

Review:

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**Melanie Mauthner, Maxine Birch, Julie Jessop & Tina Miller (Eds.) (2002).**  
**Ethics in Qualitative Research.** London, Thousand Oaks, CA; New Delhi: Sage,  
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**Abstract:** This book is a collection of theoretical thoughts about ethics in qualitative research. A coherent group of feminists propose issues to consider in research from a perspective of an ethics of care. The authors illustrate their arguments with examples from their own research experiences. Examples from actual research, e.g. in the area of health studies are provided. This book is well suited for graduate students to learn about ethics in qualitative research.

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## 1. Structure and Organization of the Book

This book is unique in its structure and organization, because the authors are a group of women who worked collaboratively in writing this book. Collaboration for these authors means two things: One, during the process of writing, they met regularly to discuss the project, and two, a different pair of women who in addition has discussed the manuscript within the whole group of contributors authors each contribution. In the introduction, the editors Melanie MAUTHNER, Maxine BIRCH, Julie JESSOP, and Tine MILLER comment on the discussion about the format of each manuscript:

"Although we choose to present our text within the established academic framework of named authors and editors, deemed necessary for our professional credibility, we have been tempted to challenge academic writing conventions and be more imaginative and radical in our collective writing." (p.7) [1]

The authors have been members of a "Women's workshop on Qualitative/Household Research," and have been working together for several years. [2]

Another specific feature of the group of authors is that they share a general analytical framework. They call themselves "feminist researchers" and define this perspective as a concern with "conducting research about neglected aspects of women's lives, grounded in their own experiences and from a particular and methodological perspective that we call 'feminist' despite the breadth of the term"

(p.3). The long-term collaboration of the authors is noticeable throughout the whole book. [3]

With the task of reviewing this edited volume, I find myself admiring the group and their ongoing collaboration. Their intensive and long term group effort in discussing their individual research projects enable them to present an edited book that is not a collection of unrelated papers, but a contribution to research ethics that presents an integrated approach, in which each chapter highlights a specific aspect of ethical concerns, but stays within the overall framework of the volume. Yet, I wonder why they ended up publishing an edited book instead of pushing their joint thinking just a little bit further by writing only one manuscript, either as a book or as a condensed version of their thoughts in form of a journal article? [4]

A summary of the main arguments about ethics is provided by Rosalind EDWARDS and Melanie MAUTHNER at the end of Chapter one. This summary is written in form of a set of guidelines for qualitative research that are informed by the authors' own theoretical approach, i.e. what they call an "ethical research practice arising out of a feminist ethics of care" (p.28). For each of the suggested guidelines the editors provide information about which chapter of the book addresses it in more depth. These guidelines are (see pages 28 and 29):

- What are the people involved in and affected by the ethical dilemma raised in their research?
- What is the context for the dilemma in terms of the specific topic of the research and the issues it raises personally and socially for those involved?
- What are the specific social and personal locations of the people involved in relation to each other?
- What are the needs of those involved and how are they inter-related?
- Who am I identifying with, who am I posing as other, and why?
- What is the balance of personal and social power between those involved?
- How will those involved understand our actions and are these in balance with our judgment about our own practice?
- How can we best communicate the ethical dilemmas to those involved, give them room to raise their views, and negotiate with and between them?
- How will our actions affect relationships between the people involved? [5]

Following these elaborations about the organization and theoretical perspective of the book, a range of topics that are related to the above formulated issues are discussed in individual book chapters. All authors write from the position of feminist ethics that focus on care and on responsibility in research relationships. They discuss their theoretical arguments in the contexts of their own research experiences. In the following paragraph, I introduce briefly the range of topics and examples within these book chapters. [6]

## 2. Range of Topics

In Chapter three, Tina MILLER and Linda BELL address issues of informed consent and the problems involved in recruiting study participants. The problem of gate keepers, for example, becomes central when researchers intend to evaluate the outcome of therapy with violent men by interviewing the female partners of these men. Dual relationships and their pitfalls, like conflicts of interest, are topics of Chapter four, in which Linda BELL and Linda NUTT discuss problems when combining professional and research roles. A consultant to foster care providers, for instance, had trouble collecting data on the expertise of her interviewees in a study with foster parents, because she was faced by requests for advice. Issues of participation in the research experiences are discussed by Maxine BIRCH and Tina MILLER in Chapter five. They argue for a stand of responsibility when researchers experience that their attention to full participation is limited within a social setting, such a health education group, due to their additional interest in collecting research data. In Chapter six, Jean DUNCOMBE and Julie JESSOP address the professional nature of interview relationships and their differences from friendships. Because of the professional communication skills of researchers, research participants are vulnerable to exposing more about themselves to researchers than they might intend. Thus, one-time interviews with couples about their relationships can leave them unsettled and with a sense of being tricked into saying too much about their personal business to a stranger. Chapter seven is devoted to looking at the relationship of research theory to relevant real life research practice. Andrea DOUCET and Natasha MAUTHNER write about problems such as individual differences among research participants that conflict with theoretical views about ethical research. One example of this, for example, is the diversity of opinions about the label, "Post Partum Depression" by women who have been diagnosed with it. For the researcher, a problem arises in maintaining an appreciative distance (as the theoretical approach demands) from the relationships of each study participant, while the views of the participants sometimes contradict each other. Finally, in Chapter eight Pam ALLED and Val GILLIES note a tension between current research theory in qualitative social sciences and actual research practice, such as a positivist assumption about transcripts as uninterpreted data that would exist prior to a "data analysis." [7]

This range of topics addresses what I consider to be relevant and important points for a discussion of ethics in qualitative research. I appreciate the strong, central focus on reflecting research relationships in every step of a study and not remaining limited to a one-time, informed consent contract (see Chapter three and seven). Also, the authors' critical and thoughtful comments about the pros and especially the limitations of collaboration make this book a required reading, especially for those working with emancipatory research purposes (see Chapters five and six). The comments on the pitfalls of dual relationships as well as attention to potential differences in expectations about what the research involves are much needed (Chapters four and six). Yet, an additional chapter on the important problem of conflicts in expectations between researchers and participants would have been useful for this book, because qualitative

researchers can be in danger of raising the hopes of potential research participants, which, in reality, can not be met. [8]

The general focus on research relationships as the result of the researcher's approach to ethics seems an adequate approach for a book on the topic of research ethics in qualitative research. Yet, there are other crucial questions relevant to ethics that could have been attended to in more depth, such as the question of harm and side effects of research, the role of ethics in the process of designing research studies, or an intensive discussion about the political and practical implications of reporting findings of research results. [9]

### **3. Conclusion**

The coherence of the book makes it worthwhile to read. The presented range of topics is all relevant and presented thoughtfully. The authors ground their elaborations on ethics on their own research practice. This helps to clarify what in discussions of ethics often remain abstract and hard to imagine. The detailed information and examples are useful for readers such as students. I especially appreciated that the examples are integrated into a sound, overall theoretical approach to ethics and that they do not remain simply unreflected narrations about problems encountered in research practice. [10]

Within the current state of feminist theory and recent developments in gender studies, the labeling of the authors' approach to ethics as "feminist" appears misleading to me. I would suggest using a more precise name for the approach, such as a feminist ethics of care with a strong focus on application. Even the references to an "ethics of care" could be more specific, especially since there are more than one versions of an academic discipline of an "ethics of care" that are discussed within the academic field of ethics. While I appreciate the argument being grounded in research experiences in the area of social sciences, a more detailed elaboration of where the authors' approach connects and differs in the context of the discipline of (philosophical) ethics would have improved the book. The book focuses on a set of guidelines to questions to consider when conducting qualitative research—yet, the authors critique the limitations those ethical guidelines provide. A more elaborate explanation about how their guidelines differ from the guidelines they critique would be useful at this point. [11]

In sum, while I have problems with an over generalized use of "feminist" for the authors' specific approach, I appreciate their notion of ethics that places a strong focus on attention to research relationships. All topics presented are worthwhile and discussed in a meaningful way. The coherence of the content in each chapter is outstanding for an edited book and makes the text worth reading from the beginning to the end. I recommend the book as required reading for any introduction course in undergraduate and graduate studies on qualitative methods. [12]

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