

3

ETHICS IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Theoretically any means can be used to gain the knowledge to answer our research questions, such as eavesdropping at private conversations, undercover participation, photographing intimate scenes, tapping telephones and reading personal letters and diaries. But it does not work that way. Social scientists follow ethical rules of behaviour to prevent them from doing harm to others and to protect themselves. The report of findings based on data that are unethically gathered can lead to harm, enormous dilemmas and possible conflicts. This chapter aims to raise awareness about the effects of social science inquiries for the different parties involved, such as the researched participants and communities, the audience, guest organizations, gatekeepers, subsidisers and society at large. Ethics are concerned with finding a balance between benefits and risks for harm.

LEARNING AIMS

By the end of this chapter, you will be able to:

- Understand the all-encompassing nature of ethics in research
- Think about the ethical principles governing social research in your project
- Identify the need for research ethical committees to judge research proposals
- Acknowledge that covert data collection violates several ethical principles
- Regard ethical planning as an essential part of planning the entire research process
- Detect stakeholders in a specific research project and their sensitivity issues
- Judge the risks and benefits of participation in a particular study
- Ensure that you have adequate support and resources for yourself as a researcher
- Discern the influence of ethics in qualitative data analysis

Ethics in social research

Researchers have to consider the moral accuracy of their research activities in relation to the people they meet along the way, such as participants, hosts, funders, colleagues and parties who are likely to encounter the implications of the research. Research in general is a human practice in which social values and ethical principles apply and moral dilemmas occur. Questions researchers may ask are: Am I exploiting participants and am I in some way deceiving them? When the people in the host organization can recognize each other despite measures to protect their identities, might it hurt or damage them? Is my project really worth doing and is it value for money? Who owns the data and who is entitled to publish the research? Who will benefit and who will lose as a result of the findings becoming public? As Miles and Huberman (1994) conclude, the entire research enterprise is full of ethical pitfalls.

A basic concept in qualitative research is trust. Field workers know that it is often one particular event that develops trust in participants and opens new doors: that specific moment when the researcher's reaction is observed by the participants. My own anecdote while doing field work in a nursing home is that I was invited to be present while enrolled nurses laid out a resident who had died a few moments before. When I showed that I wanted to observe how they dealt with death, they seemed to be aware that I was taking my work very seriously. From that moment on, they were more open about their work, about their worries and about what kept them going.

When the researcher manages to win and does not belie the trust of the participants, they may be willing to say or show more than they had planned to. In particular, interviewees get into a 'telling' mode in which they find it embarrassing or inappropriate to refuse to answer certain questions or elaborate on certain matters. That is how interviewees are socialized and it is after all what researchers try to accomplish by creating a pleasurable atmosphere while generating data. Although trust can increase openness in participants, there can be danger in it as well. Although openness can be fortuitous for researchers, they have a moral obligation to protect individuals from saying more than they want. A colleague researcher took this very literally by offering the children in her interview study a stop sign that they could raise when they did not want to talk any further. None of the children actually used the sign, but it gave them control over what they wanted to reveal.

Ethics in social science research is a broad topic. In this section we first look at the common ethical principles associated with ethical research. We address the professional codes and institutions that have been established with regard to ethical issues. Next, we turn to the relationship between ethical issues and studying sensitive topics, as research subjects in qualitative research are often sensitive. Further on, we discuss balancing harm and benefits for the people taking part in qualitative research, as well as possible stress for the researchers themselves. We finish with narrowing down the subject to the ethical aspects of data analysis.

Ethical principles

Despite different accents in the available valid frameworks that guide ethical choices, there are common principles as well (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Beneficence is considered an umbrella principle that refers to maximizing good outcomes for science, humanity, and the individual research participants while avoiding or minimizing unnecessary harm, risk or wrong (Sieber, 1992). This general principle needs translation to be of practical relevance, which is usually addressed in three dimensions, namely informed consent, privacy and confidentiality and anonymity.

Informed consent

One important general ethical requirement for the researcher's introduction to the field is informed consent. This is the obligation to outline fully the nature of the data collection and the purpose for which the data will be used to the people or community being studied in a style and language that they can understand. Informed consent is intended to ensure that the participants are placed in a situation where they can decide, in full knowledge of the risks and benefits of the study, whether and how to participate (Endacott, 2004). In other words, those who are researched have the right to know that they are being researched, and they should actively give their consent (Bulmer, 2008). When an ethical review committee (see next section) is involved, and in some countries any research study requires approval of an ethical review committee, its members will have to approve of the research proposal including the informed consent before any recruitment of participants or data collection can start.

Additionally, to some, voluntary informed consent is seen as an ongoing, two-way communication process between research participants and the investigator (Sieber, 2008; Cutcliffe & Ramcharan, 2002). The reasons for this view are twofold. First, the practicalities of 'doing research' daily can give rise to a change in design, due to the fluid and open design of qualitative research (see Chapter 2). Such a change of plans needs to be renegotiated with the participants, although a drastic change also needs renewed approval of the ethical review committee, which often keeps researchers from proposing such a change. Second, questions and concerns often occur to the participants only after the qualitative research is well under way. Sometimes it is only then that meaningful communication and informed consent can occur ('If only I had known that ...'). Therefore, it must be made clear to participants that they have the right to refuse or to withdraw from the project at any time without it affecting their/their relative's care, lessons, treatment, professional development or anything else.

The principle of informed consent cannot be reconciled with the use of covert methods. By definition, the subjects of covert research are kept in ignorance of the true identity of the researcher and they have no opportunity to decide whether or not to participate (Bulmer, 2008). However, in overt participation the participants sometimes forget that they are being studied when the researcher becomes a known person who is always around. Participants do not always realize that a friendly

conversation might be information ending up in a report. With qualitative methods, it is considered good practice to seek verbal assurance from participants immediately following data collection that the information obtained can be included in the study. This safeguards against use of information which may have been accidentally disclosed (Endacott, 2004).

Privacy

Privacy refers to the interest of individuals to control the access that others have to them (Sieber, 2008). Simply stated, this means that individuals decide to whom they give information about themselves and that researchers may not disclose such information to others. Privacy often plays a part in the public perception of social science since social scientists are perceived to intrude into areas which are considered private. Why such areas are deemed private may vary, as we will see in the next paragraph on sensitive topics. Again, secret participant observation is often an invasion of privacy. To make observations or enquiries under false pretences in order to gather material for research violates the right to privacy of the individual (Bulmer, 2008).

In social research, there are complications stemming from the institutionalized nature of social life. Entry to research settings may be controlled by gatekeepers who are professionals or administrators in charge. Yet they may grant permission on behalf of clients or customers or patients frequenting the milieu – or may deny entry even if members of those groups are willing to grant it and cooperate in the research.

Confidentiality and anonymity

Confidentiality concerns data (records, field notes, digital recordings of interviews, transcripts and the like) and agreement as to how the data are to be handled in the research in order to ensure privacy. Often this is dealt with in the informed consent statement, which clarifies what may be done with information the participant conveys to the researcher (Sieber, 2008). Confidentiality is connected to anonymity, which means that participants' names and other unique identifiers (addresses, places, professions and so on) are not attached to the data (Sieber, 2008). Only the research team that conducts the investigation will be able to identify the researched participants by use of a code book. The code book and all material will be maintained in a locked filing cabinet or will be digitally protected when stored on the computer.

Researchers' interest in the personal beliefs and experiences of participants and the often-used practice to illuminate insights with quotes and observations can cause challenges with respect to ethical conduct. For instance, it can be difficult to disguise the participants' identities when using quotes, constituting a potential violation of confidentiality (Haverkamp, 2005). Assuring that participating institutions, such as associations, hospitals, schools and communities, are not identifiable is challenging, especially when members of an organization are carrying out research in their own environment, such as medical doctors doing research in the hospital where they are employed (Endacott, 2004). On the other hand, there are certain individuals and organizations that may require acknowledgement of their role in the study.

Professional standards

Several professional associations of, for instance, sociologists, anthropologists and psychologists, have defined codes of ethics on many of the above-mentioned ethical issues and dilemmas. They offer professional standards to be found on the websites of the associations in the various countries. Of course, the difficulty lies in applying these guidelines to the decisions to be taken in one's own research. Additionally, there are numerous international guidelines on the ethics of research using human participants. Drawing on features common to these standards, a framework has been developed consisting of seven requirements: social or scientific value, scientific validity, fair subject/participant selection, favourable risk–benefit ratio, independent review, informed consent, and respect for potential and enrolled participants (Emanuel, Wendler & Grady, 2000). Although the framework was originally developed for clinical research, there is common ground with the basic philosophy that is also applicable to the social sciences (Khanlou & Peter, 2005).

Ethical review committees, referred to as Research Ethics Committees or Institutional Review Boards, review research proposals that include humans from an ethical point of view. These committees do a precautionary check of the research proposal to protect the population under study. This responsibility extends to approval of, among other things, the purpose of the study, the design, the main interview questions, measures for confidentiality and the possibility to request follow-up help if participation proves to be distressful. Although in some countries, among them the USA, ethical review committees assess all research, the committees are often connected to hospitals. Their key concerns then can be grouped under three headings (Endacott, 2004):

1. *Is this 'good science'?* The committees try to filter out poorly designed research to prevent participants' time being wasted. In their assessment they include the competence of the researchers to undertake the study successfully.
2. *What are the benefits, costs and risks for participants?* The input of participants often does not yield any personal benefit. Sometimes researchers can, however, reciprocate by presenting the findings to the participants at the end of the project. Potential harm, physical or psychological, in the individual participant should be identified, and reported in a timely manner, and possible intervention should be considered.
3. *What are the benefits, costs and risks for the participating organization?* Costs to be considered include the time needed for staff to provide data or to attend briefing sessions regarding the research. Ethical review committees seek to protect staff and clients from being over-researched.

There is debate about the role, composition and conduct of ethical review committees (Hays, Murphy & Sinclair, 2003; Cutcliffe & Ramcharan, 2002). The committees originate in biomedical research and the question whether the criteria used by these committees fit qualitative research is a recurring theme. Sometimes denying access seems contrary to the best interests of the clients, whether students, patients, prisoners or others (Morse, 2005; Sque, 2000). Although no one denies that committees must be cautious in checking the credentials of the researcher and the ethical validity of the proposed research project, they do prevent others the

right to decide for themselves whether or not to participate in scientific research. Morse (2005) adds that this often includes vulnerable groups or situations, such as trauma room patients or school children, but that these groups desperately need to be included in well-founded research. Well-designed qualitative research has inherent checks and balances that ensure participant protection (Koenig, Back & Crawley, 2003).

Sensitive topics

The interest in topics that are by nature sensitive heightens the need for ethical consideration in qualitative research. Qualitative researchers often have the desire to discuss topics that are of interest to them and they assume that the participants can talk, are willing to talk and dare to talk about these topics as well. But there are many topics that participants may not want to talk about because of their sensitive nature. What is permissible to ask in social research? And how do we deal with emotions and stress experienced by both participants and researchers? These questions take us back into the ethical domain again.

First, the nature of sensitive topics needs to be examined. According to Lee (1993), sensitive research topics commonly pose a threat. He distinguishes three broad areas in which research can be threatening: 1. Private, stressful or sacred issues, 2. Deviance and social control, and 3. Vested interests of powerful persons. I will explain these three areas with an illustration from the *Harry Potter* books (Rowling, 2008). I will start with a brief description of Lord Voldemort, one of the characters in these books:

Lord Voldemort killed Harry's parents when he was about one year old and attempted to kill Harry as well. But mysteriously his attack on Harry was foiled, leaving Harry with a lightning-bolt scar on his forehead, and Voldemort lost nearly all of his power. He has been in hiding for the rest of Harry's life, slowly rebuilding his powers to someday return and finally destroy Harry. Nearly everyone in the wizard world is extremely afraid of Lord Voldemort and will not even utter his name for fear that it may give him strength to return. Lord Voldemort's nicknames therefore are: He-who-shall-not-be-named, You-know-who and Dark Lord.

The first sphere in which a research can pose an intrusive threat is by dealing with subjects that are private, stressful or sacred. If we were able to interview Harry Potter, the character of Voldemort would be an example of such a subject. The assassination of Harry's parents is a deeply held private experience. He rarely speaks about it, not even with his best friends, because it induces stress. It hurts him. At the same time the Dark Lord is very powerful, and a certain secrecy surrounds him.

Second, sensitivity relates to the study of deviance and social control and holds the possibility that information may be revealed which is stigmatizing or incriminating in some way. Harry Potter has a visual stigma: the scar on his head. As the only child

of famous and powerful wizards he is perceived as special and there are several people who constantly watch over him to protect him. Others doubt his identity or are jealous of his status. Revealing any more personal information about himself, his family or his friends may damage Harry.

And third, research is often problematic when it impinges on political alignments, and refers to the vested interests of powerful persons or institutions, or the exercise of coercion or domination. Harry is seen as the only one who might be able to defeat Voldemort. Talking about the subject is sensitive in this respect as well. Since Harry has engaged the enemy in battle, more or less unintentionally, he has to be careful about sharing with others what he is up to. He does not know who can be trusted and who is against him.

Back to the non-wizard world. We already came across all three meanings of sensitivity when using examples earlier in this book, including teenage mothers, binge drinking and offending youth, and hooliganism at football clubs. Although all three meanings can arise, in this book we will predominantly refer to the emotionally charged element of dealing with private experiences when we talk about sensitive topics.

Balancing risk and benefits for participants

When defining 'sensitive' as posing a threat, we refer to the risk that some harm, loss or damage may occur (Sieber, 1992). But how exactly can harm be inflicted on participants, when no intrusive, physical treatment takes place, neither while observing or interviewing the participants nor while analysing texts? On the other hand, how can participation in research be beneficial? In this section we will first look at risks in qualitative research, and then at the benefits.

Risk in qualitative research

Dragging it all up

Talking about a sensitive life event, like loss, can be painful and emotionally charging. This can lead people to refrain from taking part in a research. They find the thought of a stranger enquiring about a personal event offensive and they do not want to communicate about it and drag it all up again (Sque, 2000). It is often thought that people who cannot tolerate talking about a topic will simply not do so. They will not consent to the interview, sometimes by directly refusing, by not finding a convenient time or just not turning up for an interview. Participants also protect themselves by circumventing or omitting answers to certain questions (Hutchinson, Wilson & Skodol Wilson, 1994). So basically this risk has to do with raking up emotions and possibly causing psychological harm. Who takes care of the interviewee's well-being once an interview is completed and the researcher has withdrawn from the situation?

Exploitation

Exploitation refers to research that will not produce meaningful results and needlessly exposes participants to risk and inconvenience. To avoid exploitation it is required that research will improve the well-being of people or will increase knowledge. In most research designs the researchers have more power than the participants because they have more knowledge. When this power is misused, it can lead to exploitation. In participatory research models participants are given a more equal role, for instance as interviewers or analysts. Power arrangements among participants are then expressly monitored by the investigator so that the research does not become exploitative (Khanlou & Peter, 2005; Maxwell, 2004). However, the high level of engagement usually required in participatory designs involves other risks, like disappointment and intense levels of emotion and disclosure.

With our data collection methods – sometimes literally our cameras – we invade arenas that are intended to offer a haven to people during times of vulnerability. Although we pay less attention in this book to video, photographs and to visual reporting, we do have to be very careful when using visual materials. Kendrick and Costello (2000) warn us against adopting a voyeuristic gaze, which means that the audience is allowed to gaze covertly and anonymously at a ‘private spectacle’. They give the example of a documentary about the experiences of student nurses. It showed a student nurse bathing a naked woman with dementia. The observers did not know anything about this woman other than her name, which reinforced her insignificance: the object that was once a human subject now played a minor part in displaying and conveying the experience of a student nurse.

Reflection on the purpose of what we are producing can protect us in making the right decision. In the above-mentioned programme the purpose was to learn from the experience of the nurse, and therefore the patient did not need to be exposed like this. Patients who are part of the experience need not be dehumanized. Not only do we have to be careful to leave voyeuristic examples out of visual materials, but out of written materials as well, such as quotes and examples. Research material is not written to entertain, so we must take care not to exploit sensational scenarios. The use of theory offers protection. Theory guides what is relevant and what needs to be shown. Theory can also turn a series of ‘snapshots’ into more general categories and draw a veil over the individual exposure.

Coercion

As stated before, informed consent is essential to ensure that participants offer their free and non-coerced willingness to participate. Consent for vulnerable groups brings an extra risk factor. Vulnerability comes in many forms (Sieber, 1992):

- those whose lives are visible or public
- those lacking resources or autonomy
- those who are scapegoats or targets of prejudice
- those who are weakened or institutionalized
- those who cannot speak for themselves
- those engaged in illegal activities, and
- those damaged by the revelations of research participants (e.g., family members).

These groups sometimes may not understand their rights or may not be entirely capable of exercising their right to refuse to participate in research when asked by someone of apparent authority. The researcher can resolve this problem by appointing an advocate for the research subject in addition to obtaining the subject's assent. For example, children cannot legally consent to participate in research without the permission of a parent.

Sanctions

Research participants must be assured through informed consent that their identities will remain confidential. There is a danger that the institution or community in which the study took place may be recognized. And in a small, tight-knit group, others may find out what a particular informant has said. There is a potential threat to participants if personal or stigmatizing information can be ascribed to them and then held against them. This also accounts for dyads, like couples (Forbat & Henderson, 2003). When involved in participatory research, maintaining confidentiality is difficult since researchers are required to report the findings to other participants to decide on any further action that might need to be taken, hence participants might disagree with each other.

When gatekeepers, i.e. professionals, are responsible for referring candidates for the research, other issues come into play. Candidates may feel pressure to accept participating in the study to avoid compromising their personal situation. In addition, candidates may be afraid that negative feedback and critical remarks during the study can lead to retaliations if confidentiality is not safeguarded. Researchers themselves may also feel pressure to report problems to the professionals (Johnson & Macleod Clarke, 2003).

Benefits of participation

Feeling relieved

Many participants acknowledge feeling better after having participated in a qualitative research project. Talking about one's experiences can be therapeutic and helpful. Talking is seen as a way of letting off steam. In a qualitative interview, participants are allowed to tell the whole story to an attentive listener and this can provide a sense of relief (Hutchinson et al., 1994). Talking makes experiences real and helps in processing them. Interviewees are encouraged to reflect upon events, and talking about them may illuminate issues that help them to make sense of their past and present experiences (Sque, 2000).

Being a worthwhile participant

The overall experience of being a research participant is often evaluated positively (Cook & Bosley, 1995). Realizing that your opinion counts, and that it matters what you think or feel, does people good. Interviews give voice to the participants, which may be particularly meaningful for members of discredited groups, such as substance users, the chronically ill and the imprisoned (Hutchinson et al.,

1994). Feeling that you are heard can contribute to self-empowerment and regained self-worth, especially in persons who have never been allowed to tell their story.

Helping others

Participants can be motivated to join the research if they believe that their experiences may help others. Participation in research gives people the opportunity to contribute to discussions, such as bereaved persons in a discussion of ethics in grief and bereavement research (Cook & Bosley, 1995). The participants' motivation is often to educate and support others going through the same experience, helping professionals, informing the wider public and stimulating open discussion (Cook & Bosley, 1995).

Benefits in institutional research

Institutions participating in research might consider it as a way to improve their services or environment, for example, schools, neighbourhoods, clinics or workplaces. Improvement comes from either 'an actual intervention, staff development, improved morale, insight into problems that need to be solved, collection of data that can be useful for policy-making or political purposes, development of new opportunities and relationships with powerful outsiders, prestige, and new abilities to serve community members' (Sieber, 1992: 102).

Sieber acknowledges that the term 'risk-benefit assessment' is misleading. There is no ratio computed, since most risks and benefits cannot be quantified, are not even known in advance and cannot be weighed against each other. How should we weigh a valuable publication against participants' distress? Or useful information for policy-making against violation of confidentiality agreed upon with informants? Actions that result in benefit for some may occasionally harm others. When writing the research proposal it may be useful to create a list of all who have interests in the research and a list of all possible benefits and threats. Addressing these threats to ensure that potential harm is minimized is of utmost importance. It is entirely the researcher's responsibility to address all these aspects, which can cause quite a bit of mental stress (for further guidelines see: Sieber, 2008; Kavanaugh & Ayres, 1998).

Researcher's stress

Undertaking qualitative research can be stressful to the researcher as well. Five concerns were reported by researchers who were all engaged in sensitive research: inexperience and lack of training, confidentiality, role conflict, impact of the interviews on participants and feelings of isolation (Johnson & Macleod Clarke, 2003). Issues that follow from the effects of research on the participants have been dealt with, therefore we will now focus on the three aspects that directly pertain to the researcher, namely inexperience and lack of training, role conflict and isolation.

Researchers may need a period of preparation to allow them to feel confident in their skills at obtaining information and helping the interviewees in interview situations, should this become necessary. Researchers have reported experiencing anxiety in making the first contact with potential participants and not knowing what to say or to expect (Johnson & Macleod Clarke, 2003). Although it is common for field workers to feel anxiety about dealing with an unknown field, adequate preparation can increase self-confidence and lower the stress somewhat. There are many good books about gaining access to the field, and in anthropological books especially, attention is paid to the many aspects of field work.

Uncertainty often pertains to how researchers need to behave around participants who need help, irrespective of the kind of help. Researchers might feel less nervous when they are well informed about the subject of the research and have prepared themselves to answer questions or give information on where to find adequate support or websites. It is important to follow the procedures below should an informant describe problems requiring intervention. Before beginning the study, investigators should identify a plan that includes referral to an agency or provider that could be available for information should the need arise. This information should be included in informed consent documents, as is sometimes required by ethical committees.

Role conflict mainly deals with choosing the role to play during data collection. For example, will you be a researcher or a caregiver, an interviewer or a friend? Especially professionals – dieticians, counsellors, nurses, teachers, managers – who embark on field work often have conflicting emotions about their two roles: as a researcher they aim to gather information, as a service professional they wish to assist, advise or nurture the participant (Johnson & Macleod Clarke, 2003). At the same time, participants may continue to see them in their role as service professionals, which leads to expectations that are different from the researchers' interests.

Finally, a few words about feeling isolated. Researchers often invest a considerable amount of 'self' into a project, particularly if the research addresses a question about which the researcher has strong feelings. The researcher may encounter feelings of anxiety because of disappointment in the project or in the supervision received. One can even fear the failure of the project. And when working alone, this can be very upsetting. There are some particular considerations that affect the researcher who is involved in studies into sensitive topics. The known sad or upsetting nature of the work requires researchers and interviewers who are qualified to carry out such an investigation and sparring partners to talk to after working in the field (Harris & Huntington, 2001). In Chapter 7 we address how feelings associated with field work can be used in the analysis.

Ethical issues in analysis

Since all parts of research are related to each other, everything that we discussed above about ethics also pertains to the analysis stage of the research. However, it is

difficult to disentangle exactly how ethical issues are impinging on the analysis of the data per se. For instance, if informed consent was in fact 'weak consent', then participants will probably be less willing to give detailed insights in their lives or they may even thwart data collection. When they are concerned about inequity of benefits and costs or do not trust your good intentions, this could lead to non-response and is likely to result in less data than planned. Lost responses as a result of distrust or feelings of injustice can never be recovered again. And unclaimed data will not produce results in the analysis stage of the research project. So being clear and specific on your ethical behaviour can increase the quality of your data.

Miles and Huberman (1994) mention competence boundaries. As we will see in the chapters to come, qualitative data analysis is demanding on the researcher's interpretive skills. Researchers should be willing to spend a substantial amount of time on the analysis, and if novice or inexperienced they should be confident knowing where to find help, supervision or training. Unanalysed data or incorrect interpretations that give way to erroneous findings could potentially harm the different stakeholders.

Analyses can lead to information and understandings that may be difficult for the researchers to deal with from ethical and personal standpoints. Therefore, they must be aware that they cannot base their conclusions on selective interpretation and that they must not disregard counterevidence (Haverkamp, 2005). As a researcher into long-term post-abortion experiences, Hess (2006) acknowledged her pro-life position. She could have had a tendency to reflect negatively on long-term effects and interpret the data in a prejudiced way. A research committee was chosen whose members had different opinions on abortion to keep Hess from representing a pro-life argument irrespective of the data.

Using a certain theoretical perspective to interpret your data can evoke a field of tension between the judging interpretations and the rapport developed while in the field (Hoskins & Stoltz, 2005; Snow, 1980). Imagine interviewing overweight people who give you a detailed account of the various desperate attempts they have made to lose weight and how they were unsuccessful each and every time. You may depict them as people who easily give up and who cannot take their lives in their own hands if you have the psychological theory on self-regulation in mind when analysing these stories. This could result in the participants taking your analysis as offensive. The challenge lies in the ability to 'hold an analytic perspective, while remaining empathically attuned to the ways participants make sense of their lives' (Hoskins & Stoltz, 2005: 99).

Another ethical issue stemming from the interpretation of the data is dealing with the different accounts and perspectives on your subject of interest. For example, when interviewing dyads, like employer and employee or teacher and pupil, you come to prioritize one participant's perspective over another. This can originate from your theoretical perspective or purpose of social change. But it can also (unintentionally) flow from personal commitment to a participant or a possible chemistry that exists between the researcher and one of the participants. Forbat and Henderson (2003) reflected on these issues when they felt stuck in the middle, between the accounts of carers and cared-for persons. The potential for taking sides pinpointed the need to ensure that information from one party was not expressed to

the other. It is on the basis of this complicated work that the authors concluded that there are no easy or quick-fix solutions for ethical issues and that each research project brings its own potential hazards that the researcher has to deal with.

Readings I learnt much from

- Emanuel, E.J., Wendler, D. & Grady, C. (2000). What makes clinical research ethical? *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 283(20): 2701–2711.
- Kleinman, S. & Copp, M. (1993). *Emotions and fieldwork*. London: Sage.
- Sieber, J.E. (1992). *Planning ethically responsible research. A guide for students and internal review boards*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Other resources

- *Professional guidelines* on ethics can be found in abundance. Some useful websites are American Psychological Association (www.apa.org), the American Sociological Association (www.asanet.org) and the American Anthropological Association (www.aaanet.org) – look for ethical guidelines and the code of ethics. See also the Statement of Ethical Practice on the British Sociological Association website (www.britsoc.co.uk) under the heading of equality. The International Sociological Association website (www.isa-sociology.org) has a Code of Ethics.
- *Guidelines for ethical committees* can also easily be found on the Internet. Searching on 'IRB application' will give several links to IRB forms, the consent process, and guidance stemming from various American universities. You can also visit the National Research Ethics Service in the United Kingdom (www.nres.npsa.nhs.uk) and look for 'Applying for Ethical Review'.

Doing your own qualitative research project

Step 3: Reflecting on ethical research

1. Research can be considered sensitive in at least three ways. Reflect on your topic and determine if it is to be considered a sensitive topic in one or more of these ways. What implications does this have with regard to ethical behaviour, for example, informed consent, confidentiality and reciprocity?
2. Look for information on the ethical review committees in your country. See if you can get an application form and practise completing one. Ask yourself what will be of importance for the committee. If an ethical review committee is involved in your research project, what is/was of importance for the committee? Do you agree with the committee that this is a real issue of concern to your

participants? If so, do you feel competent to manage these issues while conducting the research? If not, can you still obtain adequate training to become competent to carry out your research, and will your supervisor (or team members) be available to help you?

3. Run through the various issues raised in this chapter and anticipate any relevant problems that you have not yet identified while constructing the research proposal.
4. Think about the project from your perspective as a researcher and detect whether there is anything in the research project that may bother you from an ethical point of view. Try to find someone in whom you can confide and, if necessary, use to let off steam during the project.
5. Think of the parties involved in your research, such as participants, institutions, funders, science and society. Then try to list the benefits for each party, like knowledge, material resources, training, esteem, empowerment or success. Create a list of any possible dangers and risks for each of the parties involved. As a thinking model, creating such an overview may make you aware of the ethical issues in the project.