Chapter 3

Values and virtues in qualitative research

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Introduction

The history of 'research ethics' is practically synonymous with medical and scientific research. Prominent high-profile scandals in the United States and United Kingdom, which have helped to shape this history, include the ill-fated testing of the thalidomide drug during the 1960s, the four-decade-long Tuskegee syphilis study which ended in the early 1970s, and the retention of the hearts of dead children at hospitals in Bristol and Liverpool in the 1990s. Increasing regulation of research since the 1960s has been largely prompted by these high-profile scandals, and has impacted significantly on professional perceptions of what 'research ethics' means. This tends to be defined, almost exclusively, as about the (mis)treatment of human 'subjects'.

This historical legacy means that research ethics has, in effect, been 'captured' by the health and biomedical sciences research community. Their definition of what 'research ethics' means is dominant. The bioethical principles of beneficence, nonmaleficence and justice have been universalized in scope and may be found, regardless of discipline, in the research ethics codes of research councils, professional societies and universities throughout the world (Macfarlane, 2009). Bioethics has become a subdiscipline in its own right, and most academic papers about research ethics are written from a bioscience perspective. The principles of bioscience now serve, in effect, as a universalized code for researchers in all other disciplines.

The capture of research ethics by the biosciences, where quantitative approaches to investigation dominate, has had a significant impact on qualitative researchers, particularly those working in the arts, humanities and social sciences. This has a number of deleterious effects which may be understood in terms of regulation, principles, practice and language. There is a resulting need to counter the dominance of bioethical principles by developing an alternative way of thinking and writing about research ethics, better suited to the values and aspirations of qualitative researchers.

This chapter will begin by exploring the effects of dominant bioscientific interpretations of research ethics on qualitative researchers. Paternalistic definitions of 'research subjects' and assumptions about the predictability of methodology will be given as illustrations that undermine the values and purposes of qualitative research, institutionalized and policed within the university via research ethics committees. The second part of the chapter will outline an alternative way of conceptualizing research ethics through virtue theory, and demonstrate how qualitative researchers can give voice to an authentic and character-led means of analysing ethical dilemmas in their practice. In exploring the ethics of qualitative research this chapter will complement Chapter 5 by Duncan and Watson.

The capture of 'research ethics'

Most universities now require researchers to seek 'ethical approval' before they start any form of empirical investigation, processes which are well established in universities in the United States, Canada, Australia and the United Kingdom. Similar governance requirements are emerging in many other national contexts, including South Africa and Japan. These structures are mainly about seeking to manage institutional risk, both financial and reputational (Allen, 2008). In a UK context, although research ethics committees (RECs) date back to the mid-1960s, their contemporary growth resulted from government guidance issued in 1991 that all clinical research projects should have ethical approval at a local level.

Aside from the many well-known criticisms of RECs (see Tilley, 2008; Jamrozik, 2004), their operating assumptions about 'research' and 'research ethics' represent a bias against the values and purposes of qualitative research for a number of reasons. First, RECs are part of an approach to research ethics that assumes that ethical issues are essentially predictable and may be 'managed out' of the research process. Qualitative research is often framed as an inductive exploration of a problem or issue rather than a deductive testing of a hypothesis, as in much quantitative research. For a qualitative researcher it is normally important to be adaptable and even spontaneous 'in the field'. This means that research design tends to be more provisional or emergent rather than rigidly defined. Consequently, it is difficult for qualitative researchers to provide as much advanced information about how their research problem will be framed, as they accept the idea that they may not know all the parameters of the problem at the outset.

While a quantitative researcher can provide details about a questionnaire or a series of experiments that will be undertaken, a qualitative researcher may only be able to write in more general terms about their intention, for example, to conduct participant observation or interviews where the course of the conversation can never be entirely predetermined. Conventional mantras concerning confidentiality and informed consent are even less readily accommodated in the context of 'undercover' or 'insider' research. From an audit perspective, this does not provide an REC with as much 'hard' information about what will happen in practice. It wants research to be a predictable, linear process, and as far as possible 'risk' free. Qualitative research can appear to be more risky, as the research design parameters in dealing with human participants tend to be less predictable.

Quantitative researchers tend to operate on the basis of principalism despite the philosophical contradictions between many of these principles. Taken individually, few would object to principles such as 'respect for persons' or that research should only be undertaken where the benefits for society outweigh the costs. In practice, though, principles collide. A cure for Alzheimer's disease, a progressive loss of brain function, would be of enormous benefit to society given that it is estimated to affect over 700,000 people in the United Kingdom alone. The problem for researchers, though, is how to demonstrate compliance with respect for persons as a principle, when the sufferers of this condition are unlikely to be able to give their 'informed' consent to participating in studies. The problem of obtaining consent is similarly problematic for qualitative researchers seeking to understand people with severe intellectual disabilities, including those with little or no spoken language (Hubert and Hollins, 2007). The giving of consent by proxy might appear a practical solution to these problems, but how much real authority should be vested in relatives or parents who may have had little recent contact with a disabled or elderly family member? There is no easy answer to such a question, especially when the criteria are based on conflicting principles.

Qualitative researchers favour a more particularist stance (Hammersley, 2009), a position that moral judgement can only be determined on the basis of a particular set of circumstances rather than following 'absolute' principles. This is because of the more 'messy' and less predictable reality of much qualitative research. However, the capture of research ethics by the medical and biosciences community means that qualitative researchers must conform to a set of bioethical principles, chief among which is confidentiality. This principle derives from medicine, where it is assumed that patients would be less likely to seek out treatment if confidentiality were not maintained (Yu, 2008). It has become a default position that researchers from all disciplines must offer participants confidentiality and anonymity even though in practice this can be problematic to achieve. Confidentiality is also based on the idea that research participants are in some way vulnerable and less powerful than the researcher, and that consequently they need 'protection'.

Yet confidentiality is not always as important for participants as we might think. The notion that participants are vulnerable is a patronising assumption not made in other areas of professional life. In journalism, for example, individuals making comments are normally named, and confidentiality is granted by exception. Many participants in qualitative research studies, such as teachers and lecturers in educational research, are far from 'vulnerable' (Yu, 2008). Sometimes the participant is equal in social status or more powerful than the researcher, or may be keen to be 'quoted' (see, for example, Watson and Amoah, 2007). Research 'subjects' can even be eager to tell their own friends and family about their participation in a piece of research (LaRossa, 1977). There are also practical reasons why trying to maintain confidentiality can be little more than a fig leaf, such as in single-institution case studies. Furthermore, at a practical level, qualitative researchers sometimes find it necessary to break promises of confidentiality when participants are felt to be at risk (Wiles et al., 2008).

Aside from confidentiality, the rigid focus on gaining 'informed consent' from research participants can have the effect of undermining trust of participants in the researcher and the research process. It is now common to ask participants in any kind of social research to sign a consent form. This is a defensive and quasi-legal means of trying to 'protect' the university, and to some extent the researcher, from litigation or other accusations of wrongdoing. But researchers have found that demanding someone reads and signs consent forms can make them suspicious and even sometimes unwilling to participate (Grayson and Myles, 2005).

The basis upon which someone participates in research is rarely connected with whether or not a study has been approved by an REC. It is far more likely to rest on a sympathy with the purpose of the research, and perhaps knowing and/or trusting the researchers (Coggon, 2007). The opposite of this situation is where researchers are operating in developing countries and collecting data from the poor and underprivileged. The requirement to sign consent forms can be more about litigation protection than concern for the needs and interests of the participant (Humphreys, 2007). Consent forms can have negative consequences for quantitative researchers too. Here, the requirement to include elaborate and legalistic statements is said to damage response rates, which in turn can have a deleterious effect on the extent to which tests for statistical significance can be relied on (Grayson and Myles, 2005).

Finally, research ethics is also, crucially, about language. The dominant discourse is premised on the otherness of the research 'subject', and positions the researcher as a neutral scientific investigator. In this chapter I have hitherto, and quite deliberately, used the word 'participant' rather than 'research subject', but more often than not RECs adopt the latter term in their paperwork. This is a symbol of the dominant discourse of quantitative scientific

research. Such language can be alienating for qualitative researchers outside the medical sciences, along with other standard questions and terminology contained in ethical approval guidelines, such as whether the researcher will be undertaking any 'invasive procedures' (Hughes, 2005).

Research ethics as political correctness

The use and mis(use) of language is at the heart of political correctness (Lea, 2009). Euphemistic 'uptitling' has converted bin collectors into 'refuse disposal operatives' and shop assistants into 'sales executives'. Political correctness can be about self-censorship, or not saying what you really think in case it might give offence (Loury, 1994). In a higher education teaching context this might take the form of thanking students for a contribution to a discussion rather than telling them that you think they are wrong. It can also be about deliberately adopting language that makes a strategic assessment about the way a sentiment is understood by its audience. The pervasiveness of quality assurance processes in higher education has led some academics to adopt a scripted language that connotes commitment to certain principles (for instance, that students are 'customers' and that teaching is 'student-centred') which they do not necessarily believe in (Cheng, 2009). This scripting of communication is an extension of the deskilling of fast-food employees (Ritzer, 2000) to incorporate the professional academic.

Writing by academics and students about research ethics strongly illustrates scripted communication. This can be found in published research papers and student theses and dissertations. Here, the politically correct language of 'universal' research ethics is strongly in evidence through researchers emphasizing the importance of obtaining informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity, 'safe' storage of data, or noting the right of research 'subjects' to withdraw, among other 'commitments'. Given that ethical issues are defined in terms of the effect or potential impact on the human subject and little else, there is no politically correct need to comment about broader ethical concerns or the messy, real issues faced in the field.

Demonstrating that you have 'covered' research ethics in the language of biomedical science is now a de facto requirement for anyone seeking to pass a masters or doctoral thesis, or get a paper published in a peer-reviewed journal. This is about inauthentic, scripted communication. While the fast-food worker may be required to tell the customer to 'have a nice day!' academic researchers are required to state that they 'kept all data confidential' or that 'the identity of research subjects was anonymized'. Clichéd statements of this type represent little more than sham compliance with the audit of RECs, journal editors and reviewers, and lecturers who assess theses and dissertations. They demonstrate that the researcher understands the strategic 'game' and has chosen the politically correct language to convey the right impression to the reader (Lea, 2009). It is about a demonstration of emotional performativity. Researchers have shown that they 'care' about the impact of their research on others, whether they genuinely do so or not.

In practice, researchers know that once they have overcome the 'hurdle' of the research ethics committee or written about 'ethical issues' in the methodology section of their paper or thesis, then they can carry on 'as normal'. Here, there is an important distinction between 'procedural ethics', which is about satisfying the research ethics process, and 'ethics in practice', where the real challenges lie in making decisions in the field (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004). Some researchers may have considerable real concern for ethical issues while others may pay little regard to such matters in practice. The focus on principalism and approval

processes does not get to the heart of this matter. The regulation of research ethics by research ethics committees results in the classic audit paradox (Hammersley, 2009). Audit processes demonstrate the capacity of academics to play the role of being audited rather than the actual phenomena that are being audited.

Reframing research ethics

The uncertainty and unpredictability of the research process means that real research ethics consist of facing moral challenges in the field. It has nothing to do with seeking ethical approval. It is what happens next that really matters. We need a way of thinking and writing about research ethics that breaks the dominance of principalism. While qualitative researchers are particularly in need of such a new approach, I would argue that it is no less relevant to quantitative researchers.

The alternative to principalism does not have to be its opposite extreme, that of moral particularism. Just as people who do not believe in religion may choose not to be defined by a lack of religious belief (as atheists) but as something more positive (for instance, as humanists), so it is perfectly possible to construct a positive, alternative way of thinking about morality through virtue ethics. This is about a belief in the importance of possessing certain virtues (or excellences of character) that make it possible to lead a 'good' life. Virtues are excellences of character such as courage or (proper) pride. A virtue-based approach to ethics focuses on *being* rather than *doing*. In other words, virtue theory is concerned with defining what we mean by a 'good' person rather than trying to predetermine how someone should act through identifying principles that pay no regard to culture, context or the personality of the actor. In the context of research ethics there are personal values and virtues that are central to being a 'good' researcher. Several writers have sought to identify what these virtues might be in reference to research, such as courage (or bravery), respectfulness, resoluteness (or perseverance), sincerity (or honesty), humility (or modesty) and reflexivity (Pring, 2001; Kiley and Mullins, 2005; Macfarlane, 2009).

To take courage as an example, this virtue is of central relevance to any researcher, and may be applied or interpreted in a variety of ways (Martin and Booth, 2003). The chosen method of research may represent a deviation from standard practice in the discipline, or the researcher may be similarly audacious in challenging received wisdom in the form of a dominant disciplinary ideology or paradigm. The researcher may have decided to tackle an unpopular or taboo subject where the fact that there is little funding or even disapproval from peers must be faced. Such a decision, while courageous, might represent taking a significant career risk. Even more fundamentally, a really courageous researcher is prepared to ask questions that challenge their own previous research findings or assumptions about the world. The results of research can prove to be so controversial that the researcher may, in extreme cases, risk professional and sometimes public vilification. Such a dilemma most famously confronted Charles Darwin (1859) in the much delayed publication of *On the Origin of Species.*

Every virtue is linked to, and comes under pressure from, twin vices which represent the lack or excess of a particular disposition at either extreme. Courage, for example is linked to the twin vices of cowardice and recklessness. Human emotions play a big part in the research process, as in any other life activity. Emotions such as love, ambition, greed, boredom and laziness can have both positive as well as negative consequences. A cowardly researcher might shrink from the challenge of pursuing a difficult or taboo topic which might go

against the grain of current academic fashion. A reckless researcher might take on the challenge of a demanding research theme or question without engaging in sufficient preparation through examining the available literature, or simply be wildly over-ambitious in their aims. What is needed, in other words, is a balance, a means which lends itself toward the middle state of courage. This is what a virtue is.

Other virtues of relevance might demand that a researcher demonstrates respectfulness not just toward research participants but also to wider communities (such as indigenous peoples) and the physical environment. There is a need to be resolute in the pursuit of a research question despite challenges connected with the time-consuming nature of a project, its scope, or difficulties in collecting or interpreting data. It is tempting to cut corners and compromise original intentions. Researchers must then 'convert' hard-won data or other materials and ideas into meaningful 'results'. In practice this is about producing some kind of interpretation, critique, model, theory, design or artefact. There are many temptations to be avoided during this creative phase of research: ways to misrepresent data (both qualitative and quantitative) including 'trimming' results that do not 'fit' the researchers', or even a sponsors', own favoured beliefs or desired outcome. Here, the virtue of sincerity is critical in avoiding the twin vices of concealment and exaggeration. While the results of anyone's research might later be shown to be flawed, what is vital is that researchers only present what they believe to be true at the time. Ultimately, research is about the pursuit of truth, and to do anything other than this is to pervert the entire process. In subsequently presenting what one might believe to be true it is important to be modest and humble, paying due regard to the prior research of others and their possible 'priority' in connection with particular ideas or discoveries. Finally, throughout the research process, or at least at its conclusion, a reflexive state of mind is needed to assess the extent to which the purposes or questions posed at the outset have been answered, and to be self-critical about one's own personal performance as a researcher. This is about epistemological and personal reflexivity.

Virtues are closely connected with human emotions and personalities. Nobody is perfect, and it is important to recognize that a virtue approach is about realizing the importance of trying to improve through practice. In other words, one only becomes courageous by doing courageous things. Some virtues are more about action, such as resoluteness, while others are mainly about empathy, sensitivity and self-awareness, such as respectfulness. Here, a division is made between 'instrumental' virtues, where there is an emphasis on 'getting things done', and those that are essentially 'non-instrumental', like resoluteness (Pincoffs, 1986). Human beings, and thus researchers, have different personalities which makes some of us more empathy-oriented than others, for example (Cawley, Martin and Johnson, 2000). Personality differences are also said to be connected with gender, where a 'care' approach to addressing dilemmas is associated with young women as opposed to men (Gilligan, Ward and Bardinge, 1988).

Finally, virtues are subject to different interpretations according to the discipline. For example, early publication might be the 'right' course of action where data can help other researchers to advance, but in some fields the opposite consideration might apply, when an incomplete picture might mislead as much as inform. A chemist might be frowned on for withholding the results of an experiment, whereas an archaeologist who publishes on the basis of some incomplete analysis of an early civilisation could be accused of being less than circumspect, so potentially misleading academic peers. There is a fine line between informing and misleading. The pressure to publish is, of course, connected to the vice of boastfulness, something which increasing audit of university research in recent years has only served to exacerbate.

Living the virtues – the 'ordinariness' of research ethics

A virtue approach provides a way of thinking about how to live research ethics rather than treating this complex element of our practice as about abiding by a set of static principles. As researchers we are rarely faced by the kind of dramatic 'ethical dilemmas' that tend to attract popular attention. We are all familiar with high-profile scandals where there has been out-right falsification of results, research participants have been treated inhumanely, or someone has stolen the work of others and claimed it as their own. Yet real research ethics is rarely about headline-grabbing incidents of scandal and drama. There is an 'ordinariness' about the day-to-day decisions we face which is rarely recognized.

What is this 'ordinariness' about? In practice, we might be tempted to cut the odd corner – say on the extent of data collection, or by excluding an interview transcript that contradicts all the others. This is about making a judgement call where we know that the decision will probably never be exposed. It is about living with oneself rather than worrying about public scandal and exposure. It is about thinking through daily practice and avoiding the little temptations, such as keeping the audio recording going for a few minutes after completing a formal interview in the hope that the interviewee might say something more interesting; promising to send someone a transcript to check and never doing so in the (almost) sure knowledge that there will be no consequences; referencing to sources that we may have found in the bibliographies of others but never actually read ourselves; or taking more autho-rial credit than we should do when working with other, perhaps less powerful or experi-enced, researchers.

Few who have worked as researchers could honestly say that they have never succumbed to any of these types of temptations. Hence, being a 'good' researcher demands a vigilant attitude toward oneself. It calls for a kind of extraordinary ordinariness, as the examples in Table 3.1 seek to explain. This is not about being 'good' or 'bad', but about trying to act reasonably according to the dictates of our conscience and experience.

Table 3.1 Living the virtues (some examples)

Courage
- Seeking to challenge one's own presuppositions or conventional wisdom.
- Developing a project that might not necessarily attract funding or represent a 'fashionable' topic.
- Pursuing a line of research without undue regard to career and other financial imperatives.
- Freely admitting when research does not go to plan or when you feel your previous research was factually or conceptually mistaken.

Respectfulness
- Being respectful to others including vulnerable individuals and communities.
- Being aware of the temptation to take advantage of organizational, social or intellectual power over others.
- Taking care not to cede too much power to others who may wish to distort the research process for their own ends.

Resoluteness
- Being transparent about circumstances when the extent of data collection or creative endeavour has been compromised from original intentions.
- Being aware of the temptation to start analysing data or other results before a representative sample or case study has been completed.

Sincerity
- Ensuring that the results of research are based on an accurate representation of all the relevant information collected.
- Resisting overt or covert pressure from a powerful sponsor or stakeholder to skew results to meet their needs or expectations.
- Being aware of the temptation to conceal or exaggerate results in order to gain some advantage, either materially and/or to reputation.

Humility
- Fully acknowledging one's intellectual debt to others.
- Ensuring all research partners are fairly represented in being accorded publication credit corresponding with their relative contribution.
- Inviting others to challenge your own thinking and/or results.
- Reflexivity
- Being self-critical about one's own research findings or personal performance as a researcher.

The examples contained in the table just skim the surface of living out a virtue approach to research ethics, a more complete illustration of which may be found in Macfarlane (2009). What this approach demonstrates is that 'research ethics' may be connected to a much broader range of real issues throughout the lifecycle of a piece of research, rather than simply being confined to conforming to a set of mantras in a formalized and decontextualized front-ended process. Crucially, virtue theory provides a way of connecting 'research ethics' with one's own lived experience as a researcher. Virtue theory provides no formulas or 'step-by-step' recipes. It brings responsibility down to the level of each individual researcher, and demands an authentic rather than formulaic consideration of day-to-day decisions.

Conclusion

What does it mean to be ethical? This is partly about appreciating the dialectical interplay between particularism and principalism (Hammersley, 2009), but it is also potentially about understanding the way that virtue and vice can cause us to do good and bad things. Being 'ethical' is thus about developing a deep, personal understanding of virtue rather than being politically correct enough to espouse bioethical principles. Above all, it is about being authentic rather than slipping into the easy assumptions of principalism and justifying a pre-determined course of action based on whichever principle happens to most conveniently 'fit' with the research design.

Wisdom and uncertainty are key themes in this book, and are interlinked in relation to research ethics for qualitative researchers. In conducting qualitative research, front-ended 'ethical approval' will never capture the uncertainty and unpredictable nature of the research process itself. Here, the researcher must rely on their own personal values and virtues in order to handle ethical issues in the field. This is about practical wisdom (or what Aristotle (1906) termed *phronesis*). Getting better at handling ethical issues only comes with practice, experience and learning from the good (and bad) example of others; learning, in the process, whom to respect and whom to ignore.

Wisdom comes with practice and experience, and understanding the need to respond to unpredictable circumstances. Ethics is a bit like jazz. It is about more than simply following the notes on the page. It demands improvisation and an ability to be an interpreter of moods and situations. No two renditions will ever be exactly the same. In research ethics, a similar ability to think on one's feet is required as researchers need to deal day-to-day with unique

challenges. The rigidity of the ethical approval process and the mantras of principalism offer little assistance in facing this reality.

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