This is a book about methods. Its steady focus on ways of doing things could obscure an important issue: that qualitative data analysis is more than a technical matter. We cannot focus only on the quality of the knowledge we are producing, as if its truth were all that counts. We must also consider the rightness or wrongness of our actions as qualitative researchers in relation to the people whose lives we are studying, to our colleagues, and to those who sponsor our work.

Any qualitative researcher who is not asleep ponders moral and ethical questions: Is my project really worth doing? Do people really understand what they are getting into? Am I exploiting people with my “innocent” questions? What about their privacy? Do respondents have a right to see my report? What good is anonymity if people and their colleagues can easily recognize themselves in a case study? When they do, might it hurt or damage them in some way? What do I do if I observe harmful behavior in my cases? Who will benefit and who will lose as a result of my study? Who owns the data, and who owns the report? The qualitative literature is full of rueful testimony on such questions, peppered with sentences beginning with “I never expected . . .” and “If I had only known that . . .” and “I only belatedly realized that . . .” We need to attend more to the ethics of what we are planning and doing. As Mirvis and Seashore (1982) say, “Naivete [about ethics] itself is unethical” (p. 100).

Some Framing Remarks

Our aim in this chapter is limited: to outline recurring ethical issues in qualitative studies, as these issues relate to analysis, and to suggest some bases for dealing with them. We cannot begin to deal with all of the issues, but we do aim to cut across some of the problems involved and raise as much ethical consciousness as we can. We suggest thoughtful treatments by others that we’ve found useful.

Most professions have well-defined codes of ethics. The American Psychological Association (APA, 1992) developed its code over more than a decade from cases provided by members. It includes guidelines on everything from “boundaries of competence” to “fees and financial arrangements,” “plagiarism,” and “sexual intimacies with current patients or clients,” along with a detailed set of procedures for complaints, adjudication, and sanctions. The American Sociological Association (1989) and the American Educational Research Association (1992) have similar, less detailed codes. Such professional codes function largely to legitimate the profession involved, and to discipline the minority (usually a fraction of 1%) of men-
bers who are found to have committed grossly unethical actions. But they seem less helpful in supporting day-to-day decision making on ethical issues.

Although the American Anthropological Association (Cassell & Jacobs, 1987) has developed a handbook on ethical issues for its members, there is still no well-formulated set of ethical guidelines usable by qualitative researchers across a range of disciplines.

Why is this? There are several reasons. As May (1987) suggests, a postpositivist emphasis on multiple realities and researcher interpretation makes for a personalistic, nonsystematic approach to ethical issues. So do the emphasis on the idiosyncratic local context and the "closeness to the respondent" nature of most qualitative studies. These features tend to obscure general principles and make for situation-specific coping.

Another factor is that fieldwork and its accompanying analytic work are often quite unpredictable and situation-specific (Punch, 1986). Conceptual foci, research questions, instrumentation, and sampling all may evolve over the course of a study, making traditional ideas of informed consent or preview of study design nearly impossible to apply. It is not surprising, as Howe and Dougherty (1992) found, that institutional review boards responsible for approving research proposals have little sense of how to deal with qualitative studies.

Nevertheless, ethical issues are floating constantly beneath the surface of what we do, and they typically receive too little public attention within and beyond the research community. As May (1987) concludes: "If we continue to gloss over the potential power of communicating our ethical questions, decisions and actions among ourselves and educating others about our work, we ultimately [will] have acted in ways that gloss over the rights of those we study and our responsibilities to them" (p. 32).

In the rest of this chapter, we examine some basic theories underlying ethical choices, and then look at a series of specific issues that often arise in qualitative research, exploring their implications for analysis. We examine some of the conflicts, dilemmas, and trade-offs involved, and conclude with some general advice.

**Ethical Theories**

Specific ethical issues are, explicitly or not, nested in larger theories of how we decide that an action is right, correct, or appropriate. Deyhle, Hess, and LeCompte (1992) suggest five general theories. A teleological theory judges actions according to primary ends, good in themselves (e.g., the presumed value of knowledge resulting from research). A utilitarian, pragmatic approach judges actions according to their specific consequences—benefits and costs—for various audiences: the researcher, the researched, colleagues, the public. A deontological view invokes one or more universal rules (e.g., Kant's categorical and practical imperatives, which boil down to: (a) Would I like this action to be applied to everyone—including me? and (b) Will I treat every person I encounter as an end, and not as a means to something I want?). A critical theory approach judges actions according to whether one provides direct benefits to the researched and/or becomes an advocate for them. A covenantal view judges actions according to whether they are congruent with specific agreements made with others in trusted relationships.

Flinders's (1992) idea of relational ethics emphasizes issues of attachment, caring, and respect, more than agreements made as such; he also adds the idea of an ecological basis for ethical decisions, emphasizing the impact of actions on a complete, interdependent system "in the broadest possible context." Both Deyhle et al. and Flinders emphasize that the ethical meaning of specific actions depends very much on the general theory one is espousing. Table 11.1, from Flinders (1992), illustrates this well.

Flinders suggests that researchers with a utilitarian view (often, a traditional "scientific" stance) address the recruitment of respondents via informed consent, conduct fieldwork so as to avoid harm to others, and extend this stance through protection of confidentiality in reports. A rule-based, deontological view gets more absolutist: Recruitment must emphasize reciprocity (both researcher and researched are to gain), fieldwork must avoid wronging others, and reports must be just, fair, and honest.

Researchers taking a relational view stress equal-status collaboration, researcher and researched are now more symmetrical. Fieldwork seeks to avoid imposition of any sort, and reports serve to "confirm," support, or even celebrate people who are defined as "friends."

A comprehensive ecological view of ethics, Flinders suggests, leads the researcher during recruitment to be sensitive to the language and meanings of the local "culture"; to avoid "detachment" in favor of being attentive to the wrong or harm one may be doing to the entire relevant environment; and to consider during report writing "how to act responsibly in making public what we have learned," with attention to the effects of implicit, multiplex, stereotypic aspects of language.

Sometimes theorists offer statements of core "principles" to guide ethical choices. In her thorough, practical guide, Sieber (1992, p. 18) speaks of:

- **Beneficence**—maximizing good outcomes for science, humanity, and the individual research participants while avoiding or minimizing unnecessary harm, risk, or wrong.

- **Respect**—protecting the autonomy of (autonomous) persons, with courtesy and respect for individuals as persons,
Table 11.1
Ethical Frameworks and Aspects of Research (Flinders, 1992)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>UTILITARIAN</th>
<th>DEONTOLOGICAL</th>
<th>RELATIONAL</th>
<th>ECOLOGICAL</th>
</tr>
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</table>

including those who are not autonomous (e.g., infants, the mentally retarded, senile persons).

*justice*—ensuring reasonable, nonexploitative, and carefully considered procedures and their fair administration; fair distribution of costs and benefits among persons and groups (those who bear the risks of research should be those who benefit from it).

House (1990a) also suggests three basic principles, only one overlapping with Sieber’s:

*mutual respect*—understanding others’ aims and interests, not damaging self-esteem, not condescending.

*noncoercion and nonmanipulation*—not using force or threats or leading others to cooperate when it is against their interests.

*support for democratic values and institutions*—commitment to equality and liberty, working against oppression and subjugation.

We can see that such principles are linked to basic ethical theories: Sieber’s look deontological with utilitarian overtones; House’s are essentially relational. They provide us with general guidelines, but we are still a good way from making specific choices.

**Specific Ethical Issues**

Here we identify a series of issues that typically need attention before, during, and after qualitative studies. They are ordered crudely from early to late in a study. A number of them are exemplified in the helpful casebook assembled by Mathison, Ross, and Cornett (1993), which we commend both for its directness and for the teaching suggestions included. Because ethical choices always occur in case context, we also suggest a look at the case descriptions provided by Sieber (1982), L. M. Smith (1990, 1991), Burgess (1989), Marshall and Rossman (1989), and Whyte (1984).

We outline each issue briefly, posing key questions, giving mini-examples and citations, and suggesting the analysis-related implications. The aim is not to provide guidelines, but to raise awareness and make ethical issues more visible to the reader, who ultimately—whether deliberately or de facto—will make relevant choices. As we’ll see, ethical choices nearly always involve trade-offs, balances, compromises among competing goods and threatening bads.

**Worthiness of the project.** The question may sound pompous and hortatory, but the issue is not trivial: Is my contemplated study worth doing? Will it contribute in some significant way to a domain broader than my funding, my publication opportunities, my career?

And is it congruent with values important to me? The incongruence might not be as sharp as in Project Camelot (Horowitz, 1974), which recruited social scientists to study counterinsurgency in Latin America (practical translation: The funders wanted to know how to suppress popular revolts). But even an apparently innocuous issue, say a study of school “dropouts,” could be decidedly incongruent with your view that bad schools are causing “pushouts.”

**Implications for analysis.** In general, a study that is only opportunistic, without larger significance or real meaning to you, is likely to be pursued in a shallow way, with less care devoted to design and data collection. First
conclusions may not be questioned; follow-up analyses with rival hypotheses may be rare. The report will be written to "look good," rather than to be right.

Value incongruence, assuming that it persists during the study, tends to enfeeble and restrict conclusions; if you believe that your work will be misused, you are unlikely to put your mind into full gear. Or worse: If you let yourself be used unwittingly, you become complicitous and dishonest.

Competence boundaries. Do I (and my colleagues) have the expertise to carry out a study of good quality? Or (because researchers, both novice and experienced ones, are always exploring things they do not quite know how to do), am I prepared to study, be supervised, trained, consulted with? Is such help available?

Implications for analysis. Unacknowledged (or not understood) incompetence is, we think, responsible for a certain pattern of analytic weakness in qualitative studies: blissful (rather than deliberate) underdesign; accumulation of large amounts of poorly collected, unanalyzed data; and superficial and hasty conclusion drawing as deadlines loom. This picture often occurs when lone researchers fail to seek help from friends, colleagues, or mentors. Graduate students often understand their own inexperience, but sometimes cannot get support and help from their teachers. That is research malpractice.

Informed consent. Do the people I am studying have full information about what the study will involve? Is their "consent" to participate freely given—fully voluntary and uncoerced? Does a hierarchy of consent (e.g., children, parents, teachers, administrators) affect such decisions?

It can be argued (e.g., Eisner, 1991; Wax, 1982) that truly informed consent is impossible in qualitative studies because events in the field and the researcher's actions—such as following up new and promising leads—cannot be anticipated. The major topics of a study may well shift during its conduct (Deyhle et al., 1992).

Nevertheless the issue does not go away. We need to engage it. See, for example, the list of hard questions that McQuillan and Muncey (1990) suggest a school should ask a qualitative researcher before it agrees to proceed:

1. What is the focus of the research? What are the guiding questions? Why and for whom is the research being done?
2. How will data be collected?
3. Who will be asked to participate in this research?
4. What role(s) will school personnel be asked to play in this research?
5. How will participants' confidentiality be protected?
6. Will research participants assist in data analysis?

7. What feedback will the school receive, what form will it take, and at what stages of the research process will it be provided?

The list concludes with an additional heading—"You Can Say 'No'"—and encourages initial and regular negotiation about conditions the school considers unsatisfactory.

It does seem clear that dialogue and ongoing renegotiation are needed (Erickson, 1986; May, 1987; L. M. Smith, 1991) for voluntary, informed decisions about the researcher—researched relationship. Wax (1982) suggests, in fact, that reciprocity is far more important than informed consent.

Even this fairly enlightened list is silent on such matters as potential benefits to school and researcher, risks and costs, who owns the data, and control of publications.

Implications for analysis. Weak consent usually leads to poorer data: Respondents will try to protect themselves in a mistrusted relationship, or one formed with the researcher by superiors only.

Ambiguity about later stages of analysis also can be damaging to study quality, and to the interests of people in the case. If you plan to use "member checks" to verify or deepen conclusions, that expectation and specific procedures need to be clear and reclarified as the study proceeds. See McTaggart's (1991) account: The researcher thought he had developed a clear understanding, codified in written "principles of procedure" about matters including who could veto or edit a report, criteria of fairness, relevance, and accuracy, and how reports would be released. But a principal concerned about the report ignored the principles and, by threatening her dismissal, forced a teacher to withdraw data.

Benefits, costs, and reciprocity. What will each party to the study gain from having taken part? What do they have to invest in time, energy, or money? Is the balance equitable?

Researchers are often paid; they usually enjoy their work and learn from it; they may get a dissertation out of it; their papers, articles, and books not only contribute to "science" but also can bring them recognition, royalties, new funding, and career advancement.

Study participants have a somewhat different set of benefits: They get to be listened to; they may gain insight or learning; they may improve their personal practice; a program or policy they are involved with may be strengthened; they may get help in taking effective action on some recurring problem. (In a complex case, these benefits often are distributed unequally: Elites, managers, and key respondents may gain more than "workers" [e.g., students, teachers] or those with peripheral contact with the study.)
But study participants rarely share in publication, and they usually don’t become famous. They don’t get paid for their research contributions. McLaren (1991) calls this situation “ethnographic vampirism.”

The question of costs and who bears them is important. The researcher’s time is repaid—usually not fully—in cash or a class grade or dissertation approval. Research participants normally must take time from or beyond whatever else they are doing, and are usually not recompensed. The local organization may well have added costs (e.g., for teacher substitutes).

Implications for analysis. Study participants’ concern about the inequity of benefits and costs serves to jeopardize access and thin out data. (We are always moved and amazed when people do keep talking to us thoughtfully, inviting us into their lives day after day, when the benefits to them seem so slim, so intangible, and often so delayed.)

Researchers traffic in understanding. Most study participants are preoccupied with action—how to work and live better. It can be argued that if you approach your analytic work with a deeper sense of its action implications, your understanding will be deeper—and the benefits to participants more equitable.

Harm and risk. What might this study do to hurt the people involved? How likely is it that such harm will occur? McCall and Simmons (1969) believe that real or feared harm will always occur to someone in a qualitative study. They state the question bluntly: “To whom shall harm be done in this study, and in what magnitude?” (p. 276).

Harm to participants can come in many varieties: from blows to self-esteem or “looking bad” to others, to threats to one’s interests, position, or advancement in the organization, to loss of funding for a program, on up to being sued or arrested. The information from a qualitative study is never value-free, and it may have negative consequences (as an extreme example, take Garfinkel’s [1981] comment about the morality of the “descriptive” statement, “Anne Frank is in the attic,” if it were made in the presence of a Nazi search party).

Harm cuts both ways. We like the story told by a New York Times reporter who asked a drug dealer if he really felt comfortable about talking frankly. The dealer said cheerfully, “Sure. If I don’t like what you write, I’ll kill you.” As researchers we have occasionally been threatened with litigation, and with promises to intervene with our funding agency when a draft report was seen as threatening a key interest.

As Sieber (1992) points out, it’s important to think of varying vulnerability to harm. More-vulnerable persons (and institutions) include those who are “visible, famous and have deep pockets,” lack resources or autonomy, are stigmatized, are weakened or institutionalized, cannot speak for themselves, are involved in illegal acts, or are closely associated with those studied.

Setting risk levels for potential harm is very difficult—perhaps impossible—in qualitative studies. It’s wise to assume that the chances of some type of harm are better than even, and to consider, in advance, ways of reducing that likelihood. (For example, Erickson [1986] advises distinguishing between qualitative information in a report that is “news” or “not news” to people in the case, and that is likely to be regarded positively or negatively; it makes sense to think carefully about the probable impact of “bad news.”)

Implications for analysis. As with inequitable benefits and costs, if harm is expected, access and data quality may suffer. The prospect of immediately impending harm—which well may occur when reports are made to local participants, sponsors, funding agencies—can lead to pressure on you to revise or delete conclusions, or to self-censor them in advance.

Honesty and trust. What’s my relationship with the people I am studying? Am I telling the truth? Do we trust each other?

Most qualitative researchers are unlikely to lie, cheat, or steal in the course of their work. But broken promises are not unknown. And some researchers have reported deceiving respondents about the true nature of the inquiry (as in the style of “investigative social research” reported by Douglas [1976] and in some “participant observation” studies [e.g., Humphreys’ (1970) study of homosexuals, where he posed as a “Watch Queen” lookout outside public toilets]). The trend toward “investigative evaluation” (N. L. Smith, 1992), carried out for accountability or the detection of wrongdoing, may also involve deception.

More typically, dishonesty is more subtle. The field-worker projects a “fake persona” (the friendly listener, the would-be insider) in order to gain knowledge or access, or to keep access (Deyvle et al., 1992). Or, as Punch (1986) remarks, “Subjects are conning you until you gain their trust, and then once you have their confidence you begin conning them” (pp. 72-73).

At some levels, as Van Maanen (1979) notes, whenever the field-worker works to “penetrate fronts,” symbolic violence is being done: “People are, to a degree, coerced, persuaded, pushed, pressured, and sometimes almost blackmailed into providing information to the researcher that they might otherwise prefer to shield” (p. 545).

Van Maanen says there are always individually drawn moral limits to this violence: A researcher may decide not to push on a delicate matter, or to leave an embarrassing scene. Nevertheless, the question of just how coercive and unauthentic relationships with respondents are cannot be ignored, or be defined away by the pious stipulation that “my relationship is fully honest.”
Implications for analysis. If people feel betrayed by you when they read a report, it becomes almost impossible for them to accept it as a reasonable interpretation of what happened, because of their natural defensiveness when "the truth hurts," as it may well, and their feelings of anger at having been misled.

There is also a longer-term ecological consequence. When Punch (1986) speaks of "ripping and running" ethno- nography, or when more traditional researchers speak of "poisoning the well," they are concerned about access by future researchers, not only to the case at hand but also to others in its region, type, or network. Our deceptiveness and broken promises—especially if benefits and costs have been inequitable or harm has occurred—will make any continuation of inquiry problematic. We will have wronged not only our respondents but also our colleagues.

Privacy, confidentiality, and anonymity. In what ways will the study intrude, come closer to people than they want? How will information be guarded? How identifiable are the individuals and organizations studied?

Sieber (1992) makes these helpful distinctions among three terms, which often are confused in research practice:

Privacy: control over others' access to oneself and associated information; preservation of boundaries against giving protected information or receiving unwanted information.

Confidentiality: agreements with a person or organization about what will be done (and may not be done) with their data; may include legal constraints.

Anonymity: lack of identifiers, information that would indicate which individuals or organizations provided which data.

As Sieber notes, issues of privacy are often subtle and misunderstood by the researcher, surfacing only when there are unexpected reluctances, or an outpouring of information beyond what the person meant to say, or a confidence overheard by others. Privacy is, in part, about secrecy; see also Mitchell's (1991) discussion of secrets as serving important functions for individuals and groups (mainly protecting status or access to resources). It's easy for a jealously researcher to treat secrets casually, or to seduce respondents into telling them.

Confidentiality and anonymity are usually promised—sometimes very superficially—in initial agreements with respondents. For example, unless the researcher explains very clearly what a fed-back case will look like, people may not realize that they will not be anonymous at all to other people within the setting who read the case. Or, as an indignant principal once told one of us, "There are 111 high schools in this city, and only one of them has a female principal. That's me." (In the report, we moved the school to another city and changed the principal's gender. Was violence done to truth? Yes, though the basic lessons of the case were preserved. Her concerns about anonymity were important because the report pointed to negative aspects of the school, and she did not want it to jeopardize the school's genuine improvement efforts.)

Implications for analysis. When you realize that privacy has been threatened, new analytic moves (e.g., triangulation with other sources) may be needed to protect data quality. If privacy has, in fact, been breached, questions of the report's impact when it is fed back to respondents become central; can the information involved be connected with an identifiable person?

Using member checks to verify or extend interpretations and conclusions helps with anonymity problems, particularly if you begin with the most vulnerable respondents before moving more broadly; they usually (though not always) can spot information that would identify them and thus threaten their interests.

The basic problem of identifiability when the case is a complex site must be considered before and during report preparation. Local people nearly always can tell (or will assume) who is being depicted. You may need to err on the side of protecting anonymity, if it has been promised, and to rely on dialogue and negotiation for corrective action before the report is finalized.

Shulman (1990) found that, in a collaborative research project, local participants—actually, case writers—sense of empowerment (and decreased need for "protection") during the project made them want to be identified, rather than to remain anonymous. But it took 6 months of negotiation with the school district (and funding agency), and legal advice, before publication (with minor changes to "foul language" and negative descriptions of students and district conditions) was agreed to.

Explicit confidentiality agreements about where raw data and analyses will be stored, and who will have access to them, probably enhance data quality by increasing trust. However, courts have not normally treated social science researchers' data as a legally privileged communication, as in priest-confessor or doctor-patient relationships (Douvanis & Brown, 1992). If a case is brought to litigation, your field notes, tapes, and other data could become "un-confidential."

Intervention and advocacy. What do I do when I see harmful, illegal, or wrongful behavior on the part of others during a study? Should I speak for anyone's interests besides my own? If so, whose interests do I advocate?

Take, for example, the vivid instance of police brutality witnessed by Van Maanen (1983a) and written up in his field notes. Although he did not assist the police, he did not protest or intervene either; he had what Fetterman
(1984, 1989) calls "guilty knowledge," which he kept to himself, in the service of continued access. He thus protected the police by default, and avoided supporting the victim. Later, in a suit brought by police officers against a newspaper, he opted to "protect the best interests of the patrolman I knew in Union City" by refusing to release his field notes.

Ethical choices are not always so dramatic, but they are still there when we see indifferent teachers, medical malpractice, abused children, or evidence of misspent funds—and do or don't report them. Ethical choices are also present when we study people who are breaking the law as we study them: drug dealers and users, corrupt agency heads, traffic scofflaws, prostitutes and their pimps and customers, violent gangs, embezzlers. . . . It is important to know more about deviance, but are we somehow condoning it by our neutral, noncondemning presence? Does the "immediate, morally unquestionable and compelling good end of keeping one's promises to one's subjects" (Klockars, 1979) outweigh the harm to specific victims and to society in general? With a formal investigative mandate, our allegiances are clear, but without it, they easily become clouded.

Implications for analysis. A situation in which you have "dirty hands"—cannot evade doing wrong to one party or another—is personally anguish. And no matter how it is resolved, it skews your understanding. If you decide to withhold "guilty knowledge" in favor of continued access, then not only your public reports but also your conceptualization and explanatory theories may become lopsided. For example, it seems likely that Van Maanen's (1983a) views of the incident he saw may have undermined the role of institutionalized racism.

But had Van Maanen opted for the victim and gone public on the incident, he might well have forfeited not only his future access (and that of colleagues) but also his understanding of the marginality of police work, its deeply frustrating aspects, and its attractions for authoritarian personalities.

Research integrity and quality. Is my study being conducted carefully, thoughtfully, and correctly in terms of some reasonable set of standards?

This is more than a technical issue. If we provide a set of conclusions based on sloppy (or even fraudulent) work and claim their validity, then we are being dishonest with our sponsors, colleagues, supervisors, respondents, and anyone else who reads and trusts our reports.

Outright scientific fraud is rare, but it does occur when stakes are high (funding, primacy of discovery, career advancement). It would be naive to expect that a qualitative study could never be faked; as Guba and Lincoln (1981) note, "An unethical case writer could so select from among available data that virtually anything he wished could be created" (p. 378).

Far more common, as noted in Adler's (1991) report of a conference on integrity in behavioral science research, is "poor science": sloppy data recording; insufficient, selective, or misleading reporting of findings; unwillingness to share or retain data; undisclosed conflicts of interest; and inappropriate citation.

Implications for analysis. In Chapter 10 we acknowledge the difficulties of assessing the quality of qualitative studies and suggest a series of questions to be asked about the goodness of any particular study: its confirmability, dependability, credibility, and potential transferability to other settings.

The practical implication here is: If you have not attended to the issue of goodness criteria in your study, you are on shaky intellectual ground. It is not just that we must somehow "please" our critical colleague audiences; the deeper issue is avoiding self-delusion. After that we can turn to the task of being honest with our readers about how we did the study, and what worried us about its quality. Without such methodological frankness, we run the risk of reporting "knowledge that ain't so."

As for fraud, the truth eventually will out, though it may take as long as the decades before Cyril Burt's famous results on the intelligence similarity of separated twins were detected as faked. We should concentrate on not lying to ourselves.

Ownership of data and conclusions. Who owns my field notes and analyses? I, my organization, my funders? And once my reports are written, who controls their diffusion?

The issue of confidentiality requires being clear about who can have access to data. Most researchers consider their data and analyses as belonging to them and, absent some form of litigation, consider themselves to be responsible for safeguarding its confidentiality, preserving anonymity, and making data available to others for auditing, reanalyses, secondary analyses, and replications.

But the issues here are not simple. As Akeroyd (1991) points out in her thoughtful discussion, the spreading use of computerized databases, while it makes retrieval and analysis vastly easier, raises acute problems of identifiability, misuse of information, harm to respondents, and, indeed, data security. Most European nations now have laws strictly regulating the use of personal data covering privacy, confidentiality, identifiability, and data protection, and it is possible that the United States may follow suit. (In any case, note that the Freedom of Information Act in the United States now permits access to fieldwork data from federally funded projects.) Akeroyd suggests a worst-case scenario in which qualitative research may become impossible; at the least, she says, personal data laws "impose
constraints and procedures to which social researchers will have to adapt.”

The control of report diffusion is also a crucial issue. In many case reports (e.g., McCutcheon, 1990; McTaggart, 1991; Shulman, 1990), local respondents or their organizations have threatened, sometimes successfully, to block publication because of some aspect of the findings. Funding agencies, too, may exert this right; at the 1993 meeting of the American Educational Research Association, there were at least two instances of a government agency’s refusing to allow a public report of completed research: In one it appeared that the agency saw findings release as politically unwise; in the other the agency’s “internal review had not been completed.”

Implications for analysis. In Chapter 10 we encourage the broader use of audits, often done informally by colleagues on a less than full-scale basis. That use improves the goodness of conclusions. But there are potential risks to respondents, and you need to think carefully about how others can access your database, and how confidentiality and nonidentifiability can be maintained.

In our experience, nothing seems to hit a researcher harder than the realization that some person, group, or organization may block the dissemination of months or years of research effort. Freedom of scholarly inquiry is a strong value, as are the values of career advancement, recognition, and funding. Researchers can easily become obsessed about this (one colleague of ours wrote a 60-page paper on how a school district suppressed and ignored his evaluation findings, and still felt unvindicated). You need to be clear about the political context of your work, and to guard against agreeing too easily to others’ veto efforts, or altering important substantive aspects as a way of assuring publication or continued funding.

Use and misuse of results. Do I have an obligation to help my findings be used appropriately? What if they are used harmfully or wrongfully?

Researchers placed farther along the continuum that starts with description and moves toward evaluation, intervention, and critique (Soltis, 1990) can expect to encounter increasing ambiguity: Do I have the right to change others? Is that paternalistic? Am I sure my findings are correct? How far beyond my findings am I prepared to go? Could my findings or actions based on them lead to harm? Is consciousness-raising without action support enough? Who am I trying to help, specifically?

Once our interventions go beyond reporting to taking local action—even if it is done collaboratively—we enter a larger ethical arena. In a discussion of the ethics of organizational development “change agents,” Miles (1979a) points to such issues as congruence between the “client’s” and the change agent’s values; exaggerated competence claims; prescriptions unconnected to diagnoses; clarification of whose interests are to be served in the local setting; the balance of individual and organizational priorities; the choice of intervention means; use of coercion, persuasion, and manipulation; and accountability. Most qualitative researchers have not pondered such questions, to put it mildly.

Even though, as Everhart put it (quoted by May, 1987), “all fieldwork is politically and potentially reformist,” being directly reformist by encouraging and supporting the use of qualitative findings is not only technically ambitious (see Chapter 10, section C, and Chapter 12’s discussion of using reports) but also ethically demanding.

Examples of misuse of study findings are not hard to find; Judd et al. (1991) point to several types and cite examples. Findings may be misinterpreted (deliberately or not) and used to support wrong policies (e.g., black-white test-score differences as a justification for segregation). Or the findings, correctly understood, can be used for a purpose the researcher deplores (e.g., a new drug found to reduce people’s resistance to being attacked might be used by military forces). Or long-range outcomes for different parties may be inequitable (e.g., counterinsurgency research could lead to the suppression of revolt against an unjust government).

Knowledge is not exactly power. Rather, the use of our knowledge raises our awareness of—and enmeshes us in—the power relationships in the world we have been studying.

Implications for analysis. On any given project, it probably pays to be as clear as possible from the start just how committed you are to supporting the use of your findings (and/or warding off misuse from various quarters). Such clarity not only encourages strong technical attention to utilization effort (as in Chapter 12) but also focuses your attention on the ethical issues. You are less likely to get ethically blindsided if the project drifts—or suddenly shifts—toward a “helping” direction.

A clear commitment to use of your findings also serves to delimit and constrain the conceptual issues being considered, to focus the data collection more than in a straight “descriptive” study, and to narrow the analytic strategies followed.

Conflicts, Dilemmas, and Trade-offs

Most of us would like to believe, as Erickson (1986) says, that “ethical responsibility and scientific adequacy go hand in hand.” But the typical research experience is full of dilemmas. You often face a choice between two goods, where choosing one means, to some degree, forgoing the other.

For example, there is often a conflict between the demands of validity versus avoiding harm. One of us once
studied a school where the new principal, a bit shaky on
the job, received regular consultation from an experienced
ex-principal—who was called by some staff members “the
principal’s baby-sitter.” During feedback of a report draft,
several respondents said, “You don’t need to put that in,”
acknowledging tacitly that it would damage the principal’s
self-esteem. Right.

But when the phrase was excised, readers did not know
that the staff believed their principal needed a “baby-sitter”
and was a decent man who did not deserve to be hurt—nor
that they were, perhaps, asking the researcher to collude
with them in keeping their feelings from the principal.

We’ve alluded to the dilemma of anonymity versus visibility (Shulman, 1990); participants involved in action re-
search, collaborative research, and perhaps in efforts in-
tended to be consciousness-raising or “empowering” may well want to be credited for their work, be recognized
as inquirers who do not need, any more than the “re-
searcher” does, the protection of anonymity.

The long-term study of syphilis patients begun in 1932
at Tuskegee Institute (Jones, 1982) exemplifies the di-
lemma of scientific understanding versus individual
rights, which in this case was resolved in a particularly
inhumane and destructive way. The scientific aim was un-
derstanding the long-term course of syphilis, and it was
given priority. So individuals in the study were left without
treatment, and were not informed of the availability of penicillin (in 1943) as an effective treatment. The study
was not terminated until 1972, by which time most partic-
ants had died. At a less tragic level, this dilemma appears
in studies where we do not intervene in harmful situations
for fear of jeopardizing our access (and thus perhaps our
future scientific understanding).

Another dilemma appears when use of results is consid-
ered: detached inquiry versus help. In any given situation,
we can define our role as that of “understanding” what is
going on and providing “help” only vaguely, in the long-
term future when the fieldwork is over and the report ap-
ppears. That stance defines our actual assistance to respond-
ents in solving problems they face. If, on the other hand,
we choose to make helping primary, we risk becoming co-opted, “going native,” and forfeiting our intellectual
independence.

Cutting things another way, we can see the dilemma of help-giving versus confidentiality. It’s ordinarily quite dif-
ficult to assist (or get assistance for) a respondent you have
discovered to be in need (let’s say, a new teacher who is floundering unassisted) without breaching the agreement
that no one else will have access to what the person told
you.

Freedom of inquiry versus political advantage repre-
sents another dilemma. Most researchers opt for the first
horn, and are distressed when their findings are blocked.
Yet suppose you were strongly committed to the improve-
ment of early childhood education at a point when legisla-
tors were about to reauthorize an important national pro-
gram. And let’s suppose that your data (like some in 1993)
were fairly pessimistic about that program’s effects. Might
you want to temper the “whole truth” a bit by saying that
the findings were only partial or methodologically flawed?

This list of dilemmas is illustrative; it certainly is not
exhaustive. And more often than not, multiple dilemmas
will be in play. Many of the accounts we’ve read of ethical
dilemmas in qualitative studies describe “compromises,”
“trade-offs,” “balances,” and “unhappy choices.” If ethical
issues were clear-cut and totally approachable on a deon-
tological basis, life would be simple. But we have to keep
thinking and talking about ethical dilemmas, weighing
how we and our respondents are choosing one side or the
other. As Punch (1986) says, “Morals in research are too
important to be left to moralists” (p. 73).

Advice

Awareness. Consider what your general ethical position
looks like: What theory or frame do you seem to be apply-
ing to day-to-day choices in your research? Reasoning in-
ductively from past situations in which you felt uncertain
about the right thing to do can be helpful. So can looking
at situations in which you felt okay, but others did not.
Another avenue is discussing cases like those provided
by Mathison et al. (1992) and comparing your ideas with
others.

Anticipation. Most of the specific issues raised above can
benefit from advance thinking during the early stages of
project design. Do not delude yourself that they can be
pre-resolved, but taking thought—perhaps running
through the issues as a sort of checklist—can help you
avoid problems later.

Preliminary agreements. We’ve discussed the dimensions
of early “contracting” with case participants (see Figure
3.5) and won’t repeat them here. Our main advice is to
attend to such agreements explicitly during entry and ac-
cess, and to commit them to paper (including a brief hand-
out brochure for use with people who were not close par-
ticipants in the agreements).

Documentation and reflection. Our previous advice on
study documentation should be expanded here. It’s easy to
become preoccupied with the demands of data collection
and analysis, and to miss latent, potentially painful ethical
issues until it is too late. Some routinized structure, such
as an occasional “ethical issues” memo or study team
meeting, helps surface the sorts of mild worries that often
prove to be a distant early warning.
Third parties. Because ethical issues often tend to be masked by our taken-for-granted assumptions, beliefs, and values, engaging a trusted third party can be very helpful in bringing them to attention. Such a person can raise unheeded issues, suggest alternate viewpoints, help surface tacit assumptions, be an advocate for respondents, or serve as a mediator between respondents and researchers when there are unresolved problems (e.g., in the account by King et al., 1993). See also the helpful advice of Bermant and Warwick (1978).

Regular checking and renegotiation. The evolution of any qualitative study normally involves some twists and turns that no one fully anticipated, even with the best of good will. Initial agreements and working procedures almost always need updates. In our experience, agreement revision is quite typical as issues of feedback, member checks, and reporting come into focus. It’s useful from the start to create the expectation that agreements may need renegotiation, and that “recheck” meetings can be called at any point by either researchers or respondents.

Summary Comments

We’ve examined general ethical theories, and a series of specific ethical issues, ranging from early ones (the project’s worthiness, your own competence, informed consent, anticipated benefits and costs) to those occurring as a project develops (harm and risk, your relationship with respondents, privacy/confidentiality/anonymity, and intervention) and those prominent late (research quality, data ownership, and use of results). All have clear implications for analysis and the quality of conclusions. Dealing with ethical issues effectively involves heightened awareness, negotiation, and making trade-offs among ethical dilemmas, rather than the application of rules.

In the next chapter we consider study products in the form of reports, and how they’re produced.

Note

1. Issues of privacy, confidentiality, and anonymity take a completely new turn when visual media (still pictures, video) are used in data collection and reporting. Individuals and groups still need to have control over how they are depicted, and can resist privacy invasions (e.g., via vetoing specific pictures or sequences), but the possibility of anonymity is almost surely gone, even with facial-blur special effects. The best discussion of this subject we have seen is by Gold (1989), who also notes that visual material, when fed back, has potential for harm beyond that of text because it is seen as “definitive,” especially if no associated explanation is provided. Gold has many useful suggestions for dealing with such issues.