



Research Ethics Lecture Series

# Ethical Issues in Conducting Qualitative Research

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## Qualitative Inquiry




Qualitative research focuses on exploring, examining and describing people and their natural environments; the socio-cultural context of complex health behaviours; the diversity & richness of social life



Embedded in this are the concepts of relationships and power between researchers and participants



Qualitative health research is focused on the experiences of people in relation to health and illness




The nature of ethical problems in qualitative research studies is subtle and different compared to quantitative research

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## Qualitative Inquiry



Qualitative research often generates questions about the ability to protect confidentiality



Risks to individuals participating in qualitative research may not be able to be anticipated when the method and research are evolving throughout the research




Researchers often develop a relationship of trust in research involving in-depth or focus group discussions on sensitive topics – this relationship may be misunderstood as a therapist-client relationship or a friendship



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## Qualitative Inquiry & Ethics



Most existing guidelines for the ethical conduct of research with humans are written from a biomedical perspective for quantitative research



Beginning to include more social science and qualitative research considerations

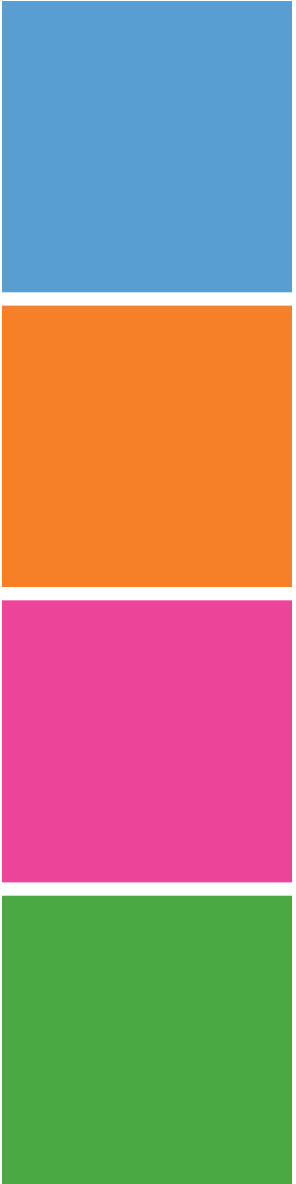


Many ethics review boards do not have members with extensive knowledge of qualitative research or of how to review such proposals



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## Goals of Presentation:

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- A vertical bar on the left side of the slide, composed of four stacked colored rectangles: blue (top), orange, pink, and green (bottom).
1. To distinguish three different dimensions of ethics in qualitative research
    - procedural ethics
    - ethics in practice
    - relational ethics
  2. To demonstrate that procedural ethics cannot in itself provide all that is needed for "*ethically important moments*" in qualitative research
  3. To pose *reflexivity* as an ethical notion
  4. To present some tales from the field for discussion

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Is it really the case that research ethics at the procedural level does not fit the practice of qualitative research?



Does the process of applying for approval in any way contribute to ethical research practice?



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# Dimensions of Ethics in Research

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## Procedural Ethics

- seeking approval from relevant ethics committee to undertake research involving humans
- basic rights & safety issues
- formality – completion of REB application form
- answer questions on forms even if irrelevant to research
- forms ask what measures have been put in place in the event of unexpected outcomes or adverse effects – many situations unexpected – how can one foresee & plan for?

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# Dimensions of Ethics in Research



## Procedural Ethics

REB Forms: Proposal

- 
- 14. What methods were used to calculate sample size?
  - 16. How will the data be analyzed statistically?

REB Forms: Consent/Assent

Assessing Harms and Benefits

Informed Consent

Privacy and Confidentiality (small communities, rare diseases, lengthy quotes)



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# Dimensions of Ethics in Research

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## Ethics in Practice/Situational Ethics

- day-to-day ethical issues that arise in the doing of the research
- unpredictable
- many ethically important moments – when participants indicate discomfort with their answer; when they reveal a vulnerability; deciding how far to probe about a difficult experience
- this ethical dimension of research practice often apparent to researchers, but little conceptual work to draw upon

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# Dimensions of Ethics in Research

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## Relational Ethics

- related to ethics of care
- who participants are and how we relate to them
- kind of relationship established with participant and how it transforms or alters the research process
- sustained relationships over a substantial period
- recognizes & values mutual respect, dignity, and connectedness between researchers & researched & between researchers and the communities where they live and work
- Carolyn Ellis – ethnography & autoethnography

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## Microethics

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Gives credence to 'ethically important moments'

Term used by Komesaroff (1995) to describe the complex dynamics between doctors and patients in clinical practice

Also applied to the complex dynamics between researcher and participant in research

A discursive tool to articulate & validate the kinds of ethical issues that confront researchers on a day to day basis – limited in terms of guidance in dealing with ethical events

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**A process and a way of thinking that  
will lead to ethical research practice  
is needed**

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## Reflexivity: A Tool for Ethical Practice



Usually perceived as a way of ensuring rigor



Involves critical reflection of how the researcher constructs knowledge from the research process




Factors that influence construction of knowledge & how they are revealed in the planning, conduct and write up of the research



Researcher role in the research process

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## Reflexivity: A Tool for Ethical Practice

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*“a process whereby researchers place themselves and their practice under scrutiny, acknowledging ethical dilemmas that permeate the research process and impinge on the creation of knowledge.” (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004)*

Recognizing, discussing and writing about the ethical dimensions of everyday research

Being sensitive to ‘ethically important moments’

Developing means of addressing and responding to these moments or pre-empting them before they happen

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## Ethics as Process Model



### The Temporal Components of Ethics

How to establish/maintain trust over time?

How to establish consent on an ongoing basis?



How to manage the general terms and conditions of the research relationship?

How to dandle relationships that develop with lonely/vulnerable people?



How to avoid the 'delusion of alliance' when participants reveal more than they intend?



**Suggestion: Monitoring capabilities to support the research process.**

Ramcharan & Cutliffe, 2001

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## Tales from the Field




Scenario 1

*Anonymity*



*Research participants are told that pseudonyms will be used in all write up of research results. Several participants want to be acknowledged and ask that their real names be used.*



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## Tales from the Field

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Scenario 2

*Compensation*

*At the end of a research interview, homeless participants are told that they will be given \$5 to participate in an additional study. This involves a delinked saliva test to determine whether or not they have HIV/AIDS. The researcher notes that they do not want to participate, but agree because they need the money.*

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## Tales from the Field



Scenario 3

*Disclosure*



*In a study on the experience of fathering an adult child with schizophrenia, a father discloses that he abused his daughter during her childhood years.*



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## Tales from the Field



Scenario 4

*Confidentiality*



*A transcriptionist calls to say that she knows the research participant on the interview tape she is transcribing. He lives on her street.*



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## Tales from the Field

Scenario 5

*Sensitive Material*

*A research associate leaves an interview feeling very upset by the story she has just heard. She wonders (as a non clinician) whether she has adequately answered a question posed by the participant.*

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## Tales from the Field



Scenario 6

*Researcher Reflexivity*

*A research associate queries who will read her detailed fieldnotes. These fieldnotes describe the setting, behaviours, social context, and research reflections on the interview/research...*

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## Summary



Ethical issues unique to qualitative inquiry



Dimensions of ethics to draw upon

Reflexivity as a tool



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