Review:

Rod Gerber

Will van den Hoonaard (Ed.) (2002). Walking the Tightrope: Ethical Issues for Qualitative Researchers. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 218 pages ISBN 0-8020-8523-7 (paperback) USD 24.95

Abstract: This publication basically represents a collection of former conference papers and some other contributions mainly by North American social scientists on the dilemmas that qualitative researchers encounter when they submit research applications to research ethics committees. Collectively, the contributions demonstrate the tensions that exist in the policy and practice of applied research ethics in qualitative research. Thirteen chapters are included in this volume. They focus on the themes of: differentiating between ethics and morality; dealing with ethics committees and policies; research processes; research ethics trends; and, ethical issues when submitting research applications. The emphasis is on research policy in a North American context (Canada and the United States), but can be relevant for qualitative researchers in other parts of the world. One challenge to this context is that it does not capture the essence of some European perspectives, especially those from Continental Europe. However, it does raise the issue of ethics in qualitative research to a high level.

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1. General Introduction

Many books portray qualitative researchers as "doing battle" against the "establishment" of quantitative, hypothesis-driven, experimental research. While this "battle" is largely passé in the general theoretical considerations of these two major research paradigms, there still remains a kind of "battle" occurring between qualitative researchers and their quantitative colleagues. This occurs when it comes to the application of research ethics through research policies and major ethical review committees that sit and adjudicate on national research funding applications and within individual universities. Many of the policies and guidelines that guide the work of these important committees are grounded in a biomedical approach to research ethics. This publication, that largely emanated from contributions to two Canadian Qualitative Analysis Conferences (1999 and 2000) and an annual meeting of the Pacific Sociological Association (2000), seeks to

address the challenge of formal ethics review of qualitative research within the context of "theory, confidentiality, sensitive settings, and voice" (p.6). Qualitative research theorists have consumed much energy demonstrating how their approach to research is distinctive, especially when it comes to issues of validity, reliability, sampling and the like. They have spent less time thinking and writing about ethical considerations. This publication is one contribution that seeks to raise the ethics issue and to demonstrate, through a range of cases, just how critical an issue it is in the larger research agenda. [1]

2. Key Issues in "Walking the Tightrope"

The editor refers to the process of ethical review of qualitative research as a "painful" one because the process of qualitative research does not conform neatly to the norms that have been established in the policies of many ethical review committees. What is particularly useful across the various contributions to this book is the demonstration of how external and internal contexts help to frame the debate that qualitative researchers are having with their ethics review committees and amongst themselves on ethical considerations. The explanation of the nature of these contexts is crucial for qualitative researchers to consider as they engage in their research activities. [2]

The external context in which ethical review of qualitative research takes place is largely constituted by the different committees in funding agencies and universities that reflect on the ethical aspects of research applications. The main issues raised here are those of ensuring anonymity and confidentiality, using forms of consent, and, exaggerating harm and risk. Some of these issues are quite difficult to implement because of the nature of the social research being conducted. Researchers can declare that they will ensure anonymity of the sources of their data, but there are a sufficient range of examples to suggest that some sensitive data may be used, under law, for purposes other than that for which the data were collected. Ethical questions, arising from doing qualitative research over the Internet, highlight whether anonymity can be preserved. The matter of the use of consent forms in doing sensitive qualitative social research is also raised to demonstrate how difficult these are to implement in ethnographic research where participant observation is an important. How is consent always to be obtained? Certainly, some key individuals may not wish to sign a form if it threatens their independence or freedom. Further, the question of risk is a difficult one for qualitative researchers because they usually do not know what will unfold during the research process. Emotive topics often form the basis of qualitative research and they can produce results that were unintended. Checklists from ethics' review committees will never detect the extent of risks that will be involved in conducting the research. The experience and attention of the researchers will achieve this point. Hence, the range of contributions in this book highlights just how threatening external aspects of the ethical review process can be. [3]

Aspects of the internal context of ethical review which qualitative researchers find important include developing the research question, the heterogeneity of the research population and the matter of "voice." The point made quite strongly in this

regard is that qualitative researchers, especially the less experienced ones, want to focus on ethical aspects of their own research in order to assure themselves, their colleagues and review committees that the quality of their research is of a high standard. The tension caused by review committees wanting to know the exact research questions and researchers not having yet formed these questions can be very unsettling. Some forms of qualitative research only clarify the research questions after the initial set of investigations are completed, therefore, only an anticipatory set of research questions can be offered to a review committee in an initial application. The heterogeneity of a research population cannot be predicted in some social research studies, as the chapter by THOMPSON demonstrates. The relevant research application could not foreshadow the extent of this heterogeneity amongst people with disabilities. Does this mean that the research should not be conducted? The issue of "voice" has also become more unsettling for qualitative researchers as they try to strike a balance between the interpretations of the researchers and the stated words of the research participants. The book raises a key question on just how ethical it is for researchers to impose their "voices" over those of the participants who provided the data in the research study. These issues clearly demonstrate how internal contextual matters do affect the ethical conduct of specific research studies. [4]

3. Major Papers in the Publication

Aside the editor's astute introduction and conclusion, this book consists of 13 papers that address a wide variety of ethical considerations when doing qualitative social research. Specifically, the chapters' authors contribute the following aspects: KELLNER (Chapter 2) considers how an ethics code is difficult in regard to the reality of qualitative research; ADLER and ADLER (Chapter 3) address the unintended consequences of ethical review committees for qualitative researchers; PEARCE (Chapter 4) laments the loss of time caused by ethics review committees for doctoral students; JOHNSON and ALTHEIDE (Chapter 5) focus on issues of control and policing; SNYDER (Chapter 6) reflects on the need to be open with data and how it may violate the promise of confidentiality; WEINBERG (Chapter 7) considers how qualitative researchers prioritize ethical dilemmas; THOMPSON (Chapter 8) considers how working in the disabilities area does not conform to the expectations of normative ethics review; MILLS (Chapter 9), STRATTON (Chapter 10) and UNGAR and NICHOLL (Chapter 11) focus on the issue of "voice" in qualitative research and difficulties for ethics review committees; and WARUSZYNSKI (Chapter 12) and KITCHEN (Chapter 13) consider the impacts of technology on doing ethical qualitative research. I highlight five key themes that these 16 contributors have introduced. [5]

- Differentiating between ethics and morality

  The distinction between ethics and morality has been clarified by BAUMAN (1993). He declared that ethics is the attempt to codify morality to set norms. This is why KELLNER's explanation in Chapter 2 is so important, for it

explains that since any form of codification is "relative" and "limited" and because it is situation-and culture-bound, it does not fit neatly into the current biomedical code of ethics. Morality is not demanded and the uniquely human aspects of human behavior are not promoted in current research ethics. [6]

- Dealing with ethics committees and policies

Challenges arising from dealing with biomedically-biased research ethics policies and committees that are required to implement these policies are addressed in several chapters (ADLER and ADLER, PEARCE, and JOHNSON and ALTHEIDE). Strong cases are made by experienced and inexperienced qualitative researchers about their difficulties in operating within permitted standards that exist for social researchers. Clearly, certain kinds of sensitive social research, completed some decades ago, could not be conducted under current sets of regulations, because they do not meet contemporary "rigorous" standards. The delays caused by qualitative researchers contesting the rulings of ethics research committees can be very frustrating and even reduce the scope of the research. [7]

- Research processes

Issues such as knowing-in-advance, confidentiality, anonymity, informed consent and silenced "voices" normally emerge as critical issues in considerations of ethics in qualitative research and in this publication it remains the case. Numerous examples are provided in at least six chapters of the scope of these challenges (e.g. MILLS, STRATTON, and UNGAR and NICHOLL). These examples offer a reasonable case for rethinking research processes and ethical approvals to ensure that equity and democracy are treated as seriously as other normative aspects in the research process. From the examples cited, it is apparent that some qualitative researchers have experienced considerable difficulty in maintaining anonymity, while others have struggled to ensure that data is obtained from all participants and not just from the more vocal participants. [8]

- Research ethics trends

A limited section of the book is given to two chapters (WARUSZYNSKI and KITCHEN) that focus on the recent trend of research using the Internet and ethical considerations relevant to studies that are conducted remotely or virtually. The impact of recent information technologies on ethical behavior in research has not been addressed centrally within research ethics policies and procedures. This is a timely plea for this to occur. It would have been helpful if other recent trends were also considered in such a publication. Issues such as cultural diversity, validity and sensitive data collection could be added to this list. [9]

- Research applications

While numerous examples are used throughout the chapters, several chapters (e.g. MILLS and STRATTON) focus on particular research methods and discuss the ethical aspects associated with these methods. Examples of narrative analysis and participative action research appear here. They serve as examples of case studies, but still allow for a background consideration of ethical aspects. The benefit of such chapters in the book is that it enables the

reader to appreciate ethical aspects throughout a study, rather than just gaining knowledge from isolated illustrations. [10]

4. Reflection on Research Ethics

What can be done to improve the trust that qualitative researchers, especially those who work in sensitive social research areas, have for research ethics' committees and contemporary research policies? Certainly, one move forward would be for policy makers and committee members to recognize and incorporate the distinctive epistemological features of qualitative research. BECKER (1998, p.208) sees these as:

·   recognizing the complexity of social settings

·   not knowing in advance the extent of data to explore

·   avoiding as much as possible advance knowledge of the literature

·   reversing the order of writing up the data and analysis

·   emphasizing accuracy

·   seeking out deviant or negative cases. [11]

Such a serious reflection would, according to the editor, lead to a new discourse between qualitative researchers and research ethics' committees. He offers interesting, constructive advice on how this might be achieved through heightening the ethical tone of qualitative research; investigating how these committees can facilitate qualitative ethics appraisal; and how both the researchers and the committee members can assist each other. I would like to draw out this final point because it opens considerable opportunities to resolve this dilemma. The propositions made here are:

·   Proposals from qualitative researchers must be evaluated for ethical soundness by their peers

·   The ethnographic researcher will not need to offer a consent form to be signed by the participant

·   The matter of informed consent needs to be re-examined

·   Research ethics committees should use terms that are more meaningful to qualitative researchers

·   Research ethics committees can exempt certain kinds of naturalistic observation from review

·   Research ethics committees need to accept a wider range of research methods

·   Research ethics committees need to learn more about the collective, but still diverse perspectives, of qualitative researchers. [12]

5. Concluding Remarks

The strength of this publication is its focus on a single, but complex, aspect of the research enterprise. It deliberately and faithfully addresses the issue of research ethics for qualitative research. There is sufficient explanation and illustration to make the various arguments convincing. All of the examples used in the text are relevant and the theoretical underpinnings are effective. The publication does achieve its goal of raising this issue and engaging researchers in the various aspects that have affected qualitative researchers for many years. [13]

Improvements can be made to such publications in the future by incorporating wider thinking concerning research ethics from places outside of North America. Even though the editor claims that it contains British as well as North American studies, the amount of British material is quite limited. I would like to see consideration of continental European perspectives on research ethics included because I feel that they have stronger philosophical bases than those from North America. This would offer an intelligent approach to enhancing the complexity of understanding of a quite complex issue. Just as the Scandinavians (e.g. KVALE, 1989) have introduced alternative ways to treat concepts such as validity and reliability in qualitative research, so treatment of ethical issues from a wider base would be useful. [14]

Even as it stands, this publication should raise the consciousness of all researchers to the variations that are evident in qualitative research methodologies and their inherent ethical issues, enabling greater democracy to occur in all forms of social research. [15]

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Author

Rod GERBER is a former Dean of Education, Health and Professional Studies at the University of New England, Armidale, Australia. He has conducted extensive research in the field of Education in learning across the lifespan, with particular foci in children's, workplace and geographical education. This research has involved a range of qualitative research methodologies, including phenomenology, phenomenography, action research and socio-cultural approaches. He has an extensive record in post-graduate research in a range of countries and has collaborated with a range of international research team.

Contact:

Rod Gerber

19/56 Kersley Road
Kenmore, Brisbane
Australia 4069

E-mail: rodgerber@uqconnect.net

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