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Perspectives From Qualitative Researchers: Negotiating Research Ethics in Qualitative Research

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Abstract: The literature on qualitative research ethics is vast and longstanding. Many scholars have written autoethnographic accounts and methodological overviews of the ways that they navigate ethics in practice. Despite various definitions and categorizations of research ethics, to date, in relatively few empirical investigations it has been outlined how research ethics is applied in practice. Thus, we explored qualitative researchers' experiences with ethics and ethical decision-making using 30 semi-structured interviews, ultimately spanning geographic and disciplinary areas. In the data, we identified three themes: First, personal moral beliefs were described by participants as being central to navigating research ethics; second, social and cultural contexts were pointed to as shaping ethical practices; and third, institutional or regulatory ethical review boards were understood as impacting what comes to be understood as ethical practices. These findings contribute to the larger body of qualitative research ethics literature by offering an empirically driven understanding of the nuanced ways that researchers make sense of ethics procedurally and in practice.

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1. Introduction

Research ethics have long been a topic of concern for social sciences researchers, with books (e.g., DeMARRAIS, ROULSTON & COPPLE, 2024; HAMMERSLEY & TRAIANOU, 2012; WILES, 2013), methodological articles (e.g., KARA & PICKERING, 2017; SIEBER, 1998), and guidelines[1] published on the topic. Here, there is generally consensus that ethics is central to the work of social science, as "ethical concerns permeate ... all human actions and interactions" (KAKABADSE, KAKABADSE & KOUZMIN, 2002, p.107). Thus, it is perhaps unsurprising that qualitative researchers have focused on the important role of ethics (ROTH & VON UNGER, 2018; TAQUETTE & BORGES DA MATTA SOUZA, 2022). In a review of the research ethics literature published between 2000 and 2015 in the *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, KARA and PICKERING (2017) found that 22 out of 29 of the published articles focused on concerns related to "anonymity, confidentiality, and informed consent; recruitment, gatekeeping, and formal ethical regulation" (p.239). These foci, they argued, align with themes in the larger ethics literature base and point to the common ethical dilemmas researchers encounter when doing research (see also HAMMERSLEY & TRAIANOU, 2012). [1]

Although numerous personal accounts by scholars describe ethical dilemmas, challenges, or decisions encountered in the field (e.g., ELLIS, 2007; LESTER & ANDERS, 2018), there remains a limited body of scholarship that empirically analyzes perspectives on these dilemmas across a diverse sample of researchers. Thus, we sought to learn from the experiences of researchers on the ground and across a range of disciplines. In this study, we invited qualitative researchers to describe and illustrate how they conceptualized ethics in their practice and research design. To do so, we conducted in-depth interviews with 30 qualitative researchers working—and trained—in various disciplines and geographic locations. The research question that guided our study was: How do qualitative researchers conceptualize and carry out research ethics? [2]

The article proceeds with a review of the contemporary scholarship on qualitative research ethics (Section 2), followed by an overview of the study's research design (Section 3). This includes background on the participants (Section 3.1), data collection methods (Section 3.1), and our analytic approach (Section 3.2). The findings are then organized into three themes generated through a reflexive thematic analysis (Sections 4.1-4.3). The paper ends with a discussion of these findings in relation to methodological implications, consequences, and limitations (Section 5). [3]

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[1] See e.g., the Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct of the American Psychological Association, American Educational Research Association's Professional Ethics, Ethics and Guidance from the British Educational Research Association, those of the Australian Sociological Association, etc.).

2. Literature Review

There is a well-established literature base on research ethics in the social sciences (e.g., ISRAEL & HAY, 2006; LAHMAN, 2018; PUNCH, 1994), as well as within qualitative research in particular (e.g., ELLIS, 2007; GUILLEMIN & GILLAM, 2004; ROTH & VON UNGER, 2018). Within the contemporary methods literature base, we identified four primary threads related to ethics in qualitative research. First, scholars have criticized institutional and regulatory procedures for their roots in biomedicine (DOYLE & BUCKLEY, 2017). KARA and PICKERING (2017) pointed to the importance of ethical regulations, such as maintaining standards of consent, and also described how informed consent compromises participants and researchers when not carried out in culturally competent ways (see also DAWSON, McDONNEL & SCOTT, 2017; FLETCHER, 2017; MIETOLA, MIETTINEN & VEHMAS, 2017; SHORDIKE et al., 2017; TOLICH et al., 2017). As one example, BELL (2014) argued that the practice of informed consent varies by field and is not always in alignment with the realities of research expectations. Other scholars have outlined issues with the formal, legal language integrated into typical consent forms, arguing it has significant cultural and social implications which may not be universally relevant or translatable (CAEYMAEX, WENGER, DE HEUSCH & LAFLEUR, 2023). SABATI (2019) and other critical thinkers have argued for integrating culturally competent knowledge before consulting with gatekeepers to ask participants to sign consent forms (e.g., TAQUETTE & BORGES DA MATTA SOUZA, 2022). In one study, interview methods were used to understand experiences of medical health researchers navigating systems of institutional review, such as changing research design or adapting to regulations to avoid going through procedural review (POTTHOFF, ROTH & SCHOLTEN, 2024). [4]

Second, within the qualitative ethics literature, scholars have largely been concerned with how vulnerability is defined in research, and the consequences of these definitions (i.e., children, elderly, undocumented, disabled, etc.). In general, vulnerability is understood as a fluid category that shifts across socio-cultural contexts, including research discipline and academic institution (BASHIR, 2018). BASHIR pointed to the connection between the participation of vulnerable people and the generation of sensitive qualitative data, describing how the very generation of data in these contexts highlights dominant ideologies, and any additional protections vulnerable participants may or may not need. In response, ALDRIDGE (2014) described leaning into methodological creativity and innovation to remain responsive to community concerns, such as responding to demands from disability rights communities for modes of inquiry that democratize the process of research so that data ownership is distributed across the research team (see also MARTINO & SCHORMANS, 2018, for a discussion on practicing ethical research with disabled participants). Ultimately, methodological approaches that center participants' rights to autonomy are highlighted as a suitable response to the critiques from scholars regarding the "... paternalistic framing of vulnerability, which tends to infantilize the respondents through tutelary protection" (CAEYMAEX et al., 2023, p.2). [5]

Third, qualitative researchers have increasingly pointed to issues around anonymity and confidentiality, concepts closely connected to the previous discussions around vulnerability. This is because methods for maintaining participant anonymity have historically been described as discriminative against marginalized or vulnerable groups (e.g., BOOTH, 1996). SURMIAK (2018) interviewed 42 qualitative researchers about their anonymity and confidentiality practices with vulnerable groups, positioning these practices as ethical decisions that sometimes grate against the expectations of ethical review boards. As one example, the author described how participants sometimes request their name or location be included in publications, rather than the default practice of anonymization (see also GERRARD, 2021; SINHA & BACK, 2014). Some scholars have pointed to issues around this practice, such as the digital era complicating anonymity and making it increasingly difficult to guarantee confidentiality (BURLES & BALLY, 2018; TILLEY & WOODTHORPE, 2011). Unsurprisingly, there has been a growing line of scholarship exploring ethical considerations related to anonymity when conducting research using online internet communities and technological devices (e.g., FLICKER, HAANS & SKINNER, 2004), along with the privacy and anonymity concerns for working with public photo and video data (LEGEWIE & NASSAUER, 2018). [6]

Finally, research ethics is generally linked to the principle of non-maleficence, or do no harm (ALUWIHARE-SAMARANAYAKE, 2012). HAMMERSLEY (2014) pointed to the range of conversations about ethics and harm reduction wherein certain steps are treated as "absolute requirements" (p.536) in qualitative research, such as debriefing. Other scholars have described the importance of committing to the principle of non-maleficence on behalf of both participants and researchers (TOLICH & TUMILTY, 2020). Of course, it is not always possible to prepare for the "thorny ethical issues" (BLEE & CURRIER, 2011, p.401) that arise during research. Nonetheless, when faced with ethical decisions (SURMIAK, 2018), researchers use different frameworks through a decision-making process. Examples include ELLIS' (2007) relational ethics (see also CAINE, CHUNG, STEEVES & CANDININ, 2020), Indigenous-informed ethics (BRANNELLY & BOULTON, 2017), ethics of/with love (SZACHOWICZ-SEMPRUCH, 2016), and spiritual-informed ethics (LI, 2023; ROXBURGH, 2019). In other words, across the literature, many scholars have described ethics as in relation to specific research contexts and participant needs, thus moving beyond a simple "checklist" activity (NORDTUG & HALDAR, 2023, p.474). In their well cited article, GUILLEMIN and GILLAM (2004) described the limitation of institutional ethics (e.g., ethics board requirements) by differentiating between procedural ethics from everyday ethics. More recently, BONO (2020) drew upon GUILLEMIN and GILLAM's work to define ethics as never "... reduced to a number of predefined procedures" but rather as "situated" and requiring "continuous redefining and negotiation of what is appropriate in unpredictable situations" (BONO, 2020, p.617). Indeed, scholars have long attended to issues of harm reduction and the subtle ethics or everyday ethics that are an inevitable part of carrying out qualitative research (LEAHY, 2022; TOLICH & TUMILTY, 2020). To understand anew ethics in practice, in this study, we directly asked qualitative researchers to share their conceptions of ethics in practice, and, in so doing, invited them to unpack the relationship of their practices within broader socio-cultural and institutional realities (e.g., ethics boards). [7]

3. Methodology and Methods

3.1 Participants and data collection

All researchers worked at a research-intensive university in the Midwest region of the U.S. and specialized in qualitative methodology. Two of the authors (Pei-Jung and Darcy) are in the advanced stages of their doctoral studies, and the third author (Jessica) is a professor of qualitative methodology. Pei-Jung is from a Mandarin-speaking country in East Asia, and Darcy and Jessica are White Americans. After acquiring ethics approval in October 2020, we employed a purposeful (PATTON, 2002) and snowball sampling approach (BIERNACKI & WALDORF, 1981) to recruit researchers who had obtained a doctoral degree and independently carried out at least one qualitative research study. The participant criteria were informed by the research project's focus, i.e., potential participants should possess both theoretical and practical understanding of research ethics to provide concrete examples of how they apply it in practice. We used a range of recruitment approaches, including social media posts on Facebook groups related to qualitative research, list servs (e.g., qualitative research special interest groups) and direct e-mail invitations. Those interested in participating expressed their willingness to participate in the study by completing an interest form. In total, 30 people agreed to participate in the study and represented a range of disciplines and countries. Among the 30 participants, eight identified as men and 22 identified as women. Eighteen of the participants indicated that they currently resided in the U.S. (with three being originally from China), four lived in Taiwan, two lived in South Africa, two lived in the U.K., one lived in China, one lived in the Netherlands, one lived in Turkey, and one lived in Chile. See Table 1 for a summary of the participant characteristics and disciplinary backgrounds, and Appendix A for a listing of the participants' self-selected pseudonyms and disciplines.

Participant Characteristics	n	%
Total Participants	30	100
Professional Role		
* Postdoctoral fellow	4	13
* Research associate	4	13
* Adjunct professor	2	7
* Assistant professor	7	23
* Associate professor	9	3
* Professor	4	13
Discipline		
* Criminal justice	2	7
* Education	15	50
* Health / Public health	7	23
* Sociology	2	7
* Political science	1	3
* Other: Folklore, disability, language	3	10
Location		
* Chile	1	3
* China	1	3
* Europe (England, Netherlands)	2	7
* South Africa	2	7
* Taiwan	4	13
* Turkey	1	3
* United Kingdom	1	3
* USA	18	60

Table 1: Characterizing participants by professional role, discipline and location [8]

Semi-structured interviews (KVALE & BRINKMANN, 2009) were conducted with the participants and ranged from 34 minutes to 2 hours and 27 minutes, averaging 79 minutes. All interviews took place via Zoom, a video-conferencing application, and were recorded within the application. We used a semi-structured interview protocol, and the questions focused on ethics in qualitative research (see supplementary file). Twenty-five interviews were conducted in English (by Pei-Jung, Darcy, and Jessica) and five interviews were conducted in Mandarin Chinese (by Pei-Jung). After the interview, participants were offered a $25 stipend in the form of a gift card. [9]

3.2 Data analysis

We conducted a reflexive thematic analysis (BRAUN & CLARKE, 2006), and, in so doing, focused on the participants' individualized ethical principles, the impact of social and cultural differences on ethical decision-making capabilities, and how ethical practices were constructed and carried out through formalized ethical procedures. Our analysis was informed by the six-stage process outlined by BRAUN and CLARKE. [10]

First, we transcribed the recorded interviews using Sonix.ai automatic transcription services. This service is an online tool that automatically generates transcripts while providing encrypted, secure file storage and complying with data protection regulations. After acquiring the AI-generated transcripts, we manually refined them to assure their accuracy. The five interviews that were conducted in Mandarin were manually transcribed and translated to English by Pei-Jung. Next, all data, including the video files, were imported and organized in MAXQDA 2022, a qualitative data analysis software package. Next, we familiarized ourselves with the data by reviewing the transcripts and individually generating a summarizing memo for each interview. We then met as a research team to compare our initial understandings of the interviews and consider potential ways to code the data. [11]

Second, based on our individual summaries, we developed an initial set of codes that allowed us to consider the participants' disciplines; the populations they worked with; their various definitions of ethics; examples of ethical practices; and how methodology relates to ethics. In our first round of coding, we generated 53 descriptive codes. We used this initial set of codes to code three interviews together as a team. Upon discussion, we agreed to take an inductive approach to coding so that new codes could continue to be applied to the data. Next, the remaining transcripts were distributed amongst the team for coding. After independently completing the first cycle of inductive coding, we merged our project files and began to refine the coding scheme. [12]

Third, we searched the data for themes by closely reviewing the refined list of codes. Next, we merged any identical or overlapping codes with their counterpart and noted any relationships within and across code groups. To support this process, we each generated a concept map in MAXQDA 2022. [13]

Fourth, we met to share our individual concept maps and moved toward producing the themes. Utilizing the visual analytic tools in MAXQDA 2022, we merged our individual concept maps to generate one collective thematic map. We combined common elements from each of our individual maps and justified why other categories in our individual maps were necessary to include. Fifth, we defined what each theme meant by reviewing each coded segment of the data associated with its theme. Finally, we moved on to writing and representing our findings in a reflexive and transparent way. During this process, we also engaged in member-checking, inviting all the participants to read and respond to our findings. Five participants responded to this request, offering ways that they felt the findings captured their experiences and perspectives. [14]

4. Findings

Overall, we identified three intersecting themes: 1. pursuing ethical research in relation to moral beliefs, 2. enacting ethics in relation to socio-cultural contexts, and 3. practicing ethics in and through institutions. These three themes are not fundamentally distinct from each other; rather, they were related and discussed by participants in intersecting ways. [15]

4.1 Theme 1: Pursuing ethical research in relation to moral beliefs

Across the data, participants consistently discussed the link between conducting ethical research and their moral beliefs. When describing ethical practices, such as obtaining informed consent, participants emphasized the distinctive nature of their approach and its alignment with their individual beliefs regarding what it means to be ethical. Capturing the essence of Theme 1, Maya[2] described this as the "moral dimensions of the researcher." Framing research ethics by moral dimensions highlights the diverse ways that the individual participants oriented to ethics in relation to themselves, their research, and specific participant populations. One participant, Montien, expressed, "you don't learn about how to do an ethical or moral research [project] ... you're always learning about how to be a human-being, you know?" Similarly, Yung-Kang drew upon daily life and a person's core principles to describe practicing ethical research:

> "The things you shouldn't do in mundane life, you also shouldn't do in research. If you are a man of your word, then after you sign the consent, you should respect it. If you count on your integrity in mundane life, you should also consider this while doing research." [16]

Here, "integrity in mundane life" pointed to how the participants' personal values and principles—which indeed are relative and subjective—shaped their research encounters. Moreover, the participants underscored how their ethical positions were rooted in their personal beliefs, asserting that ethical research is fundamentally "about being a [good] human being" (Yung-Kang). Pragmatically, they offered multiple examples of how ethical beliefs informed their research process. For example, several participants pointed to the informed consent process as an ethical practice that extended beyond what is expected by their institutional ethics board, likening it instead to an individual responsibility. Expanding on this, Frasier described the importance of prioritizing voluntary participation:

> "I live by the whole value, or the norm, of voluntary participation. At all times. In everything I do, I keep that in mind whenever I make a decision, and I try to stop myself and say, "Okay, is this in accordance with that value, and is that through voluntary participation, [and is] that through limiting deception and being aware of potential harms?" [17]

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[2] Pseudonyms are used throughout to maintain confidentiality (see Appendix A).

In addition to Frasier, many of the other participants emphasized the role of remaining explicit about the purpose of their research project and all that consenting to participate entails. In this way, the participants placed great value on respecting a voluntary and ongoing consent process. Highlighting this point, Jane described informed consent as a "continuous process" which

> "... infuse[s] everything that you do with participants all through writing and presenting and everything. So to me, the most important thing, or one of the most important things, is to be very mindful of protecting, being as honest as possible with the people that you're working with [and] that you're getting the consent from." [18]

While participants' versions of morality differed across individual and socio-cultural backgrounds, a few common topics came up across the data. Jane's emphasis on the ongoing nature of consent and the importance of honesty in interactions with participants reflected a key pattern: The centrality of respecting participants' agency. Indeed, several participants spoke about personal integrity, which has been described in the qualitative literature base as underpinning ethical research practice and characterized by "straightforwardness" and "moral uprightness" (WATTS, 2008, p.440). Similar to WATTS' definition of "moral uprightness," one participant, Mia, spoke of the distinctions between integrity and ethical research practice:

> "When you practice research, you are not just working ethically, you're also working with integrity and there's a code of conduct that you're expected to follow. And I guess that's where the moral dimension starts to come in, because that's upholding your integrity as a researcher. That's your commitment to acting in ways which are virtuous and with integrity. So that [is] things like, not cherry picking your data to sensationalize a particular message, not fabricating your data in the first place, and not plagiarizing the work of others. It's about treating people with a certain level of respect, it's about empathizing with participants rather than sympathizing with participants if they're revealing sensitive and traumatizing narratives. It's about taking responsibility and working with gatekeepers and practitioners and various other people to ensure that you are doing your best for those participants in ways that aren't always necessarily down to ethics but are more down to your integrity as a researcher in ways in which you want to be practicing in terms of the project overall." [19]

Here, Mia highlighted how "moral dimensions" uphold one's integrity, and, in taking up this stance, she showcased how this "moral dimension" shapes the entirety of the research process. Participants also reflected on how their identities influenced potential risks in their research interactions. Haley, for instance, found her role as a parent-researcher aided in her ability to access and build rapport with other parents in her study. At the same time, she acknowledged that leveraging this role inappropriately could have ethical consequences due to her dual identity as both a researcher and a parent at the same school (e.g., conflicts of interest). Others, like Julia, mentioned how individual biases or "inclinations" might be shaped by their identities. Relatedly, all of the participants positioned reflexivity as central to one's background and assumptions, describing it as fostering a unique ethical research stance. The interconnection here between reflexivity and ethics was emphasized clearly by Darby as she described teaching students about qualitative research ethics:

> "I assume when I have students in my class that they have a way of thinking about their everyday activities as being ethical or not ethical, or that they're already using ethics in some way. So I just try to help them recognize that and develop that. And people will be at different places with that [...] I think it's helpful to be able to develop ourselves ethically and not think of our ethics as static or unchanging. I think reflexivity helps that transformation process so that we become more and more ethical." [20]

Ultimately, the participants regarded reflexive practice as a catalyst for maintaining ongoing ethical conduct. Additionally, most of the participants described how a commitment to caring for the well-being of research participants inspired them to think differently about the language they use when describing their research and developing consent forms. For example, Jack shared that he prefers a person-centered consent form because standard consent forms use a "very scientific and weird language." He noted that informed consents include language that he would never use when talking to a friend, let alone a potential participant. Abby echoed this sentiment, saying that giving "a form that you know they [research participants] do not understand, to me, that's a breach of being ethical." Collectively, these commitments—ranging from thinking anew about the consent process to maintaining a reflexive understanding of the impacts of positionality—underscore the fundamental essence of this theme. That is, participants articulated that the role of an ethical qualitative researcher is inextricably linked to the principles of being an ethical individual. [21]

4.2 Theme 2: Enacting ethics in relation to socio-cultural contexts

Significantly, all participants located their descriptions of ethical practices and the meaning(s) of ethical qualitative research as always in relation to the unique socio-cultural, political, and historical contexts within which they situated their research. This focus was captured by Doris' discussion of culture, "[s]o perhaps you—coming from another culture, growing up in a country different than mine—might see ethics and how you do ethical research in a different way." Here, Doris foregrounds the place of culture and the geographies that shape the methodological contexts in which they arise. Like Theme One, participants spoke of this idea as being linked to recognizing that researchers are always present in the research process. Tianyi, for instance, stated that engaging in research involves ongoing reflection, or "... critical reflexivity of our own participation in this larger systemic configuration of power, privilege and identity." Participants also spoke consistently about power and the ways in which research involves systems of power and the potential for power differentials between researchers and participants. Several participants described specific practices they used to minimize or even counter power imbalances. As one example, Haley offered a culturally responsive strategy to promote power distribution across the entire research process where a "board of people who you're always talking with about everything that's happening and then also checking in to make sure that you're being ethical." Crystal also described several other practices:

> "I think about ways to minimize the power differential with participants. One way I do it is when I use electronic consent just in general—even [in] non-Covid times—when I send that, I send a copy of the semi-structured interview guide. I feel like then they really know what they're consenting to, I'm saying then, these are the questions I'm going to ask. You can skip anything you want. And so that is one way I try to balance the power differential. So to be transparent, essentially, right? Another way I think about balancing it [power] is I use member checking [...] And so, again, I think the idea of not being the expert in the room." [22]

In response to varying socio-cultural, political, and historical contexts that researchers inevitably navigate, participants emphasized that "doing no harm" pervades all conceptions of ethics; however, this practice was described as not always easy to implement. Several participants reported challenges with institutional policies that prohibited them from offering cash compensation to participants who might derive little to no benefit from a gift card. These types of barriers were often described as "bureaucratic" and infringing upon "the most fundamental thing...this concept of do no harm" (Maya). Julia explained:

> "So when you're trying to meet people where they're at, and you're trying to understand their social worlds, and you're trying to do that in the most humane, ethical way possible, how do we go about conducting research or doing whatever it is our professional or personal activities are gonna be in a way that really doesn't harm people, and harm broadly understood." [23]

For the participants, ethical practice involved actively seeking to understand participants' social worlds where this effort is understood as being essential to upholding the principle of doing no harm. Some participants, however, highlighted that while doing no harm is central to ethical practice, it is not enough. Doris noted, "... to do research ethically it's not just the standard informed consent. It's not just do no harm. You must do more than do no more you must let people grow and flourish." Yet, Doris and others also noted that leaving participants "better off" at the conclusion of research was challenging, and, at times, felt impossible. This kind of commitment, however, was one that participants described as involving continual reflection, particularly given the inevitable tensions that arise when conducting research. [24]

Additionally, participants described reflective questions as central to ethics. This questioning included close consideration of how the socio-political and historical contexts within which they worked shaped the very meaning(s) of ethics for both them and their participants. For instance, Nora described the importance of remaining "aware" of "historical circumstances that might possibly "play out" when conducting research in Cuba. She shared:

> "The US has a very fraught relationship with Cuba and a lot of really bad practices in the past. So I am pretty aware of that and making sure that I'm very clear with people

> that I talk to, but also applying for certain grants or as the case may be, not applying for certain grants, like, for example, from the State Department or the US government when it comes to doing research in Cuba." [25]

Relatedly, Doris, a white South African researcher, spoke at length of the "complicated" nature of ethics when conducting research within Black South African communities. She noted that even the informed consent process must be shaped by the cultural preferences and needs of the community, which requires a researcher to build rapport with the participants and broader community. Describing her approach to participant recruitment, she noted,

> "I've really put a lot of time and money into building rapport and then I almost felt like becoming their friends because they are all exceptional people and I've still got contact with them. But still in the beginning what is a white person doing here? I was involved in that community and I'm still involved in that community for four years and I still get people who say so from what country are you? And I would say I'm from South Africa. And they would say you're German, you're from Germany. And I would say no I'm from South Africa generations back, generations back. I'm from South Africa." [26]

Shu-Hui, Yung-Kang, Yen, and Montien—participants from Taiwan and China—also spoke of how they engaged their knowledge and appreciation of the cultural practices specific to their field sites when conceptualizing and carrying out the informed consent process. In this way, the participants collectively pointed to ethics and being ethical as inextricably linked to the layered contexts within which they work and live, highlighting that, as Darby said, "I don't own ethics—we have to do it together as a group." [27]

4.3 Theme 3: Practicing ethics in and through institutions

Across the above two themes, institutional ethics were generally described by participants as always relevant because their practices were (re)shaped or mediated by institutional procedures and regulations. We understood this relationship as evidenced via the interactions between institutional and ethics review boards and researchers' own ethics in practice. One participant, Jack, distinguished this as "big picture ethics or procedural ethics" versus "practical ethics or the day-to-day" ethics. This distinction marked a pattern across the data, where participants noted that the administrative or procedural aspects of ethics were important, but not the sole player in carrying out ethical research. Instead, ethical research was described as a complex, multidimensional, and ongoing process that is difficult—if not impossible—to meet through current processes of institutional ethics boards. Maya succinctly noted that "ethics isn't just about completing your IRB [ethics board] application and getting approval to do the research." When describing the relationship between institutional ethical reviews and individuals, as discussed in the Theme 1, Shu-Hui attended to KOHLBERG's (1971)[3] stages of moral development (indicating that the ethics board stays at the

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[3] Lawrence KOHLBERG was an American psychologist who proposed six stages of moral development (1971). The first two stages—punishment and obedience orientation, and self-

lowest stage (i.e., punishment and obedience stage), where researchers often engage themselves at a higher stage (i.e., social-contract legalistic stage and/or universal ethical-principle stage) when it comes to ethical practices and decision-making. [28]

In this way, participants positioned institutional ethics as one step amongst a complex system of conducting ethical research. This sentiment resonated with most participants who positioned the ethics board as important, while maintaining its ineffectiveness at overseeing *all* aspects related to carrying out ethical research across all areas and contexts. For instance, participants emphasized how current ethics systems do not account for issues of ethical ambiguity that occur in the field, such as unanticipated research encounters or events. For these reasons, institutional ethics boards were often described by participants as a minimum standard or baseline to support a further process or investigation of ethics while engaged in the research process. Speaking to the situatedness of ethics in ethnographic and longitudinal research, Zara said:

> "I'm not suggesting that we shouldn't consider and adhere to those [administrative ethics], but I think that there needs to be a degree of flexibility. And this idea that we can always foresee ethical issues I think is problematic, particularly for ethnographic and longitudinal research, because you don't know what you can't always foresee what's going to happen. So we need to move away from this idea that ethics is a tick box and understand that ethics needs to be managed in situ, and it's a process, and that process can change and is different for each individual." [29]

While procedural or institutional ethics was consistently described by participants as similar to a "tick box" exercise, other participants, particularly those who had or were currently serving on institutional ethics committees, pointed to how ethical bodies try to mitigate such narratives, while still recognizing the inflexibility of certain systems (e.g., data security). Speaking from the position as a qualitative researcher and a member of an institutional review board, Lauren pointed to how their IRB offered:

> "Workshops for staff and postgraduate students on ethics and things to think about ... .they are trying to encourage students and staff to think beyond ethics as a tick box exercise, but really to think thoughtfully." [30]

Although workshops such as these certainly contributed to participants' understandings of ethical boards, in general, institutional ethics were not oriented to as a holistic approach to ethics. Instead, words and phrases such as "gatekeeping," "red tape business," and "bureaucratic" were drawn upon to describe these overarching, regulatory bodies. For example, Tori noted:

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interest orientation—are known as the pre-conventional level, where decisions are made based on direct consequences. Stages three and four—the conventional level (i.e., interpersonal accord and conformity, and authority and social-order maintaining orientation)—involve decisions made to meet societal expectations or laws. Finally, at stages five and six—the post-conventional level (i.e., social contract orientation and universal ethical principles)—moral decisions are based on mutual understanding of individual rights and cultural values, as well as abstract reasoning about what is right or wrong.

> "There's bureaucratic things that I need to do because I have to get my studies approved, but I guess I worry less about those forms. I mean, they have to be done, but for me, it's more important to do things in the spirit of ethics." [31]

As Tori's account highlights, institutional pressures put in place by systems may be necessary to go through in order to pursue research, but these ethical systems are not usually the primary ethical concern of qualitative researchers. Related to Theme 2, some participants also highlighted the limitations of ethic review boards as inadequately addressing the socio-cultural nuances particular to the context of many qualitative research projects. As one participant, Mia, said, "ethics committees can also come with a layer of bureaucracy that actually hinders and damages research." Some participants further historicized the institutionalization of research ethics and its impact on qualitative research by referencing significant events, notably Tuskegee[4] (mentioned in 6 out of 30 interviews) and the Stanford Prison Experiment[5] (mentioned in 3 out of 30 interviews). Thus, throughout the interviews, many participants portrayed the historical context of research practices as a rationale for the establishment of institutional ethics, notwithstanding its identified shortcomings. [32]

When describing specific processes and practices that are often associated with institutional ethics, participants most frequently mentioned informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity, privacy, and data security. Specifically, participants described the ways institutional ethics defined and created stringent procedures for certain practices associated with ethics, such as consent, confidentially, data security, etc. Thomas offered:

> "When I'm talking about the procedural [ethics] it's like the steps that I'm going to follow in order to work with all these consent forms and how I'm informing my participants, and then the norms is like what my university tells me." [33]

Here, Thomas connected aspects of the research process to the very culture of institutional ethics. In addition to the practices that were attributed to meeting the demands of overseeing ethical bodies, participants described specific ethical reports and procedures that institutions or countries use to guide ethical decision-making processes. Some examples include the Belmont Report, the British Educational Research Association (BERA) ethical guidelines, and the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). [34]

Finally, a common topic related to institutional ethics dealt with who the procedures in place were there to protect and/or serve. Participants described how administrative ethical processes, such as the ethics review boards, primarily served to protect the institution, rather than research participants. For instance, Tianyi shared that the primary role of institutional ethics boards is "protecting [the] institution," and Dal further elaborated:

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[4] For more background of the Tuskegee study and its long-term impact, see ALSAN and WANAMAKER (2018).

[5] For more background of the Stanford study and its long-term impact, see LE TEXIER (2019).

> "The Institutional Review Board is to protect the university, it's not to protect the participants. If the participants get hurt, but they don't sue the university, the university is not going to step out and say, 'Hey ... we're sorry you're hurt.' The university will be like, 'Please don't sue us.' So ... I guess from the institutional perspective, I think it's good. It's good. I think it's necessary to have it and to keep faculty members from I guess going wild ... but um I don't think it's enough ... There's still a lot to do, and it's really up to the researcher in the field." [35]

While none of the participants offered concrete examples of how institutional ethics boards prioritized their own well-being above that of others, this trope—as is also seen across the literature base (STARK, 2019)—positioned institutional ethics boards as insufficient for safeguarding participants against ethical wrongdoing. In contrast, the participants oriented to institutional ethical guidelines as a basic compass to ensure ethical research. While this particular compass was viewed as incomplete and not capable of eradicating all ethical tensions that may arise in a given study, it was understood as guiding some aspects of the research process, at least in part. [36]

5. Conclusion and Discussion

Through examining how qualitative researchers described conceptualizing and enacting ethics, this study's findings extend the current literature base about qualitative research ethics in four primary ways. First, our study's findings illustrate the central role that qualitative researchers' individual values play when they conceptualize and enact research ethics. Other scholars have engaged with reflexivity (e.g., PEZALLA, PETTIGREW & MILLER-DAY, 2012) and positionality (e.g., FOLKES, 2023) when it comes to researchers' personal values. Extending these arguments, our findings show that the researchers in our study consistently engaged with their personal values in everyday ethical moments and sought to "make ethical decisions in research the way they make them in their personal lives" (ELLIS, 2007, p.23). Moreover, this finding offers further evidence that, as KAKABADSE et al. (2002) argued, "ethical concerns arise in connection with core values the researcher holds" (p.107). [37]

Second, we found that qualitative researchers' engagement with ethics involves conversations between research practices and cultural norms, power dynamics between researchers and participants, and an acute awareness of the socio-political and historical status of both researchers and participants. Research designs and practices have long been described as influenced by systemic factors (BREAR & TSOTETSI, 2022). Our study builds on this understanding by pointing to how qualitative researchers' ethical decisions are always influenced by systemic factors, as "ethically important moments" were positioned as arising in contextually specific ways (GUILLEMIN & GILLAM, 2004, p.261). [38]

Third, and perhaps unsurprisingly, our findings align with the longstanding critiques of institutional ethics boards and the ways in which they offer only a partial roadmap for carrying out ethical research. Like much of the qualitative ethics literature (e.g., GUISHARD, HALKOVIC, GALLETTA & LI, 2018; KARA &

PICKERING, 2017; NIND, WILES, BENGRY-HOWELL & CROW, 2013), our study's findings highlight the limitations of administrative ethics and the constraints of medicalized definitions of ethicality. Yet, like other scholarship (e.g., BLEE & CURRIER, 2011), the findings underscore the necessity of institutionalized ethics boards, locating them as providing a baseline from which to work. [39]

Finally, to our knowledge, this is one of the few empirical investigations of how qualitative researchers across a range of disciplines characterize ethical qualitative research. The design of our study contrasts with much of the current literature on qualitative research ethics, which predominantly addresses ethical principles at a theoretical or philosophical level (e.g., CAEYMAEX et al., 2023), centers on empirical inquiries within specific disciplines (e.g., POTTHOFF et al., 2024) or consists of reflective accounts by scholars examining ethical concerns through the lens of their personal research experiences (e.g., LI, 2023). Important insights have been garnered from the broader methodological scholarship on qualitative research ethics; yet, what has been lacking, at least in part, are ongoing empirical considerations of the shared and diverse perspectives that qualitative scholars bring to their work. There are a few exceptions that empirically examine researchers' perspectives on specific aspects of ethics. For instance, SURMIAK (2018) presented the views of 42 Polish qualitative researchers on addressing confidentiality and anonymization when working with vulnerable populations. [40]

While our study's findings contribute empirical insights on qualitative research ethics, we also believe it opens new questions for further inquiry. First, we recognize that our participants were all trained in qualitative methodology and methods and thus potentially brought insights related to research ethics that are unique to the qualitative paradigm. As such, a broader study of research ethics in practice across research paradigms, methodologies, and disciplines may usefully unearth whether there are unique ethical considerations linked to given research paradigms and/or methodologies. Future empirical research, for instance, could offer different insights on the ways in which unique qualitative methodologies (e.g., narrative, grounded theory) might shape (or not) how qualitative researchers enact ethics. Second, our participants represented a variety of disciplines, offering a rich and diverse range of substantive areas from which to speak about qualitative ethics. Yet, the majority of the participants were still based in the U.S. and in the field of education. What might offer further insight is a study that comparatively examines in greater depth how various disciplinary contexts may shape (or not) conceptions of ethics and ethical practice. Finally, given the centrality our participants placed on reflexivity, we acknowledge that a more in-depth consideration of the positionality of participants and the link to conceptions of ethics may point to a greater understanding of how our subjectivities shape ethical practice. Given the centrality of ethics in qualitative research, there remains much to be learned from the *on the ground* activities of qualitative researchers writ large. [41]

Appendix A: Participants' Self-Selected Pseudonyms and Disciplines

Pseudonym	Discipline
Abby	Public health
AJ	Education
Blaire	Disability studies
Crystal	Social work
Dal	Education
Darby	Education
Doris	Education
Frasier Crane	Criminal justice
Haley	Education
Jack	Public health
Jane	Folklore
Julia	Sociology
June	Health science
Lauren	Sociology
Martina	Discourse/Language studies
Maya	Public health
Maya5	Education
Monique	Education
Montien	Education
Nora	Political science
PJ	Health science/Public health
Rebecca	Criminal justice
Rui-Lin	Education
Shui-Hui	Education
Thomas	Education
Tianyi	Education
Tori	Health science/Public health
Yen	Education
Yung-Kang	Education
Zara	Education

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