investigators have no easy answers when confronted with conflicting values; protecting informants *versus* improving the care of elderly nursing home residents' (Kayser-Jones and Koenig, 1994: 30).

One possible way forward on these questions is to explore the potential for gains in research ethics that may stem from greater interaction between ethical social-work practice and ethical research practice. This is largely the line taken by Butler in his development of a code of ethics (Butler, 2000). My view is that the jury is still out on the fruitfulness of this approach. It is certainly unhelpful if it is treated as a covert cop-out from gaining a deep familiarity with the practice of research and the literature on research ethics. It is equally unhelpful, however, if research and practice ethics end up lacking congruence with one another.

## Fieldwork Ethics

Lofland and Lofland (1995) list the main ongoing ethical concerns likely to occur in qualitative fieldwork. Is it ethical to:

- See a severe need for help and not respond to it directly?
- Take a calculated stance towards other human beings?
- Take sides or avoid taking sides in a factionalized situation?
- 'Pay' people with trade-offs for access to their lives and minds?

Each of these problems finds particular expression in the research relationship. Two illustrations of these issues can be observed: first, in feminist work on the research relationship, and second, in the working out of these problems when research is contextualized in specific national, cultural and service contexts.

First, feminist work has accomplished more than most other work to bring these issues to the forefront (see, for example, Acker et al., 1983; Ellsworth, 1989; Stacey, 1988). The research of Acker et al. (1983) was on the relation between changes in the labour-market situation of women and changes in consciousness. They tried three strategies to reduce unequal power and acknowledge the subjectivity of the participants, although they admit they did not solve this problem.

1. Encouraging the interviewee to take the lead in deciding what to talk about. This did not always work. The women often wanted to be asked questions. However, the approach did work better for those women with whom they had more than one interview.
2. Establishing reciprocity, by offering to tell women something of themselves. This was accepted and often invited, and 'we formed friendships

with many of the women . . . However, we recognized a usually unarticulated tension between friendship and the goal of research. The researcher's goal is always to gather information, thus . . . attempting to create a more equal relationship can paradoxically become exploitation and use' (p. 428).

3. Showing their written material to the women. However, they did not do so with all of them. They admit that they shared most with 'those who identified themselves as consciously trying to change'. They were therefore the women who 'most shared our worldview', and 'we have to admit some reluctance to share our interpretations with those who, we expected, would be upset by them' (p. 428). This raises the issue of whether the evaluator should share interpretations with those whose explanations are radically different from their own. This is the 'tension between the goal of reducing the power differences between the researcher and the researched and the difficulties of carrying this out when there is a lack of agreement on the meaning of experiences' (p. 429).

Second, ethical issues need contextualizing, regardless of where we stand on issues of relativity and relativism. An example illustrates the form this may take. It is drawn from a roundtable discussion of ethics which took place at a symposium on homelessness and social exclusion organized in 1996 by the Paris-based Conseil National de L'Information Statistique. I have retained the roundtable format in the following example, without disclosing the identity of the participants.

### Example 1: Ethics and Homelessness Research

**Chair** summarized the ethical issues in this field as linked to:

1. the purpose of any enquiry;
2. the balance of the value of the enquiry against the degree of intrusion;
3. who are the beneficiaries? Is the respondent a beneficiary?
4. how is the information obtained?
5. how will it be used? Issues of privacy, and potential misinterpretation of the findings.

**Discussant One** argued that ethical issues are not greater in homelessness research but they do need more careful formulation. He believed that they include the following.

1. The right of refusal at the point of contact. But this right cannot be exercised on someone's behalf. The discussant was against the right of any group to make a collective decision on behalf of others not to participate.
2. The interview. There is a need for privacy of space. This may be a special difficulty in homelessness research.
3. The content of the interview. Ethical consequences arise from the fact that the emphasis of such interviews is frequently on negatives, on the deficiencies of the responder.

4. Ending the interview. Offering some trade-off is difficult due to the lack of an address, but it is a central issue.

**Discussant Two** referred to the possible payment of interviewees in a French homelessness research project. In French research culture, payment is very rare. On the one hand, it poses the problem of paternalism, but on the other hand consent to be interviewed can result in people losing their turn at a soup kitchen or begging time. Their solution was to give a telephone card at the end of the interview, but not to say in advance that this would happen. The idea was that the card allows contact with family and friends and cannot be used directly to harm themselves.

**Discussant Three** was concerned with the ethics of longitudinal research carried out in America. He reported research in which 1500 interviews were undertaken, from which 500 were followed through at two-monthly intervals over about 16 months. The ethics issues he identified were the following.

- Paying. It is American standard practice in research to pay for long interviews. He acknowledged there might be risks attached to giving money, but argued for a non-paternalist stance on payment.<sup>3</sup>
- Privacy. There is a problem of knowing how the information will be used. For example, it could be damaging to a homeless person to ask a third party (perhaps an official) for information about the individual's homelessness. It might jeopardize the likelihood that the agency supplying information will continue to offer services. As a partial solution they gave a non-damaging title to the research. Instead of naming it 'The Course of Homelessness Study', they called it 'The Course of Housing Study'.
- Implications of obligations arising from long-term relationships with people.

**Discussant Four**, a street-level social worker, distinguished those who are 'sentenced to give' (social workers), and those who are 'sentenced to receive'. 'People who are homeless have been made cuckolds by life'. It is what happens after the research that matters. How can we give back to them the knowledge they gave us? Learning to receive is the key ethical issue. He acknowledged he had no real answer to this problem of giving back. He had been involved in the organization of an art exhibition for homeless people, where the money gained was kept for collective use. He remarked that we also give back by keeping the information in ourselves. Listening as well as answering is part of giving back. Sometimes the person cannot be contacted or may die – but we should become 'watchful' in our own behaviour.

**Discussant One** argued that the interview does have a benefit. It can enable people not to see life as fate (for example, by learning to read behind the figures). This should be part of our ethical concerns. Finally, we should not forget the collective benefits of research. Judgements of benefit do not have to be limited to the immediate beneficiary.

This example raises a wider question about the ethical implications of more

radical forms of user-engaged research. My collaboration with user-researchers persuades me that such research is likely to have a distinctive focus, and to address a more person-centred array of themes than either academic or practitioner-led research. These themes include coping, identity, information needs, support needs, self-help, carers, women's issues, a powerful sense of what is stigmatizing, and users' and sufferers' rights and opportunities. The ethical focal points of user-led research are likely to give more weight and a distinctive twist to questions of confidentiality, safety, honesty and transparency. In so far as user-led research hands over control for the research, the resolution of these ethical questions is more likely to permeate the whole research project.

It has sometimes been claimed – too simply in my view – that user-led research is intrinsically more ethical than other forms of research. One line of argument is that conventional research objectifies in the sense that it treats people as objects. This position, so it is sometimes claimed, dehumanizes people. This argument is sometimes presented too unproblematically. My own position is much the same as McKay's argument that in the context of human engineering 'a technique cannot be ethically evaluated solely by asking whether it is manipulative . . . it is the refusal of due dialogue rather than the presence of manipulation as such that invites our condemnation' (McKay, 1988: 95).

## Ethics and Analysis

I will make three illustrative points in this closing section to reinforce my view that ethical research practice needs to be related to the specifics of the research process. My points are about the ethical consequences of narrative analysis; the centrality of participants' beliefs about social justice for drawing conclusions about research on the outcomes of social interventions; and ethical questions associated with the use to which qualitative research is put.

### Narrative Analysis

We should not allow a proper emphasis on diverse constructions of reality and the local contextual distinctiveness of the programme, project or practice to excuse a lapse into ethical indifference. Experience 'is the stories people live. People live stories, and in the telling of them reaffirm them, modify them and create new ones' (Clandinin and Connelly, 1994: 415). Ethical issues are raised by the fact that, as we encourage service users to tell their stories, we become characters in those stories and thus change those stories. This can be positive, and be one way of helping someone to reassess a problem. But it also carries risks and re-emphasizes that evaluating must be done with care and not as 'a raid on mislaid identities' (Dannie Abse's phrase, from his poem 'Return to Cardiff') (Abse, 1989: 46–7). I recall the poignancy of listening to a woman in a town in a South Wales valley talking at length about the experience of bringing up at home her son with serious learning difficulties, then in his early 20s. She reflected that this was the first time she had ever talked to someone about this experience.

## Justice and Outcomes

Most writing about qualitative methodology makes little reference to its relevance for outcome research. For many, this is simply as it should be, while for others it betrays the Achilles' heel of applied qualitative research. I have argued elsewhere that qualitative methodology is pertinent to the understanding of outcome issues (Shaw, 2003).

The ethical issues that follow from this can most economically be illustrated from a more conventional hypothetical scenario, through reflecting on how different notions of justice affect the conclusions we draw as to whether a particular project or programme is good or not. Models of social justice may be based on ideals of utilitarianism, fairness or egalitarianism. A utilitarian view of justice proceeds on the basis that practices are judged right or wrong depending on whether they produce happiness or satisfaction for the greatest number of people. Rawls' theory of social justice is based on justice as fairness (Rawls, 1971). His famous difference principle states that social and economic inequalities are just only if they result in compensating benefits for everyone, in particular for the least advantaged members of society. Hence we may feel able to justify pay rises for doctors or teachers at a level higher than benefit rate rises, on the grounds that disadvantaged people may thus benefit. Holders of an egalitarian theory of justice would insist that the disadvantaged must always gain redistributive benefit until equality is achieved. Consider the following social work example.

Social workers run a group with the aim of lowering car-related crimes. Suppose the outcome that the group is successful for all members but less so for those with lower literacy levels. The conclusions we draw are contingent on the underlying view of justice to which we adhere.

It may be worth inspecting our tacit response to these outcomes. We have been academically socialized to respond with a methodological bent. Were the differences significant? Was the programme adequately implemented? Did the design provide an adequate basis for such implied causal inferences? These questions may or may not be relevant. But the methodological twist with which we treat evaluative claims illustrates the way in which efficiency has been preferred over justice. Our instinctive response becomes part of the problem. In the example above the programme was a success on utilitarian grounds, a failure on egalitarian grounds and inconclusive on the grounds of a model of justice as fairness.

## Utilising Qualitative Research

But this may seem rather abstract. Consider instead the ethical and political dilemmas about how research material is used. These issues are sometimes sharper in qualitative research than in quantitative work. A risk of betrayal arises partly from the greater closeness and consequent trust that may develop between researcher and participant. In quantitative research the greater distancing may make these issues less agonizing.



The risk of betrayal is increased because of the characteristic use of smaller samples, and the emphasis on the details of how people live their lives. Finch describes from her playgroup's evaluative research her 'sense that I could potentially betray my informants as a group, not as individuals' (Finch, 1986: 207). 'Where qualitative research is targeted upon social policy issues, there is the special dilemma that findings could be used to *worsen* the situation of the target population in some way' (Finch, 1985: 117).

### Example 2: Playgroups – Whose Side are We On?

Finch's particular interest was in what self-help playgroup provision would mean for working-class women living in economically deprived areas. Over a three-year period, through observation and semi-structured interviewing, she was able to document the character of self-help playgroups in such areas. 'I uncovered situations where practice diverged wildly from bourgeois standards of child care and education which most policy makers and academics would take as the norm, and at times were downright dangerous' (1985: 117).

She was worried that the publication of her work would further reinforce 'those assumptions deeply embedded in our culture and political life that working class women (especially the urban poor) are inadequate mothers' (p. 117). Those who had welcomed her for three years would thus be betrayed.

She had to work through these problems. Had she been guilty of taking a middle-class norm and imposing it on these groups? Yet that norm was the one to which the women who ran the groups aspired. It was the participants' model and not simply hers. She eventually developed reasoning that avoided the deficit model of explanation, and argued that to view working-class mothers as incompetent is improper and naïve. She acknowledges she is not certain she has fully resolved the issues, and accepts that, 'To argue like this is to take a frankly moral stance, far removed from the model of the objective social scientist . . . It seems to me that qualitative research on social policy issues will lead inevitably to explicit moral stances of that sort, and that it can never simply provide the "facts"' (Finch, 1985: 119–20).

## Conclusion

The ethics of qualitative research design place distinctive demands on the principles of informed consent, confidentiality and privacy, social justice and practitioner research. Fieldwork ethics raise special considerations regarding power, reciprocity and contextual relevance. Ethical issues raised by the analysis and dissemination of qualitative enquiry emphasize questions regarding the ethics of narrative research, outcomes and justice, and the utilization of research.

What are the implications of this analysis? They are fourfold:<sup>4</sup> the need for a culture of ethical awareness; a review of ethical approval; an awareness of the ethical issues posed by practitioner involvement in evaluative research; and the

strong case for understanding the ethical dimensions of different parts of the research process.

Although there is a shared acknowledgement of the general significance of ethical issues in social care research, there is considerable variability in the levels of understanding of the character of these issues in the social care community. While it may be unrealistic to ask that qualifying social work training should take on yet one more responsibility, there are opportunities to promote a culture of ethical awareness through post-qualifying training, the growing network of social work research centres, and research and development units.

The British government's commitment to joined-up social policies is likely to lead to an increasing number of research proposals that cross the borders of public-sector services in the fields, for example, of health, education, housing, social care and health promotion. Existing ethical approval mechanisms are unduly health-led. Any emerging ethical approval systems should include a sufficiently broad remit to address the range of public-service settings in which research ethics matters will be present. I would not be in favour of the establishment of distinct social-work research ethics committees. The implications of the analysis of this article seem to be that generic ethics issues should be central to any such approval process, but that members should also hold specialist briefs on social work, housing, education and so on.

A caution is in order. If we are right in one of the main arguments of this article, that ethical issues emerge at all stages of the research enterprise, then social-work research should not place undue emphasis on the initial ethical approval process. Ethical questions cannot be answered and tidied away for the duration of the project. In qualitative evaluative research, by its very nature, ethical issues will be emergent. To reiterate Eisner's words, 'We might like to secure consent that is informed, but we know we can't always inform because we don't always know' (Eisner, 1991: 225–6). The imperative is that social workers should engage in ongoing reflection on and responses to ethical issues throughout research projects. There should be a stronger self-imposed requirement that project advisory groups should carry a brief to develop and monitor mechanisms for ensuring ethical compliance.

Practitioner-researchers may not always be aware of existing social-work standards and guidance, still less of the work undertaken in related occupations and disciplines. This accentuates the potential problems posed by the suggestion earlier in this article that issues of informed consent may be specially difficult in practitioner research, and that ethical problems arise in cases where service users may not be familiar with the research role in practitioner research. One way of responding to this question is to link it to the general point mentioned above about fostering a culture of research awareness, and to include practitioner research ethics in the various forms of research training suggested there. In addition to this, the emergent lessons of user-led and other strongly participatory research ought to act as a growing counterbalance and an antidote to ethical myopia.

Ethical issues on qualitative research are not fundamentally different from those in more traditional designs. Neither is qualitative research more (or less) ethical than quantitative enquiry. There is, however, a strong case for the need to recognize the specific character taken by ethical questions in qualitative research and evaluation and the form these take in the delivery of evaluative research. There is some anecdotal evidence that there may not be sufficient experience and familiarity with these issues among members of traditional medical ethics committees to enable them to offer advice and guidance in a sensitive and full way to researchers using qualitative methodology. One way of responding to this shortcoming is analogous to the suggestions made above regarding the generic/specialist balance of ethics committee membership.

Social-work research ethics cannot be borrowed in a linear fashion from practice ethics. Neither can they proceed via eclecticism based on naïve pragmatism about methodology, or on a tacit assumption that the agenda posed by the methodological concerns of design control, technology and large datasets are normative for all social work and human services.

I have approached questions of research ethics in this article on the premise that no methodology is ethically privileged. The emphases have been threefold. First, I have focused on the ethical questions raised in different phases of the process of research. Second, instead of taking the conventional ethical problems of randomized control trials as a benchmark, I have emphasized the ethical questions raised by qualitative research. Third, although my primary interest is in human-services research, I have deliberately looked for precedent and stimulation to the work of writers outside the usual boundaries of social work, especially those working in the evaluation field. Social work has been slow to cross such boundaries, but is the richer for doing so.

#### Notes

1. In the United Kingdom, the Cabinet Office in 2002 commissioned the development of standards that will apply to government funded qualitative evaluation. In the United States the National Institutes of Health published *Qualitative Methods in Health Research* in 2001 as a guide to crafting fundable research proposals: <http://obssr.od.nih.gov/publications/qualitative.pdf>. See Gilgun (2002) for a critical discussion of these proposals from a social-work perspective, and a response by Heurtin-Roberts (2002).
2. The British government, through its NHS Executive, also sponsored the development of more wide-ranging medical ethics guidance during 2001 and 2002, commonly referred to as the Caldicott Guidance, that establishes principles and rules for protecting and using patient information. The Caldicott report recommended that every flow of patient-identifiable information within, and from, an organization should be tested against these principles: <http://www.doh.gov.uk/confiden/cginflows.htm>. There is an interesting social-work case example on protecting research participants' rights at <http://www.doh.gov.uk/research/rd3/nhsrandd/researchgovernance/main/boxa.htm>
3. Payment questions provide an example of research ethics decisions that have been insufficiently empirically grounded. For example, a user-researcher who had

experienced sexual abuse as a child commented: 'I'd feel dirty if I was paid for talking about my experiences'.

4. I am indebted to my colleague Catherine Tanner, with whom the following argument was developed.

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