

# Designing Qualitative Research

## Ethics in qualitative research

Contributors: Uwe Flick  
Editors: Uwe Flick  
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# Ethics in qualitative research

## Chapter objectives

After reading this chapter, you should

### Introduction

The awareness of ethical issues and concerns has grown considerably in the last decades in qualitative research also (see Punch, 1994; Hopf, 2004; Christian, 2005). The discussion about ethics in research in general has been pushed forward from different angles. A number of examples have raised the awareness of research done with people not knowing about being researched and sometimes suffering from the research (medical experiments in the concentration camps during the Nazi regime in Germany but also the Tuskegee Syphilis Study, for example); the Milgram experiment, in which people were made to give other [p. 69 ↓ ] people electric shocks not knowing that they were part of a different experiment and that they were exposed to influences; cases of manipulated data and results coming up repeatedly; covert research in subgroups like the study of Humphreys (1975); and publications of ethnographic research that allowed the identification of people or communities despite attempts at anonymization. Finally, in natural sciences in particular, we have had several cases of manipulating or faking data and results in recent years.

Such cases of misuse of research and the public attention they attracted have led to establishing precautions against such violations of good practice in research. One is that most academic societies have formulated their codes of ethics (e.g. the American Sociological Association Code of Ethics, [www.asanet.org](http://www.asanet.org), or the Statement of Ethical Practices of the British Sociological Association, [www.britisoc.co.uk](http://www.britisoc.co.uk)). The other is that most institutions doing research, such as universities, now have institutional review

boards or ethics committees that have to approve a project if it involves human subjects as research partners. In principle, such institutionalized precautions are an important step towards avoiding unethical research, but as many authors show for the qualitative or field research, such institutions do not always address the 'real' problems of research and in some cases make research impossible rather than better. Also, the ethical problems in qualitative research run throughout the whole process of designing and then doing it.

There are several basic principles of ethically sound research (see also Christian, 2005, pp. 144-6):

For all these principles, we can state that they are correct and important as an orientation for planning research with responsibility and care. However, they do not protect the researcher in the field from the ethical dilemmas linked to working with people in natural settings.

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In this chapter, we will address ethical issues that become relevant in planning and designing a qualitative study. The aim is less to give a comprehensive overview of qualitative research ethics (see for more details Flick, 2006, chap. 4; 2007, chap. 9). Rather this chapter is intended to focus on the ethical issues that arise in the steps of the research process, planning and design.

## Preparation

Reflection of ethics is not only relevant while you are in the field and it is not only something to work on while you prepare a proposal – for the ethics committee or the institutional review board of your institution. Ethics should play a role in your considerations of how to plan a study, of who you want to work with, and how you (or your fieldworkers) should act in the field.

## Relevance

In preparing your project, you should reflect several issues for their ethical dimensions. The first is relevance in various respects. Is your topic already 'over-researched'? Is there enough research already done and will your research contribute something new to the existing stock of knowledge?

## Participants

When you think about your possible participants, is it justifiable to expose them to your research, especially if you intend to work with vulnerable people like children, patients, very old people or those living under difficult circumstances? This does not mean that you should do no research with these groups, but – as in every case – you should reflect if it is justified to 'use' them.

## Researchers

Sometimes we find suggestions of 'Just do it' as being the best way of going into the field, finding something new there and developing interesting knowledge from it (e.g. Glaser, 1992, for taking or Punch, 1994, for reviewing such positions). However, we should think about how to prepare our research(ers) carefully for working in the field. To be prepared for contact with people or events in the field, researchers should be trained in using their methodological approach, know what it is about and what problems might arise in applying it. Interview training in role-plays may be helpful, if they are followed by a critical feedback by the research team or the supervisor of a research. Open situations and meeting strangers in order to have a conversation about sensitive topics with them can be a challenge for many researchers, and having some experience with such a [p. 71 ↓ ] setting can be helpful. In particular, if research addresses topics like chronic or terminal illness, contact with interviewees can be not so easy for the researchers, also. Experience with this topic and knowledge about this may obstruct a naïve position, from which researchers see what members in the field do not see any

more, but it can also be helpful for getting along with the issue, the participants and the field in general. It can also be a good starting point for developing an ethically sound relationship with the interviewees or participants in the study.

These three angles – relevance, participants, researchers – will not only be issues of an examination by an institutional review board but should be taken into consideration by the researchers in planning the concrete study.

## Research questions

There are several ethical issues linked to the formulation of research questions.

### Focus of research questions

A central issue here is how focused the question is – does it give a clear advice for what is necessary as data to collect for answering it or not? Unfocused research questions not only make the project more difficult to manage, but also extend the scope of the data to be collected more than necessary. Qualitative research is often understood as open and holistic, and focus accordingly should be developed and refined in the later stage of the project. The consequence of such an approach for the participants is that their life or situation is recorded or talked about more extensively in the research than would be necessary. Thus, the focus of the research question and a clear planning at this stage can prevent participants from being ‘over-researched’, meaning that they are asked for more insight into their privacy than necessary.

### Confrontation through research issues

A second issue in this context to reflect is what the research question might mean for possible research participants. What will they be confronted with when they agree to take part in the research and to answer the questions in the interview? For example, doing interviews with people suffering from a beginning dementia can be very painful for the participants as they are confronted with their forget-fulness and with the gaps

in their knowledge, memory or language use. In our homeless project, it can be confrontational to ask the adolescents how their street life began, as this will in most cases lead back to more or less severe conflicts in their family, for example. This confrontation can be necessary for pursuing the goal of the research, and if it is really justified and cannot be avoided, then you should accept it but take precautions to avoid harm to the participants.

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## Deception in research

A third issue in this stage is linked to the topic of deception in research. It may be a consensus now, that we should not deceive our participants about our research. But at the same time, will it be helpful for the research if we inform our research participants in great detail about our research question? Of course we should inform them about our topic of research, but if we present our research question in detail (for example, including our assumptions of group comparison), we might produce specific expectations or irritations. If we take this into account, the general rule 'No deception!' becomes more difficult on the level of the details of how to put that into concrete terms.

Again, we have identified three angles for assessing ethical issues at this stage of the research. This does not mean that we should not do research, but we should reflect whether how we deal with these issues is justified by the research we pursue.

## Access and sampling

Ethics become practically relevant once you approach people for participating in your research, which means once you enter the field of your research.

## Informed consent

In approaching the field and our participants, we should prepare a form that regulates the informed consent – wherever this is possible. The best way is to prepare a mutual contract, which explains the purpose of the research, the expectations from the participant (e.g. to give an interview), the procedure with the data (how long it is to be stored, who will have access, how is anonymity guaranteed). This should be signed by both the researcher and the participant and should include a possibility of withdrawing consent. To give the researcher a working basis, a time for withdrawing a signature should be defined (e.g. two weeks). If this can be realized, this contract should also include whether the participant will be given the results or not.

## Vulnerable people

In the standard situation, every participant should sign such a contract beforehand. However, there are several exceptions to such a rule. First, experience shows that there are many people who are ready to participate in the research but refuse to sign a document like this. Sometimes we work with people who are not in a situation to sign a contract – such as children, very old people or patients. In such cases, we should clearly define how the informed consent can be guaranteed as a principle, and what kind of substitute could be acceptable. In the first case, the researchers should sign that they informed the participant and that he or she [p. 73 ↓ ] agreed on this basis to take part. In the other cases, we should think about who else can give an informed consent for the participant and if that is justifiable.

## No harm

When you approach people to become participants in your research, it should be certain that they do not suffer any disadvantages, harm or risks from taking part. That will be beyond doubt on a general level, but if it comes to details this may become problematic. For example, if you do a study with people in underprivileged conditions of living – say

homelessness – you are mostly interested in people in these conditions and not so much in people in general. Therefore, you look for such people and you are somehow reliant on their remaining in such a situation long enough for you to do your interview with them, for example. Of course, there are many projects of action research that intend to change the situation of their participants through the research, but here as well the existence of social problems as a ground for doing the research part is constitutive as well.

## Selection

If you do your research in an institution and have to sample interview partners from a group of people who know or are in touch with each other, it can be irritating for the individual not being chosen for participation (am I not interesting enough?) or to see that others are not integrated in the research (why me?). The researchers should reflect such a dynamic they might produce in the field with their sampling decisions.

## Collecting data

While collecting data, we should be aware of our influence on the field or on the subjects of our research – not so much in the sense of a bias undermining the quality of our results but seen from the perspective of our partners.

## Disturbance

The first is the disturbance we produce with our research – for professional or private routines by standing in the way, by focusing on things otherwise unnoticed by the members of the field, by asking questions or by reactivating memories when asking for family photos, for example. This disturbance can be productive for our research and the knowledge we can produce with it, but it often is an irritation for those who let us into their private or professional lives. Again, this does mean either that we should not do our research for this reason or that we could avoid such a disturbance completely. But



we should reflect our impact on the daily life of our participants and should try to limit it to what is absolutely or really necessary.

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## Being pushy

Research is a dialogue, and not only in interviews, where this may be obvious. This dialogue consists of asking for access (to spaces and observable processes) and information (answers, stories, images, documents, etc.), which are offered in return. Research is often not satisfied by first answers and offers and comes with second questions and probing. In interviews, it is important to develop a feeling for the limits of our participants, when it comes to issues they cannot or do not want to talk about, and for when we should stop insisting. Again, this depends very much on the concrete case and can hardly be decided beforehand or formulated in a general rule. But here we may come to borders of privacy and intimacy we have to respect.

## Being ignorant

On the other hand participants sometimes offer aspects we did not foresee, which might be important for them to talk about or relevant in the context of the issue. Here again, researchers need to develop a sensibility for when to take up such issues to avoid being ignorant of such aspects and to the participant. In this context it is again the balance between working with the participant in a very focused way and taking him or her seriously in what they reflect about the issue beyond what we expected.

Data collection is the part of your research where you come closest to your participants, so that ethics in relation to field and participants become concrete and practical at this stage.

## Analyzing data

### Being accurate

Analyze your data carefully, read and reread them continuously. Do your analysis systematically by using a method (like theoretical coding for example). Use explicit comparison (among events or among people) rather than implicit comparison based on your assumptions.

### Being fair

Try to avoid interpretations of data that come along with a devaluation of people. Be careful not to see people as a result of unconscious forces or drives. Try to respect people's intentions and agencies when you interpret the practices or statements you collected as data. Try to be neutral in conflicts becoming visible in the data, especially if several of your participants are involved. Do not read anything into practices and statements that is not 100 per cent supported by the data. Do not be too fast with (over-) generalizations and try to keep the deviant cases in mind when developing patterns, types and other forms of generalizations. Be careful with internal generalization – when you infer from occasional statements to regular habits or traits of people or institutions, for example.

### Being confidential

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A major issue in analyzing the data is how to keep the anonymity and privacy of your research participants. Field notes and transcripts should not include concrete information about real persons and sites, but should be anonymized right away. You should avoid talking in your research team about 'real' persons (by using their real names) but talk about cases with anonymous or changed names (aliases). The same

applies to sites and institutions. If you do your research in an institution with several interviewees knowing each other in real life, you should be extremely careful how to protect your single interviewees from being identified by their colleagues.

## Avoid cemeteries of data

Do not keep your data for the rest of your life, but keep them safely stored as long as you really need them. If your contract with the participant includes that you discard the data after a certain time, do so. If you store them, keep them safely locked and distant from any file that allows identifying the participants in real life. Do not collect and store more data than you need for answering your research question.

These suggestions show the need to be rigorous in analyzing the data and in preventing participants from being identified and the data from being misused by other people than those by whom they were originally given for their research.

## Writing, generalization and feedback

In writing, the issues of ethics come up again in a nutshell. Here, it is most important to maintain the anonymity of the participants, of the site and of the institutions in which you collected your data. The history of qualitative research is full of examples where participants in a study found themselves presented in such a way that they or their community were easy to identify (see Punch, 1994, for examples). Here, issues of fairness towards the participants and of keeping a position of fairness among them are most crucial. In writing you should select your wording with respect – to the single participants if you quote them or write about them. Here you have to reflect diversity in the way you formulate. Avoid language that is biased against persons (e.g. because of ethnic group membership or age, etc.) and be sensitive in the use of labels. Reproduce your findings accurately and do not try to modify them (slightly) to meet audiences' expectations. Try to give a transparent account of how you proceeded and arrived at your conclusions. Be careful in your generalizations (see above) and also in the formulations you use. If you want to come back to your participants with your results, plan this step carefully. Find a level of presentation (and of differentiation) that is

adequate to [p. 76 ↓ ] your audience. Just giving a scientific presentation of typologies can be confusing; confronting participants with interpretations that go beyond the way of thinking they are used to may be irritating and painful. So plan your feedback procedure carefully!

## Key points

## Further reading

The following articles go into more details of ethical issues in qualitative research, as will the other books in *The SAGE Qualitative Research Kit* do for each methodological approach:

Christian, C.G. (2005) 'Ethics and politics in qualitative research', in N. Denzin and Y.S. Lincoln (eds), *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, pp. 139-64.

Flick, U. (2006) *An Introduction to Qualitative Research* (3rd ed.). London: Sage (chap. 4).

Hopf, C. (2004) 'Research ethics and qualitative research: an overview', in U. Flick, E. von Kardorff and I. Steinke (eds), *A Companion to Qualitative Research*. London: Sage, pp. 334-9.

Punch, M. (1994) 'Politics and ethics in qualitative research', in N. Denzin and Y.S. Lincoln (eds), *Handbook of Qualitative Research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, pp. 83-97.

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