

Qualitative Research Ethics in Practice

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There is a tendency today for ethical issues to be viewed as a matter of satisfying Research Ethics Committees (RECs) or Institutional Review Boards (IRBs), of following some set of rules or procedures, or of fully satisfying some ethical principle. While advice from others and published guidance can be helpful in reminding us about important issues, it is no substitute for thoughtful practical decision-making, and reflection in and on practice, by qualitative researchers themselves. By its very nature, qualitative research involves a high degree of contingency. While it is certainly important at the beginning of the research process to consider what methodological, ethical, and other problems may arise, it is never possible to anticipate all that may occur, even less to determine in advance how the problems that *are* anticipated should be dealt with. One of the reasons for this is that ethical issues will take distinctive forms in different situations, and must be handled in ways that are sensitive to the unique features of those situations, as well as to how circumstances change over time.

So, discussions of research ethics can point to the importance of considering the risks of harm to participants, and indeed to the researcher; to the need to respect the autonomy of others involved in the research; to the requirement that their privacy be protected; and so on. However, what these principles entail, what priority they are to be given, and how far they can be realised will vary according to circumstances.

One way of formulating this is to say that, in their work, researchers must exercise *phronesis*, a word that Aristotle used to refer to the practical wisdom that is required in order to live well. However, besides Aristotle, we also need to draw on Machiavelli, whose insight was not only that the chances of living well are variable according to circumstances, but also that sometimes it may be necessary to compromise ethical values if worthwhile and important goals are to be achieved. Applying this to the case of research ethics, if it were to be insisted that researchers must *ensure* that people involved in their research suffer *no* harm, have their autonomy *fully* respected, and their privacy *entirely* protected, social research of any kind would be impossible. And if the same requirements were applied to most other activities, the same would be true of them. In the course of our lives, most of us do not seek to avoid causing all possible harm – if we did, we would not drive a car, we would not get close to other people for fear of catching or spreading infections, and so on. Rather, we aim at avoiding what we regard as unacceptable risk of serious harm, and the threshold for this will be different on different occasions. Similarly, we will usually seek to respect people's autonomy, for example by being honest with them, but we will not usually be *completely* honest all the time – in the sense of telling them everything they may wish to know. Similarly, there can be circumstances in which

we would invade people's privacy for good reasons, for example because we judge them to be a danger to themselves or to others.

So, in the course of qualitative research, difficult decisions have to be made about whether, how much, and in what respects, ethical values can be satisfied if research is to be pursued effectively. This means that those values may sometimes have to be compromised. Equally, though, there are occasions when it may be necessary to abandon or suspend the research process because it is not possible to carry it out in an ethically acceptable way – though this is relatively rare, because the ethical threats arising from qualitative research are usually small. Researchers have an obligation to carry out their research ethically, but also to pursue it effectively. These two requirements will sometimes be in conflict, and some means found of resolving this conflict. As explained at the start, however, there are no rules for doing this, it can only be done satisfactorily by researchers making judgments that are sensitive to the nature and circumstances of particular studies.

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