

# INTRODUCTION

- What is ethical and unethical in qualitative research?
- What does it mean to be ethical or unethical?
- Who should judge whether or not qualitative researchers are behaving ethically?
- How is this to be done?

These are some of the questions we will be addressing in this book. We will argue that answering them can be more difficult than is often supposed, and our own answers will be controversial in some respects, for example as regards the severity of the ethical dangers involved in qualitative inquiry and how we should approach them.

All social research involves ethical issues, but the character and importance of these varies. This book focuses on qualitative research, broadly conceived as research that employs relatively unstructured forms of data, whether produced through observation, interviewing, and/or the analysis of documents. The production of such data can involve researchers in quite close, and sometimes long-term, relationships with people. Indeed, the ethos of qualitative research tends to emphasise the need for such closeness if people's perspectives are to be understood adequately, and perhaps also if the full relevant range of their activities is to be documented. Furthermore, data collection usually takes place in 'natural' settings, rather than in situations specifically set up for research purposes. These features have considerable significance when it comes to thinking about ethical issues, and we will be focusing especially on ethnographic or participant observation research for this reason, though our discussion will be relevant to most other kinds of qualitative work.

Any discussion of 'research ethics' must begin by addressing the meaning of that phrase, and this will be our focus in Chapters 1 and 2. There is a common tendency to treat research ethics as primarily or even exclusively about how researchers should treat the people they study, this often being conceptualised in terms of protecting rights and interests, for example avoiding causing harm, respecting people's autonomy, and preserving their privacy. We will argue that, while such matters are important, they do not identify the primary obligation placed upon researchers, which is to pursue research in ways that answer worthwhile questions to the required level of



likely validity. Other ethical considerations, we suggest, must be evaluated against this background.

Here in the Introduction we will begin by outlining why research ethics has become such a prominent issue in social science in recent years. In the final part, we will outline the contents of the other chapters.

## THE RISE AND RISE OF RESEARCH ETHICS

Research ethics has long been a topic for methodological reflection, and occasionally for intense discussion and disagreement, among social scientists. However, in recent years it has come to be given even more attention than previously. There are several reasons for this.<sup>1</sup> One is the use of new technologies (from digital photography and audio- and video-recording to the analysis of virtual materials from the Internet). This has introduced some distinctive problems, or at least it has given old problems a new form (Prosser 2000; Buchanan 2004; Wiles et al. 2008b; Markham and Baym 2009). Another factor is data protection legislation, in the UK and elsewhere, which carries implications for how researchers store and report data, and for its deposition in archives and its re-use.<sup>2</sup>

Later in the book we will examine the issues raised by these developments, but here we want to look more closely at two other factors that have led to increased attention to research ethics: the growth of ethical regulation, and the fragmentation of qualitative research along philosophical and political lines.

### Professional codes and ethics committees

The move towards ethical regulation of social science began many years ago with some social science subject associations establishing codes to guide the behaviour of their members. This was stimulated in part by earlier developments within medical research after the Second World War, these being prompted by the appalling experiments carried out by Nazi doctors on people in institutions and in concentration camps. The Nuremberg Code of 1947 specified ethical principles that should guide medical experiments, these later being applied more widely, notably in psychology. They were subsequently clarified, developed and supplemented in the World Medical Association's Helsinki Declaration of 1964, and in the Belmont Report of 1979 in the USA. The last of these was prompted by further scandals, for instance the Tuskegee project in the southern United States, in which African-American men

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<sup>1</sup>Writing over 30 years ago, Barnes (1979: Ch. 1) also noted a growth of interest in research ethics, explaining this in terms of long-term socio-political trends.

<sup>2</sup>For interpretations of the implications of this legislation in the UK, see Akeroyd (1988); SRA (1995); Le Voi (2006); Alderson and Morrow (2011: 36–7). On ethical issues and archiving, see Corti et al. (2000); Thompson (2003); Erdos (2011a, 2011b); Williams et al. (2011).





were not given treatment for syphilis, in order to allow researchers to understand the variable course of the disease.<sup>3</sup>

The production of ethics codes by social science associations also stemmed more directly from controversies resulting from the involvement of social scientists in work for external organisations, especially governments. For example, during the Second World War, some anthropologists in the United States were employed by a US government agency that was responsible for the internment of people of Japanese descent in California (Opler 1986; Starn 1986; Mills 2003: 40; see also Price 2008), and this led the Society for Applied Anthropology to produce a code of ethics in 1948, probably the first social science association to do so. In the 1960s and 1970s, there were a series of further controversies around anthropologists' and other social scientists' involvement in government-sponsored projects concerned with military operations and counterinsurgency in Latin America and East Asia (Wakin 2008: Ch. 2).<sup>4</sup> The one that caused most debate was Project Camelot, where anthropologists, sociologists, political scientists, and psychologists were to be funded as part of a proposed CIA project concerned with 'assessing the potential for internal war within national societies' and identifying 'those actions which a government might take to relieve conditions which are assessed as giving rise to a potential for internal war' (Horowitz 1967: 5). This, along with some anthropologists' involvement with CIA activity in Thailand (Wakin 2008), and demands that social science associations take a stand against the Vietnam War, led the American Anthropological Association to set up an ethics committee, and eventually to produce a statement on ethics in 1968 and a code in 1971. This code declared that: 'Anthropologists' paramount responsibility is to those they study. When there is a conflict of interest, these individuals must come first'. In the same spirit, it was argued that 'anthropologists must do everything in their power to protect the physical, social and psychological welfare and to honour the dignity and privacy of those studied' (AAA 1971).

Similar developments occurred in other associations; for example the first version of the American Sociological Association ethics code was adopted in 1970, being prompted by many of the same events and issues. Of course, while some social scientists denounced all involvement in government projects concerned with foreign policy, others argued that, in this area as in others, they had a responsibility to offer their expertise for use by governments, or to seek to modify government policy through advising on its formulation and implementation.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup>The Tuskegee case is one of several 'atrocities stories' (Dingwall 1977) used in discussions of research ethics, particularly in justifying ethical regulation. However, it is open to conflicting interpretations: see Cave and Holm (2003) and Shweder (2004). Kimmel (1996) provides an account of the development of ethics codes in US psychology; see also Diener and Crandall (1978: 17–22).

<sup>4</sup>More recently, there has been concern over the involvement of anthropologists in the invasions and occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan; see Fluehr-Lobban (2008) and Lutz (2008).

<sup>5</sup>It ought to be noted that the positions taken on this issue often reflected the attitudes of commentators towards particular governments or policies at particular times, and towards the people affected by them, even though the debates were formulated as disagreements about fundamental ethical principles.





Codes in other social science associations in other countries arose rather differently. For example, the British Sociological Association (BSA) established a code of ethics in 1968 as a result of concern about the huge increase in the number of people engaged in sociological work outside universities, and specifically about their competence and level of experience (Mills 2003: 46; Platt 2003: 34). Here, the emphasis was on establishing and maintaining professionalism: it was stated that ‘the professional sociologist, while insisting that only persons properly trained or skilled should do social research, should himself [*sic*] recognise the boundaries of his professional competence’ (quoted in Platt 2003: 162). It is worth noting, however, that this emphasis on professionalism was closely related to a concern to defend academic freedom. In fact, during the course of dealing with an individual case that raised this issue, the BSA’s Ethics Committee came to be replaced in 1971 by a Committee on Academic Freedom in Teaching and Research (Platt 2003: 116), though a ‘professional ethics committee’ was re-established later.

As should be clear from this brief account, the production of codes has involved some variation in motives. Furthermore, the resulting codes served different functions at different times, not necessarily those intended or anticipated. They could be designed or function to protect the people studied, to preserve or promote the image of social science, and/or to defend it against unrealistic expectations and complaints. Occasionally, the aim seems to have been to ward off external intervention. For example, Homan claims that the BSA revised its code in the early 1980s in order to avoid government intervention prompted by official reports into privacy issues (Homan 1991: 38). As regards change in the functioning of codes over time, Caplan (2003: 19) has noted that, in the case of anthropology, ‘from the 1960s until the end of the 1980s, support for ethical codes was seen as support for a politically radical version of anthropology, while, by the 1990s, ethics had for some become a politically conservative part of audit culture’. Partly as a result of this variation in function, codes also differed, across associations and over time, in how abstract or specific, and how prescriptive, they were.

It should be said that the introduction of these codes did not go unopposed. They were challenged for reasons that anticipated later complaints about ethical regulation. For example, when the American Sociological Association published its ethics code, this was criticised on the grounds that it inevitably oversimplified complex issues, that it presumed a consensus that did not exist, and was unnecessary given that sociologists do not deal with a clientele, in the manner of most service professions (Becker 1964a; Freidson 1964; Roth 1969; Galliher 1973; see also Ladd 1991). In addition, Payne et al. (1981: 249) have argued that codes ‘put a premium’ on forms of research that can be easily policed, as well as undercutting the ‘sense of personal accountability and, hence, of the importance of personal integrity’. Along similar lines, Pels (2005: 82) has suggested that since the 1990s ethical codes have introduced a form of ‘legalism’ which shifts the emphasis of ethics ‘away from research practice to the practice of rule making’.

However, in social science the codes that were developed did not amount to ethical regulation, strictly speaking, by contrast with medicine, where codes were generally accompanied by procedures through which complaints could be made, and





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punishment administered. While medical associations could often prevent a member continuing to practise, at least within their jurisdiction, this was rarely if ever possible for social science associations. In short, their codes were largely advisory in function, with little or no policing to ensure compliance.

In recent decades, however, there has been a major shift towards the ethical regulation of social science. One aspect of this is that the locus has moved from professional associations to the organisations in which social scientists work, or with which they must deal in carrying out their research: universities, research institutes, and research sites like hospitals. This process began in the United States, with the introduction of Federal regulations in the early 1980s which required the establishment of Institutional Review Boards to assess research proposals within all institutions receiving funds from what was then the Department of Health, Education and Welfare. What forced universities to comply in setting up these boards was that future Federal funding for projects was dependent upon this. While the review board system was primarily concerned with medical research, the remit of these boards covered social science as well. And their flexibility in interpreting ethical principles across research fields has varied considerably (Israel and Hay 2006: 41–5). Furthermore, over time, there has been a process of ‘ethics creep’ involving an intensification of regulation and its extension to examine all aspects of the research process (Haggerty 2004).

In the UK, the shift towards this kind of ethical regulation was more recent. Here, too, it began in the field of health, with the Department of Health requiring hospitals to set up research ethics committees, and later providing guidelines for the establishment and operation of these. And more recent changes have led to much tighter regulation through the NHS Research Governance Framework (RGF), which was introduced in 2001, and now covers most research conducted in healthcare settings in the UK, not just medical research. Dixon-Woods and Ashcroft (2008: 383) describe what is involved as follows:

The RGF defines research governance as improving research quality and safeguarding the public by: enhancing ethical and scientific quality; promoting good practice; reducing adverse incidents; ensuring lessons are learned; and preventing poor performance and misconduct. Its aim is the continuous improvement of standards and reduction of ‘unacceptable variations’. It formalizes structures and responsibilities, specifying arrangements to define and communicate clear quality standards, mechanisms to ensure these standards are met, and arrangements to monitor quality. [...] The RGF clarifies the responsibilities of those conducting and those ‘hosting’ research, so that all NHS trusts (healthcare organizations) are now legally required to have, as a core standard, systems to ensure that the principles and requirements of research governance are consistently applied. [...] Any research conducted in the NHS [National Health Service] must comply with the requirements of the RGF, which include having the approval of a REC [Research Ethics Committee].<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>Quotations here are from the Research Governance Framework.



These changes in the health field were important factors in stimulating increased regulation across UK social science. There had previously been ethics committees in some universities, but these had usually been concerned with medical research, and/or with the treatment of animals by biologists, and of children by psychologists. However, in 2005 the Economic and Social Research Council published its *Research Ethics Framework* (2005) and this was formulated very much in the language of ‘research governance’. In effect it required that most research proposals coming to it be subject to vetting procedures within universities before they could be funded. In the wake of this, universities extended the remit of existing ethics committees to deal with social research, or set up new procedures; although this continues to be done in a variety of ways, and with differing degrees of operational effect. More recently, regulation has been tightened up and extended through a revised framework (ESRC 2010; Stanley and Wise 2010).

The most significant aspect of this shift from codes to regulation is that whereas, even within professional medical associations, the application of codes had been retrospective, responding to complaints, the operation of the new institutional review boards and ethics committees was prospective, effectively determining whether particular research projects could go ahead. Furthermore, it frequently entails a ‘mandatory requirement for the prior and meticulous review of social research proposals by groups that are representative of a wider constituency than the research community’ (Homan 1991: 17). In other words, research proposals are to be judged not just by members of the relevant research community but by committees that include academics from across diverse disciplines and, increasingly, lay representatives as well.

It is no accident, perhaps, that this move to ethical regulation took place at a time when the organisational character of universities, in the UK and elsewhere, was changing quite rapidly: away from a broadly collegial towards a more managerial model (Deem et al. 2007; Tuchman 2009). The aim of many governments in funding universities was increasingly to bring their mode of operation into some sort of correspondence with the presumed character of business firms, the aim ironically often being to make them more effective instruments of government policy, where previously they had been regarded as relatively autonomous. This resulted from the application of ‘new public management’ ideology, according to which an insufficiently accountable and therefore (it was supposed) inefficient public sector was to be transformed through the introduction of regulatory practices that mimicked the ‘discipline of the market’ and forms of internal organisation parallel to those characteristic of contemporary large-scale commercial organisations (Hammersley 2011: Introduction). One aspect of this was the development of policies and structures for the strategic management of research, designed to maximise external income. And, over time, the operation of ethics committees came to be integrated into these in many universities. Indeed, in the UK this is a requirement laid down by ESRC.

The reorganisation and tightening of ethical regulation has had particularly sharp consequences for qualitative research, because the model of inquiry on which regulatory guidelines and arrangements have come to be based is usually at odds with its character. This biomedical model assumes clear specification of objectives and means of achieving them at the start of the research process, followed by the testing of hypotheses, and the scheduled production of promised outcomes. It also presumes that research consists of



the administration of research instruments in researcher-controlled environments (Reiss 1979). By contrast, qualitative research generally operates on the basis of a flexible and emergent mode of research design: in which the task – in the early stages of data collection at least – is to clarify and develop understanding of the research problem. As a result, it is difficult for qualitative researchers to anticipate, at the beginning, what sorts of data will need to be collected. Furthermore, qualitative research typically takes place in ‘natural’ settings, over which researchers have little control. Even when interviews are involved, these are usually relatively unstructured in character, and carried out in territory that is not controlled by the researcher. All these features make it difficult to anticipate what contingencies might arise at various stages of the research process, and to plan in any detail how ethical issues will be dealt with.

This mismatch between regulatory procedures based on bio-medical or experimental psychological models and qualitative research has sometimes been recognised by regulatory authorities. But the result has usually been the introduction of only marginal flexibility into procedures, or even the recommendation of more detailed regulation. For instance, the ESRC’s *Framework for Research Ethics* states that: ‘Where a study design is emergent, the REC [Research Ethics Committee] should agree procedures for *continuing* ethics review (for example through a Project Advisory Group) [...] as a condition of approval’ (ESRC 2010: 17, point 1.11.2, emphasis added). In other words, those engaged in qualitative studies are required not simply to submit proposals to an ethics committee prior to starting the investigation, *but there must also be continual external monitoring during the rest of the research process*. At present, this recommendation does not seem to be widely implemented, but it may be in the future.

The establishment of ethics committees has been closely associated with specification of *principles* of research ethics by regulatory organisations and their sponsors. For example, the ESRC’s *Framework for Research Ethics* (p. 3) lists the following ‘six key principles’:

- 1 Research should be designed, reviewed and undertaken to ensure integrity, quality and transparency.
- 2 Research staff and participants must normally be informed fully about the purpose, methods, and intended possible uses of the research, what their participation in the research entails and what risks, if any, are involved. Some variation is allowed in very specific research contexts [...].
- 3 The confidentiality of information supplied by research participants and the anonymity of respondents must be respected.
- 4 Research participants must take part voluntarily, free from any coercion.
- 5 Harm to research participants must be avoided in all instances.
- 6 The independence of research must be clear, and any conflicts of interest or partiality must be explicit.

It is no accident that these ‘principles’ have the character of injunctions, using words like ‘should’, ‘ensure’, and ‘must’, since this is effectively demanded by the sort of accountability regime they are intended to implement. But there are serious questions to be raised about this approach to research ethics, as we will make clear in subsequent chapters.



The growth in ethical regulation has generated a considerable literature. Some of this has concerned the principles on which regulation should be based, some has been designed to assist researchers in thinking about research ethics in ways that allow them to navigate the requirements of ethics committees, and a considerable amount has been concerned with the negative effects of ethical regulation for qualitative work.<sup>7</sup>

### Qualitative research and ethics

Qualitative inquiry raises distinctive ethical issues because, as already indicated, it generally involves emergent and flexible research designs, and usually entails collecting relatively unstructured data in naturalistic settings. Furthermore, since the middle of the twentieth century, there has been much discussion of these ethical issues. To some extent, this was stimulated by particular studies that attracted adverse publicity or were seen as involving severe problems. (See Box 1 for some of the qualitative studies that have generated controversy.)

#### BOX 1

##### STREET CORNER SOCIETY

In the late 1930s Whyte studied a poor Italian-American community in Boston, USA, living with a family there and hanging out with young men on the street. Some issues raised:

- 1 Whyte broke the law by engaging in 'repeat' voting. Is it ever legitimate for a researcher to break the law?
- 2 There were negative reactions from some participants towards their portrayal in the book that Whyte published. What responsibilities do researchers have regarding their portrayal of others?

(See Whyte 1992, 1993a, 1993b; Barnes 1977: Ch. 2; Boelen 1992; Denzin 1992.)

##### WHEN PROPHECY FAILS

In this study, researchers joined a small apocalyptic religious group, covertly observing and interviewing them, in order to study their reactions when the world was not destroyed on the date predicted. Some issues:

- 1 Is covert observation of private meetings in people's homes an invasion of privacy?
- 2 Was it legitimate to deceive the participants by pretending to share their beliefs?

(See Festinger et al. 1956; Riecken 1956; Erikson 1967; Bok 1978.)

<sup>7</sup>For references, see Traianou and Hammersley (2011).



### SPRINGDALE

This was a study of a small town in upstate New York in the 1950s. It emerged out of a larger investigation published independently. It was specifically intended to counter the 'positive', 'bland' account of the town portrayed by the main study, focusing instead on conflicts within the community and on the power of some key community members. Some issues:

- 1 What are the responsibilities of individual researchers where they participate in larger teams and projects?
- 2 What constraints, if any, should operate on how researchers portray individuals, communities, or organisations that they have studied; particularly when some of these are easily identifiable?

(See Vidich and Bensman 1958 and 1964; Bell and Bronfenbrenner 1959; Becker 1964b.)

### COVERT RESEARCH ON ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS

Lofland and Lejeune (1960) recruited graduate students to attend open meetings of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), these students being required to present themselves as alcoholics, and to behave in ways that supported this impression; as well as dressing in different styles in order to assess variation in initial acceptance according to social class. Some issues:

- 1 How far is covert observation in 'open' meetings, and deception of members of this type of organisation, ethically acceptable?
- 2 Did Lofland and Lejeune ask their graduate students to behave in an unethical way?
- 3 Was this research also unacceptable because it could result in Alcoholics Anonymous and other organisations becoming wary of sociological researchers and refusing to cooperate with future research?

(See Davis 1961; Lofland 1961; Lofland and Lofland 1969: 299–301; Erikson 1967; Denzin 1968.)

### TEAROOM TRADE

Laud Humphreys carried out a covert study of male homosexual encounters in public restrooms/lavatories ('tearooms') in the US, acting as a look-out for the men. He later traced them to their homes and interviewed them without disclosing that he had observed them. Some issues:

- 1 Covert observation of very private, and illegal, behaviour, albeit in a 'public' place.
- 2 Illegal obtaining of addresses from car number plates.
- 3 Putting participants at risk of legal prosecution through contacting them.

(See Humphreys 1975 – this includes the original study, some critical articles, and Humphreys' response; see also Nardi 1999; Galliher et al. 2004; Horowitz 2004.)

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### RESEARCHING OLD-TIME PENTECOSTAL RELIGIOUS GROUPS

As part of his research in the sociology of religion, Homan spent 18 months as a regular worshipper in a Pentecostal community. He adopted a covert strategy on the grounds that the community would have been unlikely to agree to his carrying out research, and if they had known of his research their behaviour would have been significantly altered in his presence. Some issues:

- 1 Was a covert strategy essential in this case?
- 2 Given the methods employed, should his article have been published in a reputable sociology journal?

(See Homan 1978, 1980a, 1980b; Barbour 1979; Dingwall 1980; Bulmer 1982.)

### SEXUAL RELATIONS WITH PARTICIPANTS

Goode carried out research on the National Association for the Advancement of Fat Americans (NAAFA). In gaining access to the organisation it was made clear to him that his participation should be as a 'fat admirer' not primarily as a researcher, and therefore that he must be prepared to date women within the organisation. During the course of his research he had sexual relations with some of the women, including one who had his child. Some issues:

- 1 What conditions of entry should and should not be accepted in negotiations with gatekeepers?
- 2 Are sexual relations between researcher and researched ever legitimate? And, if so, under what conditions?

(See Goode 1999, 2002; Hopper 1999; Bell 2002; Manning 2002; Saguy 2002; C. Williams 2002; and Zussman 2002.)

### IRE IN IRELAND

Scheper-Hughes studied social relations in a village in rural Ireland, arguing that these generated mental illness on the part of some family members. Following publication of the book, a journalist was able to identify the village and subsequently published articles in the *Irish Times*. When Scheper-Hughes returned to the village twenty years later in order to collect data for a second edition she was received with hostility and was quickly forced to leave. Some issues:

- 1 Do researchers have a responsibility to produce an account that is appealing, or at least acceptable, to those whose behaviour they describe?
- 2 How far does the responsibility of the researcher extend when anonymisation procedures fail to protect participants' privacy?

(See Scheper-Hughes 1979, 2000a.)



### THE EL DORADO SCANDAL

This was prompted in 2000, when an investigative journalist (Tierney) published a book that included criticism of a very well-known US anthropologist (Chagnon) for behaving unethically in relation to the Yanomamö people in Brazil, whom he had studied over a long period of time. Central was the charge that he did not do all that he could have done to deal with a measles epidemic that killed large numbers of Yanomamö. But it was also claimed that, on his own account, Chagnon had violated some of the principles of the American Anthropological Association ethics code, and that his work had been used against the interests of the Yanomamö by Brazilian mining companies. Some issues:

- 1 What level of responsibility do researchers have for intervening to counter the effects of local catastrophes?
- 2 Does the distribution of money or goods to participants by researchers itself cause harm, for example generating conflict?
- 3 What counts as the 'staging' or 'fabrication' of data?
- 4 Is it legitimate for researchers to use deceitful means to obtain information, in this case about names and genealogy, that are matters which participants regard as private or secret?
- 5 What responsibility do researchers have for how their work is used by others?

(See Tierney 2001; Geertz 2001; Pels 2005; Hill n.d.; Fluehr-Lobban 2003a; Borofsky 2005.)

### SCANDALOUS STORIES AND DANGEROUS LIAISONS

Sikes carried out an in-depth qualitative study about consensual romantic and sexual relationships between male teachers and women (over the legal age of consent) who had been their students. Her research findings challenged stereotypical views that such relationships always involve the abuse of power. In 2005 Sikes agreed to give a pre-publication copy of her article to a journalist who was writing a report on the topic. As a result, her research was misrepresented and misrepresented in the wider press as promoting sexual relationships between teachers and students. Some issues:

- 1 The right of the researcher to study 'sensitive' or 'taboo' topics.
- 2 What are the responsibilities of researchers as regards the dissemination of their findings via the mass media?

(See Sikes 2006a, 2006b, 2008, 2010; Sikes and Piper 2010.)

Besides debates around particular studies, increasing attention to research ethics has also been generated in recent years by the proliferation of sharply discrepant approaches to qualitative research. There are now deep divisions within the research community, relating not just to the means to be employed, but also to what is seen as the goal of and rationale for qualitative research.

In debates about quantitative versus qualitative approaches, one sort of criticism made of quantitative work concerned ethics. It was argued that it tends to force





people's responses into categories determined by researchers, thereby reducing them to objects that can be counted and represented as statistics, rather than portraying them as persons and agents (see, for example, Mills 1959: Ch. 5). These features were seen as closely associated with the practical functions served by quantitative research, notably in being used by governments and big business to control and manipulate employees, citizens, and consumers.

However, with the rise in influence of qualitative work, and its fragmentation into competing approaches, ethical criticisms came to be directed at some forms of this work as well. For instance, the involvement of early anthropological ethnography in the operation of European colonialism was highlighted, with the suggestion that it continues to serve as an arm of neo-colonialism (Asad 1973). Furthermore, there was the claim that qualitative research is, if anything, even more capable of intruding into people's private lives than quantitative work. Through participant observation, researchers can gain direct access to people's lives, observing what they say and do at firsthand, which has sometimes been denounced as surveillance (Nicolaus 1968; see also Barnes 1979: 22) or voyeurism (Denzin 1992). Similarly, open-ended interviewing was criticised, notably by feminists, on the grounds that it could encourage people to disclose aspects of their past and of their experience that they might wish to keep private, as a result of false rapport strategically developed by interviewers (Finch 1984). More fundamentally, the asymmetrical roles played in the research process by researchers in relation to those they are researching came to be challenged as constituting a 'hierarchical' relationship that involves the exercise of power, and that is fundamentally exploitative in character (Stacey 1988).

Besides these charges, there were also criticisms that much qualitative research is politically trivial, in the sense that it has little or no impact in changing the world and therefore is of little or no value. For example, at the height of the Vietnam War, when radicals were challenging their profession to take a stand against it, Gjessing (1968: 397) suggested that unless the whole direction of anthropological inquiry were changed anthropologists would be 'playing an intellectual game in which nobody outside our own tiny circle is interested'.

In order to remedy these defects, it was insisted by many that qualitative research must be aimed directly at emancipation, in other words at challenging oppression, social inequalities, or human rights abuses. Thus, over the course of the 1970s and 1980s there were calls for a 'liberation anthropology' (Huizer and Mannheim 1979) and for qualitative inquiry to 'become critical' (see Hymes 1972). Sometimes it was argued that what is required is a form of participatory action research (Hall et al. 1982), one which recognises the agency of those who need political support in overturning the status quo. Not surprisingly, these criticisms and proposals were often formulated in ethical terms.

Later, these differences in attitude about the methods and goals of social research, and about what counts as ethical research practice, deepened and diversified. For example, some feminists criticised mainstream social research for its commitment to abstract ethical principles, proposing instead an ethics of care that gives central concern to the *interdependence* of human beings and their responsibilities to each other; for adopting Western conceptions of the subject; and/or for maintaining a distinction





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between researchers and researched that reinforces power differences, and thereby undermines the production of ‘authentic’ data (Mauthner et al. 2002). Within disability studies, there was growing resistance to research by non-disabled researchers (Oliver 1992; Barnes 2009), just as under the influence of anti-racism there were challenges to whites studying blacks. Similarly, in the field of childhood studies, which emerged in the 1980s, there has been an insistence that research must be designed to secure children’s rights, that it must represent their voices, and, increasingly, that children should themselves carry out research (Alderson 2000; Kellett 2010). Parallel developments have also taken place in relation to research on ‘indigenous communities’ (see Smith 1999; Denzin et al. 2008; Chilisa 2009).

While these developments have been strongly shaped by socio-political changes, and ‘new social movements’ like feminism and disability activism, they have also been influenced by changes in ideas about the nature and value of social scientific research. Whereas qualitative researchers in the 1960s and 1970s generally insisted on the scientific character of their work, from the 1980s onwards many began to distance themselves from this model, looking more towards the Humanities and Arts. In part this reflected wider cultural challenges to the status and character of science, and also attacks upon Enlightenment thinking, inspired by Critical Theory and post-structuralism. Indeed, it came to be argued that this legitimates oppression and disguises Western interests behind a veil of objectivity and universalism (see, for example, Clifford and Marcus 1986).

In important respects, these developments transformed research ethics and gave it heightened relevance. Indeed, for some it moved centre-stage. For example, Caplan (2003: 3) has argued that ‘the ethics of anthropology [...] goes to the heart of the discipline: the premises on which its practitioners operate, its epistemology, theory and praxis’. In other words, it is concerned with ‘*What is anthropology for? Who is it for?*’ Many qualitative researchers outside of anthropology would concur that what is at issue here is the whole rationale for and orientation of qualitative inquiry (see Denzin and Lincoln 2011).

## AN OUTLINE OF THE CHAPTERS

We argue in this book that there needs to be careful attention paid to the meaning of the terms used in talking and writing about research ethics, and this begins with the words ‘ethics’ and ‘ethical’ themselves. In Chapter 1 we look at ambiguities in these, and at their relations with other relevant, and equally problematic, concepts, such as ‘morality’ and ‘politics’. We also examine some of the different kinds of argument that are employed in thinking about ethical matters, drawing on the philosophical literature.

Chapter 2 proposes that research ethics is a form of occupational ethics, and explores the implications of this. The most important one is that a distinction needs to be made between those intrinsic values that constitute the goal of research, or derive from this, and extrinsic values, for example about how the people studied





should be treated. We insist that the only operational goal of research can be the production of knowledge, that this is what distinguishes it from other activities. Of course, there are many reasons why we might believe that producing knowledge is important, and why we should devote ourselves to this task, but these do not themselves constitute the goal of research. So, knowledge as justified true belief is the goal, and the primary value guiding research is truth: every effort must be made to try to ensure that the knowledge claims produced are justified. In this chapter we explore the implications of this, outlining several virtues that qualitative researchers must exercise. Towards the end we outline some of the key extrinsic values that should operate as a constraint on research, these being the focus for subsequent chapters.

Chapter 3 is concerned with a value that has been central to most discussions of research ethics: the minimisation of harm. We argue that identifying what constitutes harm is by no means entirely straightforward, and we highlight the different kinds of harm that have been given attention, exploring how there can be significant variations in degree and likelihood of harm, and how these can be assessed. Against this background, we suggest that there is the potential for causing harm, as well as for producing benefits, in all research, so that what can reasonably be expected of researchers is only that they try to avoid serious harm. The danger of this varies, of course, across different forms of qualitative research, and we explore this by considering the case of research with children that employs visual data. One of the problems is that research rarely if ever causes harm on its own; other factors in the situation will also play a role, and there can be reasonable uncertainty about what caused what and about where responsibility lies, as well as attempts to displace blame on to others. Moreover, researchers are usually faced with the task of assessing the risk of harm prospectively, an even more uncertain business. Finally, we consider the range of people who could be harmed by research, including researchers themselves.

In the next chapter we examine the principle of respect for the autonomy or freedom of the people studied. Autonomy is a central value in Western societies and in other societies too, and we explore some of the complexities surrounding it. This value underpins what is the main procedural requirement often believed to be central to research ethics: informed consent. We consider when consent is required, from whom, and for what; as well as the question of whether consent can ever be unconstrained, and what this might mean. In addition, being informed is usually seen as essential for autonomy, but there are issues to do with what information can and should be provided about qualitative research projects, especially at their start; about what being informed amounts to; and about what is possible in this respect, given the constraints under which qualitative inquiry is typically carried out.

Another value commonly given a central place in discussions of research ethics is privacy, and this is the topic of Chapter 5. It is often argued that researchers must not intrude into the private sphere of the people they are studying, or that they should minimise such intrusion. Privacy is, of course, a general issue in society, but it is one that is subject to conflicting pressures, with growing trends towards making the private public, and demands for 'transparency'. Furthermore, there is uncertainty surrounding which settings or parts of settings are public and which are private, and what this means. Another aspect of privacy concerns the control of information,





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some of which may be treated as sacred or personal. The issues involved here are present in all qualitative inquiry, but they take on distinctive features in online research, and we explore this as an example. We also look at the strategies that qualitative researchers employ to maintain confidentiality, including anonymisation of people and places in data records and publications, and at some of the debates surrounding this.

The three extrinsic value principles to which we have devoted chapters in this book by no means exhaust those that researchers take into account in doing their work, or that could be relevant in evaluating research proposals or assessing completed studies. Other values mentioned in the literature include trust, reciprocity, and equity. While we do not have the space to discuss these principles in our book, we believe that the sort of approach we have adopted in Chapters 3, 4, and 5 applies to them too.<sup>8</sup>

In the Conclusion we summarise our arguments and draw them together, contrasting them with currently influential views about research ethics and about the character and purpose of social research. In particular, we challenge what we see as the moralism that informs much discussion of research ethics by qualitative researchers today, and that underpins the spread of ethical regulation.

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<sup>8</sup>Trustworthiness is a very widely valued personal attribute, and is of considerable significance in many of the contexts in which qualitative researchers carry out their work, especially given that the researcher often enters as a stranger. By ‘reciprocity’ we mean the idea that participants ought to be rewarded for any costs the research imposes upon them. Relevant here would be arguments about the exploitative character of research (see Hammersley and Atkinson 2007: Ch. 10), and debates about whether or not there should be financial remuneration for participants (see McKeganey 2001; Sanders 2006: 210). By ‘equity’, we mean the extent to which researchers treat different people in the field in an equivalent way. Further extrinsic values include integrity (Macfarlane 2009) and authenticity (Guignon 2004).

