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Ethical Considerations in Qualitative Research: Summary Guidelines for Novice Social Science Researchers

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Abstract: This paper sheds light on ethical considerations that must be taken into account when conducting qualitative research. Ethics revolve around the responsibilities of researchers towards their participants, their audience, their society, and their academic communities. Researchers should refer to some ethical guidelines to ensure they have adhered to the principles of good research practices. This paper summarises the ethical considerations that we generally need to promote in qualitative research when collecting and analysing data. These include ethics of respect and conflict of interest, relationship with participants, Informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity, reporting back to the participants, trustworthiness of research, and issues of translation

Keywords: Ethics ; Qualitive Research ; Social Sciences ; Researchers

Ethics deals with moral problems related to the practice of research. Bos (2020) refers to Ethics as an inquiry into what is right and wrong, and what researchers ought to do. The focus is on the responsibilities of researchers towards the rights and interests of their participants, their audience, their academic community, and their Society, (Cameron et al., 1994; Judd et al., 1991; British Educational Research Association BERA, 2004, 2018). It is important that that researchers usually refer to some ethical guidelines to ensure they have adhered to the principles of good research practice (Judd et al., 1991). This paper will discuss the ethical considerations that researchers in social science need to promote in qualitative research when collecting and analysing data. Mack et al. (2005: 8) point out that:

Whenever we conduct research on people, the well-being of research participants must be our top priority. The research question is always of secondary importance. This means that if a choice must be made between doing harm to a participant and doing harm to the research, it is the research that is sacrificed. Fortunately, choices of that magnitude rarely need to be made in qualitative research! But the principle must not be dismissed as irrelevant, or we can find ourselves making decisions that eventually bring us to the point where our work threatens to disrupt the lives of the people we are researching.

When it comes to research, ethics refer to the norms and values that guide decisions regarding the collection of data and analysis of said data, as well as the dissemination of findings. As ‘ethical knowledge is of a tacit character more often than not’ (Gedutis et al. 2022: 376), an increasing number of studies are investigating the ethical challenges posed by research evaluation. This paper aims to increase the awareness of novice researchers regarding the most common ethical issues that they need to give their utmost attention to while conducting research which involves living participants. Specifically, this paper focus on the following:

1. Ethic of Respect

All individuals who are involved in our research must be treated with "respect" and utmost trust, especially the volunteers. Any research must be conducted with consideration for the participants' respect ‘regardless of age, sex, race, religion, political beliefs and lifestyle or any other significant difference between such persons and the researchers themselves’ (BERA, 2004: 9). Consequently, all participants must be treated equally and must receive close consideration for every point they make during the investigation. BERA (2018: 6) for instance note that:

[R]esearchers should operate within an ethic of respect for any persons – including themselves – involved in or touched by the research they are undertaking. Individuals should be treated fairly, sensitively, and with dignity and freedom from prejudice, in recognition of both their rights and of differences arising from age, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, class, nationality, cultural identity, partnership status, faith, disability, political belief or any other significant characteristic.

We should not utilize any speech, whether academic or personal, that disempowers or demeans the participants. The participants must be permitted to communicate without hindrance, intervention, or fear. They should be encouraged to utilize the language they are most comfortable with, especially in multilingual research contexts. We must make every attempt to use a discourse that minimizes its impact on the ideas and emotions of our participants. Our interactive techniques during the data collection process should focus on eliciting information rather than expressing our own opinions and ideas. Mack et al. (2005: 11) warn researchers against feeding information to their participants or using personal opinions when interacting, as they note:

Because qualitative research is conversational, it is important for data collectors to maintain clear boundaries between what they are told by participants and what they tell to participants. Conversation is a social act that requires give and take. As qualitative researchers we “take” a lot of information from participants and therefore can feel a strong need to “give” similar information in return. People also enjoy talking about what they hear and learn – and researchers are no different. It may be tempting to pass along seemingly inconsequential information from one participant to another – for example, a funny statement or some news that appears to be common knowledge. Don’t do it! People can become upset and untrusting about even seemingly trivial comments being shared, especially if they have divulged very personal information and grow concerned that you will divulge more.

2. Relationship with Participants and Conflict of Interest

Another issue of ethics is related to conflict of interest which refers to the researchers’ relationship with their research participants (Halasa, 2005; Mack et al., 2005; BERA, 2018), especially when they are friends and colleagues. In this respect, researchers must establish a clear and transparent relationship and interaction with all the participants during the different phases of research. Specifically, we must differentiate between our personal relationships with them as friends and colleagues and our relationship with them as research participants. To ensure the seriousness and adaptability of their research, researchers must maintain a formal yet relaxed relationship with the research participants during the process of data collection. Researchers should raise participants awareness about their neutral and unbiased stance, otherwise this could result in distortion of the truth and the falsification of the findings.

3. Informed Consent

Researchers need to seek the “voluntary informed consent” (BERA, 2004: 6) of every participant prior to any data collection session. An informed consent letter needs to be sent to each participant. The consent letter should explain the main aim and objective of the research, the ethics of the research like issues of confidentiality and anonymity. We need to also highlight the terms of the “researcher-participant contract” (Dane, 1990; Miles and Huberman, 1994) and seek their consent and agreement before we proceed with the collection of data.

Furthermore, we should always ensure our research is free of any deception. Deception is the deliberate use of research for any purposes other than the ones initially discussed with the participants.

4. Incentives

We must recognize that it is unethical to use material incentives when conducting research. Prior to or following the data collection sessions, the data collection process should not be contingent on us or anyone else fulfilling any material conditions or providing any service. However, the participants may benefit from the data collection discussions and may pose their own questions. To motivate the participants, we can, for instance, make them aware of the community benefits of our research. Furthermore, we frequently find that the participants require someone to listen to and comprehend them (Miles and Huberman, 1994). They typically view research as an avenue for voicing their concerns.

5. Confidentiality and Anonymity

Researchers should make every effort to protect the anonymity of the research participants and the privacy of data. (Dane, 1990; Miles and Huberman, 1994). Before conducting data collection sessions, these two points must be communicated to participants and incorporated into the researcher-participant agreement. All information must be handled and stored in accordance with the Data Protection Act. No party other than the researcher and, if applicable, the research team members should have access to the data. A secure location that is still easily accessible should house all records, both written and audio.

6. Reporting back to the Participants

The participants must be kept apprised of the research's progress whenever possible. After data collection, researchers should ensure that each participant receives a copy of their responses, questionnaire, or transcript. In addition, to prevent any misinterpretation of data and falsification of findings, the research participants should be provided with a summary of how the collected data was analysed. The BERA considers it a 'good practice for researchers to debrief participants at the conclusions of the research and to provide them with copies of any reports or other publications arising from their participation' (BERA, 2004: 10). It is almost important to get the participants' feedback at any stage of the research so that amendments are made if deemed necessary (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

7. Trustworthiness of Research

To establish the credibility and consistency of the findings, we must also address the issue of reliability (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Flick, 1998). In conclusion, trustworthiness refers to the extent to which "data may have been influenced by the researcher's presence in a way that leads to misleading conclusions" (Boulton and Hammersley, 1996: 295). To prevent this, researchers are typically advised to take proactive measures to reduce their intrusiveness and bias, thereby preserving the credibility of their research. This can be accomplished by employing the following strategies:

- Prolonged engagement: Prior to, during, and after the data collection process, we must establish and maintain participants' trust. Transparency must be our guiding principle in all our research endeavours. This enables us to gain a deeper

understanding of the participants' thoughts and emotions (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Flick, 1998; Miles and Huberman, 1994; Boulton and Hammersley, 1996).

- **Triangulation:** A triangulation of data collection methods can be used to increase the credibility of the findings. This requires collecting information from multiple sources (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Flick, 1998; Miles and Huberman, 1994; Boulton and Hammersley, 1996).
- **Peer debriefing and reflexivity:** We must share our research with other academic colleagues (Chenail, 1995) for the purpose of exchanging ideas and receiving feedback on our research, which helps us to remain focused (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Flick, 1998; Miles and Huberman, 1994; Boulton and Hammersley, 1996).
- **Use of audit trail:** Throughout the research process, we must be mindful that our responsibilities as researchers extend beyond our participants to include our readers and the entire community of researchers (BERA, 2004). Any decisions made during the research process must be detailed in our report (Chenail, 1995).

8. Issues of Translation

The question of bias is fundamental to qualitative research. It refers to the extent to which the researcher's subjectivity affect the data collection and analysis. It is commonly agreed that qualitative research cannot in any way be free of bias (Peirce, 1995). Since the researcher is considered an integral part of the research process, it is now essential for researchers to acknowledge their bias in their work.

In qualitative research, translation may be a significant source of bias. By resorting to translation, the researcher interprets the meaning based on his or her prior knowledge. Nonetheless, translation is often essential in ethnographic and certain qualitative research, particularly when the researcher has a different linguistic and cultural background than the participants. Goldestein (1995), for instance, studied Portuguese immigrant workers in Canada and conducted her interviews with the assistance of bilingual translators. Another study conducted by Filisetti and Fives (2003) investigated the relationship between French students' epistemological beliefs, goal orientations, and self-efficacy beliefs. Questionnaires were used to collect data. Filisetti and Fives (2003) explained that one of the authors, who was bilingual, translated the questionnaires from English to French as there was a need 'to create measures of belief constructs within cultural contexts so that meaning within items is consistent with common cultural understandings' (p. 34).

As researchers, the challenge we typically face is that some data chunks are in a different language. Therefore, in order to prepare data for analysis, we must translate from one language to another. Once transcription and translation are complete, it is important that researchers meet with our participants to maximize the credibility of the data and solicit their feedback on the transcripts as well as the accuracy of the translation (Davis, 1995). Although they may last for a while, these sessions are usually very beneficial and can be a part of the researcher's 'prolonged engagement' (Davis, 1995) with the participants.

IV- Conclusion:

We end this paper by providing a summary of the main points discussed in this paper. These are outlined in the "Research Ethics Framework" by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC, 2005: 1):

- Integrity and quality in research require careful planning, review, and execution.

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- Research participants must be given clear and complete information about the aim and main objectives of the study, procedures, and potential outcomes, as well as about the nature of their involvement and any associated risks. There is room for flexibility within these policies in extremely limited and unusual research settings, for which explicit guidance is provided.
- Research participants' anonymity and the privacy of their information must be protected.
- There can be no coercion or compulsion involved in the research process, and all participants must voluntarily take part.
- Participants in research should not be put in danger.
- Any conflicts of interest or partiality must be made explicit, and the independence of the researcher must be clear.

Finally, it should be emphasized that researchers should consider the above-mentioned ethical norms and values, institutional standards, as well as international legislation when conducting research which involves living participants.

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