

Chapter 11

To Whose Benefit? At What Cost?

Consideration for Ethical Issues in Social Science Research

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ABSTRACT

This chapter takes a conceptual approach to addressing issues of ethics in research with human participants. The author proposes preliminary questions at the onset of a research study that deal with the issue of addressing researcher responsibility. The chapter argues ethical considerations surround epistemology and impact when conducting mixed methods research. Moreover, defining the interaction between researchers and participants is crucial. The author challenges early career practitioners to ask the question ‘To whose benefit is the research?’ but more importantly ‘At what cost when conducting research?’ Recommendations for engaging in an applied social science methodology include understanding critical epistemological and philosophical perspectives and grappling with the potential impact and outcomes of research. This level of critical awareness enables research to display complex processes that address social, political, and moral ideals that resonate with and value human experience as knowledge.

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INTRODUCTION

Ethical concerns arise over the attempt to collect and codify research that deals with human subjects. However, social science research is uniquely positioned to be able to explore and illustrate complex processes encompassing, for example, social, political, and moral ideals that resonate with human experience. Considering the representation and mediation of multiple perspectives, the responsible researcher is called to explicitly unpack the intent of their research agenda. One way to do this is to invite participants to make well-informed decisions about their participation by way of ensuring that the research study adheres to the protection of human rights by way of internal and institutional review (i.e. IRB). The organic and procedural transactions embedded in establishing a doctrine of ethics in research resembles an explicit and implicit contract (Josselson, 2007). Taking a deeper look at the persistent concerns over managing ethical dilemmas and making ethically and intellectually sound decisions allows for awareness of the level of reflexive assessment necessary for establishing research responsibility. When the researcher positions oneself as a learner during the course of research, this position warrants a self-reflexivity and an ‘ethic of care’. Care, as demonstrated by the researcher’s concern and empathy for the participants’ stories, that the research will a) cause no harm to the participant and b) embrace a commitment to standards that ensure that the research methods are trustworthy.

This chapter takes a conceptual approach to addressing issues of ethics in research with human participants. It is not meant to report findings from an empirical study. Rather, it serves as a discussion of the author’s experiences reporting on empirical social science research and teaching research methods courses at the doctoral degree level. Much of the discussion stems from the author’s experience addressing preliminary questions at the onset of a research study. This chapter is intended for anyone wishing to gain a bit more insight, and open-minded perspective, around ethical decision-making in research. The chapter argues for ethical considerations when conducting mixed methods research. Moreover, defining the interaction between researchers and participants is crucial. The author charges early career practitioners to ask the question ‘to whose benefit is the research’ but more importantly ‘at what cost am I conducting this research’? Clandinin and Connelly (2000) reflect on the *relational responsibility* of the “ambiguous, shifting participant observation relationships” (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p. 9). They describe this relationship as “the study of an experience...participants are in relation, and we as researchers are in relation to participants” (p.189). To that end, Craig and Huber (2007) articulate the ethical concerns for hearing the stories of others:

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