

## The Good Qualitative Researcher

*Svend Brinkmann, Ph.D. student, Department of Psychology, University of Aarhus*

**Abstract.** This paper discusses what it means to be a good qualitative researcher. The aim is to deliberately blur the distinction between epistemic and ethical goodness by arguing that there is a close connection between being a good qualitative researcher in the epistemic and the ethical senses. First, the relation between researcher and researched is articulated as a power relation giving rise to certain ethical demands. Second, some similarities between the discourses on ethics and qualitative research are brought forth, and it is argued that the key qualifications that enable qualitative researchers to deal well with their subject matter are irreducible moral virtues. Finally, a relevant objection is considered: By blurring the distinction between science and ethics in qualitative research, do I not commit an “ethicist” fallacy that portrays qualitative research as automatically liberating, progressive, and inherently ethical?

In what follows I shall discuss what it means to be a good qualitative researcher. The word ‘good’, of course, is ambiguous. It can refer either to goodness in producing knowledge (this I call “epistemic goodness”) or it can refer to ethical goodness. My aim is to deliberately blur the distinction between epistemic and ethical goodness. I shall argue that it is often futile to separate the epistemic and the ethical domains when it comes to qualitative research. I propose that there is a close connection between being a good qualitative researcher in the epistemic and the ethical senses. I do not mean to say that successful qualitative researchers are all angels or moral saints, but I do believe that they possess some skills that are also involved in ethical perception, judgment and reasoning. I want to raise the question whether, when we talk about *good* qualitative research, it makes sense to do so without including the ethical dimensions of goodness.

The discussion is structured in three parts: First, I discuss the relation between researcher and researched as a power relation. This has recently become a commonplace in much qualitative literature, but it is often overlooked that power and ethics logically and psychologically presuppose one another. We cannot understand what ethics is without knowing something about power, and vice versa. Second, I bring forth some similarities between the discourses on ethics and qualitative research. The subject matter of ethics consists of phenomena that are practical, vague and uncertain, normative, qualitative and particular. The phenomena that qualitative research deals with can likewise be said to be practical (i.e. situated in practical contexts of life as lived), often vague rather than distinct, normative (or intentional), and also qualitative and particular. I argue that the key qualifications that enable qualitative researchers to deal well with their subject matter are irreducible moral virtues, and I also discuss the notions of objectivity and validity as ethical-*cum*-epistemic values. Finally, I consider a relevant objection to my perspective: By blurring the distinction between science and ethics in qualitative research, do I not commit an “ethicist” fallacy that portrays qualitative research as automatically liberating, progressive, and inherently ethical?

## **1. Power and ethics: The fundamentals**

Why is it important to discuss ethics in relation to qualitative research? The obvious answer is, of course, that it is important because researchers have ethical obligations to the people they study. Researchers are usually the relatively more powerful part in the power relation between researchers and researched, and the latter is usually relatively more vulnerable. I am aware that some qualitative researchers portray their practice as inherently dominance-free, based on trust and empathy, and a free exchange of viewpoints, but it seems reasonable to conclude that qualitative research as practiced is in fact (and cannot but be) a power relation (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2005; Kvale, in press). In the case of the interview, we clearly find an asymmetrical power relation where the interviewer has the scientific competence and the right to pose questions and set the agenda. Usually, an interview is an instrumental conversation that is not its own goal, but conducted in order to serve the researcher's ends. As Kvale (in press) has argued, it is even the case that interviews are often manipulative, when interviewers use subtle therapeutic techniques to get beyond the subject's defenses. Furthermore, it is generally the case that researchers uphold a monopoly of interpretation over the subjects' statements, and enjoy the privilege to interpret and report what the subjects really meant.

Although anonymity in research is often a good thing, in this regard it can also serve to deny the participants a voice in the research product that originally emerged from their statements (Parker, 2005). So even anonymity, which is often presented as an essential part of the ethical code, can function as a power technique that silences the participants and leaves the researcher free to interpret according to her own research interests (I do not, however, mean to say that this is always the case). Interviewees are often intent to be good, informing and helpful vis-à-vis the researcher, and some feel honored that a researcher is interested in spending time, sometimes several hours, with them. It is perhaps the exception rather than the rule that research participants object to the researcher's questions and interpretations, and researchers often become aware of this in hindsight only. A striking case is reported by Tanggaard (2003), who interviewed apprentices about their learning, and found, when re-reading the interview transcripts, that the interviewees did not want to talk about their activities in terms of 'learning', a concept they associated with passive, scholastic situations, but a concept that the researcher nonetheless insisted on applying during the interviews.

### ***1.1 Power and subjectivity***

It can be argued that it is the very presence of power in the relation between researchers and researched that constitutes the ethical issues. Absent power relations, there are no ethical issues. This is not something special for qualitative research. As the Danish theologian and philosopher K.E. Løgstrup (1956) tried to show in his phenomenological ethics, our lives are always "delivered over" to one another, and we never deal with each other without holding something of the life of the other in our hands. This is the fundamental human condition: "it is impossible to avoid having power over the person with whom we associate." (p. 53). We cannot *not* have power over the people that we deal with. It may be a little, e.g. in relation to the person at the check-out desk in the supermarket, or it may be a lot, e.g. in the case of one's children. The case of researchers and researched in qualitative studies probably fall somewhere in between these extremes. According to Michel Foucault (1977), we are made

subjects in power relations (again, the case of parent-child relations springs to mind). The human subject is an effect of power. It is not primarily subjects, who, from a position outside power relations, intentionally exercise power in order to promote their specific interests, for being a subject with interests in the first place is only possible because of power relations. Power is thus not merely oppressive, according to Foucault, but also productive: it produces acting and knowing subjectivities. Absent power relations, there can be no subjectivities, for we are always formed (and form ourselves) in networks of different strategies, projects and techniques (the case made famous by Foucault is the panoptic prison structure from the eighteenth century that made prisoners turn the guards' gaze towards themselves, thereby becoming self-monitoring subjects). The qualitative research interview and other human research activities can also be considered as practices that constitute subjectivities; both during the interview, in the understanding of consent to participate in the research, and through the production of the interview transcript (Alldred & Gillies, 2002:155). This gives us one weighty reason to consider qualitative research as at once based on power relations and giving rise to ethical concerns.

### ***1.2 Rights and duties***

Løgstrup argued that the basis of ethics lies in the fact that human encounters are power relations. Ethical demands exist only because what we do have consequences for other people, sometimes serious consequences. Logically, there can only be an ethical demand to help another if this other can be harmed (e.g. by our not helping). Invulnerable beings (if such creatures can be imagined) could not have duties, e.g. to help and protect each other, for they could not be harmed. Invulnerable beings could not have rights, for rights are only conceivable for creatures that have something that can be taken away from them (e.g. liberty, property, dignity, health, integrity).

Rom Harré (2005) has argued that we should understand the concepts of rights and duties in terms of powers and vulnerabilities. *Rights*, he argues, are derived from *vulnerabilities*, for we can only have rights because of our vulnerabilities [1]. The hungry have a right to be fed, because without food, they will die. *Duties*, on the other hand, are derived from *powers*, for we can only have duties because we have the power to do certain things; as Kant famously said: an 'ought' presupposes a 'can', i.e., a *power*. Harré notes that the issue of what constitute powers and vulnerabilities is context dependent. For example, the grandmother who looks after her grandchild has a duty to take care of the child, and the child has a corresponding right to be taken care of. Again, this is in virtue of the power relation between these two persons. But suppose the grandmother is going blind, and they are about to cross a road together, then the child has a duty of guiding them safely across the road, and the grandmother has a right to ask for help. This is context bound. As Løgstrup said, the ethical demand to take care of that of the other person's life that is in my power is given (and universal) in virtue of human interdependency, but how to live up to this demand in concrete situations is based on a judgment that cannot be codified or summarized into universal rules. To reiterate the earlier example: Whether anonymity in qualitative research is a good thing or not cannot be decided a priori for any and every case, but the issue can only be settled by looking closer at the particular situation. We should not think, like Kantians and (some)

utilitarians, that moral dilemmas and uncertainties can be eliminated by formulating general rules (e.g. “always ensure anonymity”), for there will inevitably be cases where living up to the ethical demand requires breaking the rules. Instead of seeking absolute certainty (thereby risking serious ethical transgressions), we should learn to articulate dilemmas and uncertainties in ways that will help us act sensibly. A main point to be discussed further below is that good qualitative researchers have cultivated their skills of situational perception, articulation and judgment, and this, I believe, is goodness, epistemically as well as ethically.

From the above discussion we can conclude that human interaction can fruitfully be seen as structured, among other things, by normative demands that arise from our context bound powers and vulnerabilities. In moral philosophy, the vagaries of powers and vulnerabilities are often conceptualized in terms of duties and rights, and major discussions evolve around the theme whether duties or rights are more fundamental. As Harré (2005) makes clear, it is historically evident that human societies have been based more often on a structure of duties than on individual rights, and it was only in the late eighteenth century that it became important for philosophers and politicians explicitly to discuss rights in their own right (pardon the pun!). Harré has previously offered philosophical arguments in favor of the thesis that duties are primary, and that rights are sometimes derivable from them (Harré & Robinson, 1995). I shall skip the discussion about what is more fundamental, for I am primarily interested in the ways that rights and duties – and the corresponding vulnerabilities and powers – figure today, particularly in the practices of qualitative research. Fundamentally, if it is true that the relation between researcher and researched is a power relation with the researcher primarily having powers and the researched primarily being vulnerable, then the participants, the subjects, have rights whereas the researchers have duties. This is the ethical ontology of the research situation.

What has hopefully been made clear so far is that power and ethics presuppose one another. There are ethical demands only because people have the power to affect and ultimately destroy the lives of others. Løgstrup again: “Because power is involved in every human relationship, we are always in advance compelled to decide whether to use our power over the other person for serving him or her or for serving ourselves.” (1956:53). This relation also holds the other way around: There is power only because people are ethical subjects with a certain amount of freedom. As Foucault (1994:342) made clear: “freedom must exist for power to be exerted, and also its permanent support, since without the possibility of recalcitrance power would be equivalent to a physical determination”. It makes sense to analyze human life in terms of power only in so far as human subjects are seen as ethical subjects with the possibility of freedom. Bertrand Russell once said that Power is the fundamental concept in social science, in the same sense in which Energy is the fundamental concept in physics (Flyvbjerg, 2001:88), but we should add to that statement that Power makes sense only because there is such a thing as Ethics; these are two sides of the same coin in human life. I suggest that we see power and ethics together as constituting a basic fabric of human intercourse and becoming. I further suggest that the capable qualitative researcher is one who navigates wisely in this complex field of power and ethics. In what follows, we shall

examine closer how the vagaries of power and ethics play out in the practices of qualitative research.

## **2. Qualitative ethics and ethical qualitative research**

I began the previous section with the assertion that it is important to discuss ethics in qualitative research because researchers have ethical obligations to the people they study, and I explained this through an analysis of power and ethics as complementary concepts. Now, I shall give a different answer to the same question, which does not contradict the first one, but adds something to it. My answer now is that it is important to discuss ethics in qualitative research, because the fields of ethics and qualitative research are quite similar and largely overlapping. In my view, they concern the same plane of human existence, viz. the plane of meaning, normativity and intentionality that does not lend itself to quantification.

In a defence of qualitative psychology, not just as science, but as the fundamental scientific approach to psychological phenomena, Harré (2004) argues that the qualitative/quantitative distinction is a superficial derivation of the more fundamental distinction between intentional and material properties. Intentional properties are (or ought to be) primary in psychology, a discipline that Harré defines as “the scientific study of meaning making and management, and the skills necessary to accomplish it.” (p. 4). Unlike the natural sciences, psychology (and other human sciences) study meaningful phenomena, e.g. the display of emotions, problem-solving, recollections etc., and these are discursive acts that cannot be grasped through causal concepts, but which demands the use of a range of *normative* concepts. That is, in order to grasp what emotions are, for example, we must know something about when it is *appropriate* to display them, when specific emotions are normatively *warranted* and can be *justified* etc. For example, the reason we count anger among the range of human emotions but not indigestion (although both have behavioural manifestations as well as distinctive experiential qualities) is that anger belongs in what Harré calls a normative moral order, whereas indigestion does not (it can be explained in pure causal terms). In effect, what we have here is an argument that psychology’s phenomena qua psychological are intentional and normative *and* that they make sense only on the background of a moral order. But such phenomena are exactly what moral philosophers have studied for centuries if not millennia. Such phenomena seem to belong to the field of ethics, and it thus appears that we almost have an identity of ethical and qualitative phenomena in psychology. The argument here is not that all qualitative phenomena in psychology are ethically *good*, but that they are potentially subject to ethical evaluation. Harré’s point is that something counts as a qualitative psychological phenomenon only if it can be evaluated relative to a moral order that distinguishes good from bad, warranted from unwarranted, correct from incorrect etc.

### **2.1 An alliance of ethics and qualitative research?**

If we bracket the modernist ethical theories that aim to provide universal procedures for moral reflection (e.g. Kantian theories) or aim to provide a (quantitative) calculus with which to determine the proper course of action in any situation (different forms of utilitarianism), then we can say that ethics, as the study of moral phenomena, is concerned with phenomena that are (1) practical, (2) vague and uncertain, (3) normative, and (4) qualitative and particular. (1)

They are practical, because they concern things done. According to Aristotle (who serves as a major source of inspiration for this paper), in the moral sciences, “we are studying not to know what goodness is, but how to become good” (1976:93). The moral sciences (among which I would count ethics as well as psychology) are in this sense practical, concerned with doing things and ideally improving the world. (2) Ethical phenomena are vague and uncertain, because ethical problems and dilemmas appear in those situations when we are uncertain about what to do. If we knew the proper course of action, then there would be no ethical problem. (3) They are normative, which speaks for itself. Of course, behavioural scientists have repeatedly tried to treat normative phenomena (say, ethical demands) as non-normative facts. Thus ethical demands about what people ought to do are treated as *de facto* beliefs in people’s minds. (4) Ethical phenomena are qualitative, because they are about the *qualities* of actions, emotions and characters. This point in particular has been denied by modern moral philosophers, not least by those utilitarians who argue that ethics is a quantitative discipline concerned with maximizing the net sum of subjective well-being or preference satisfaction. The modernist conception of human rationality in Western thought has articulated a false dilemma: Either ethical deliberation is quantitative or else it is a mere shot in the dark (Nussbaum, 1990:60) (this false dilemma has also been influential in discussions of research methodologies: Either research is quantitative or else a mere shot in the dark!). But as Nussbaum, writing in the Aristotelian tradition, says: “Experience shows us a further alternative: that it [i.e., ethical deliberation] is qualitative and not quantitative, and rational just because it is qualitative, and based upon a grasp of the special nature of each of the items in question.” (ibid:60-61). Thus, ethics concerns not just the qualitative, but also the *particular*, since we are always interested in solving particular moral problems, which demands “a grasp of the special nature of each of the items in question”.

These four features together provide a reason why psychology, although originally part of *the moral sciences*, to a large extent has ignored the role of morality in human lives. Practical, vague, normative, qualitative and particular phenomena are ill suited to a discipline that has modelled itself after Newtonian natural science, using causal concepts and aiming to formulate universal, theoretical and non-normative laws about human behaviour. Only in the field of qualitative psychology do we find psychological descriptions and analyses of phenomena that are practical (i.e. situated in practical contexts of life as lived), often vague rather than distinct, normative (or intentional), and also qualitative and particular. This points to common interests of qualitative researchers and ethical theorists. Could we not conclude that ethics is a qualitative discipline and that qualitative inquiry is an ethical discipline, i.e. concerned with matters irreducibly moral?

If so, we can ask the further question: Is *knowing* in ethics the same as *knowing* in qualitative research? If Aristotle is right that ethics and other moral sciences are concerned with how to become good, then knowing well in ethics cannot be separated from acting well. Theoretical knowledge about what one ought to do is useless if the person cannot act well (similarly, theoretical knowledge about logic is useless, and will not really count as knowledge, unless the person is able to reason logically). According to Aristotle, knowing well in practical affairs implies first the capacity to perceive salient moral features of concrete situations. If

one does not perceive that some moral issues are at stake, then the person will not engage in moral judgment or reasoning. Second, it implies the capacity for practical judgment that Aristotle called *phronesis*. Interestingly, Aristotle describes *phronesis* as an “intellectual virtue” rather than a “moral virtue”. *Phronesis* involves knowledge of particularities and is the capacity to judge well in concrete situations, and this is not confined to situations when moral issues are at stake. The capacity for good judgment cannot be formalized into a set of rules, for rules do not apply themselves or dictate their own interpretation. As indicated above, there are situations when such *prima facie* rules as “ensure anonymity for participants in the research project” *ought* to be broken. And the reason for breaking the rule can be at once ethical and epistemic. There may be ethical reasons to break this rule (thereby allowing people to object to how their lives are represented), and there may be epistemic reasons to break the rule (thereby allowing them to engage in public discussion about the findings, thus potentially adding to the validity of the knowledge produced). Again, we find an intricate entanglement of ethical and epistemic issues in good qualitative research. The ethical reasons there are for doing certain things are often just as much epistemic reasons, and vice versa.

If we look more closely at what a good qualitative researcher must be capable of (in this case an interviewer), then the following list of qualification criteria has been proposed (by Kvale, 1996:148-149):

1. *Knowledgeable*: Has an extensive knowledge of the interview theme without attempting to shine with his or her knowledge.
2. *Structuring*: Introduces the purpose of the interview, outlines in passing and rounds off the interview in a structuring manner.
3. *Clear*: Poses clear, simple and short questions.
4. *Gentle*: Allows participants to finish what they are saying etc.
5. *Sensitive*: Engages in active listening, trying to get a hold of the fine nuances.
6. *Open*: Hears which aspects of the interview topic that are important for the participant.
7. *Steering*: Is persistently aware of what he or she wants to know more about.
8. *Critical*: Does not take everything at face value, but continually tests the reliability and validity of the participant’s statements.
9. *Remembering*: Retains what was said earlier and perhaps asks later for elaboration.
10. *Interpreting*: Manages throughout to clarify and extend the meanings of the interviewee’s statements, which may then be confirmed or disconfirmed by the interviewee.

What is striking, from my point of view, is how difficult it is to determine whether these key qualifications should be seen as moral virtues that enables the researcher to act wisely in an ethical sense or if they should be seen as more “technical” aspects of the interview situation that enable the researcher to produce the best (most valid) knowledge possible. Again, the point is that the good qualitative researcher is good epistemically *and* ethically. The good qualitative researcher is sensitive, for example, to those fine nuances in human interaction that express what somebody believes, how somebody feels etc. This is a form of ethical perception, the ability to *see* what one ought to do that is not mediated by moral rules or principles. But it is also a necessary component in the production of valuable knowledge.

To take a concrete example (from Fog, 1994): In a research project about living with cancer, a woman is interviewed and denies that she fears a return of the disease. She says that she is not afraid, and she appears happy and reasonable. However, as a skilled interviewer and therapist, the interviewer senses small signals to the contrary: The interviewee speaks very fast, her smile and the way she moves her hands are independent of her words. Her body is rigid, and she does not listen to her own words. If the interviewer decides to respect the interviewee's *words*, and refrains from anything resembling therapeutic intervention, then the written interview will subsequently tell the story of a woman living peacefully with cancer. Valuable knowledge might be lost in this way, which could only have been obtained by trying to understand other aspects of the woman's actions in the interview. But of course, it could rightly be argued that there is an ethical problem in trying to get behind the denial and defenses of the interviewee. The woman has not asked for therapeutic help and insight, but has agreed to participate in a research interview. So the ethics and the "epistemics" seem to be in conflict in this case. The point is, however, that it is the same capacity on behalf of the interviewer that enables her to see (1) that the woman is likely in some sort of denial (primarily an epistemic insight) and (2) that it would be unethical to pursue the issue further in this context (primarily an ethical insight). The good qualitative researcher here has cultivated her skills of situational perception and judgment in a sense that enables her not just to act ethically but also to produce valid knowledge (although she may refrain from doing so in this particular case).

## **2.2 Objectivity**

I will suggest that we understand the interviewer's capabilities here in terms of objectivity. She sees objectively what ought to be done. She does not try to impose her own wishes, desires and biases onto the situation, but is open to the situation itself. Objectivity, of course, nicely illustrates the point of this paper, that ethical and epistemic issues are intertwined in qualitative research. Objectivity is an ethical *and* an epistemic value. As MacIntyre (1978:37) has noted, "objectivity is a moral concept before it is a methodological concept", and we learn what it means to be objective, impartial and fair in our moral lives before we do so as researchers. Its epistemic value, in this sense, is derived from its moral value. Hilary Putnam says more generally about epistemic (he calls them 'cognitive') values:

we should recognize that *all* values, including the cognitive ones, derive their authority from our idea of human flourishing and our idea of reason. These two ideas are interconnected: our image of an ideal theoretical intelligence is simply a *part* of our ideal of total human flourishing, and makes no sense wrenched out of the total ideal, as Plato and Aristotle saw. (Putnam, 1990:141).

Our epistemic/cognitive values like truth, objectivity, reliability, simplicity, coherence, etc. are valuable because they are part of what it means to flourish as human agents. In a broad sense of ethics, that Aristotle certainly would have endorsed, they are moral values.



What it means to be “objective” in qualitative research, however (ethically and epistemically), is not easy to determine. The everyday meaning of ‘objectivity’, I believe, is something like “not imposing one’s own biases unto something”, but, as Latour (2000) has suggested, there may be another (and related) sense of objectivity that also nicely captures the entanglement of the ethical and the epistemic: Objectivity in the sense of “allowing the object to object”. Ethical as well as scientific objectivity is about letting the objects object to what we do to them and say about them. Qualitative research seems particularly well suited to do so, since the research situation is not necessarily and inherently fixed as, for example, in many psychological experiments. In Milgram’s obedience studies, to mention a famous case, it was predetermined in advance that the subject’s responses were to be understood according to the binary concepts of ‘obedience to authorities’ or ‘disobedience’. In qualitative research there is at least the possibility of a *tertium datur*. But again, it is good to remind oneself of the complex power play that also inheres in qualitative research practices. Often, as was argued above, the researcher uses her power to define the research situation in a way that makes it quite difficult for the “object” to object to questions, transcripts and interpretations. To stress the main point again: This not just prevents the researcher from obtaining important knowledge about the given subject matter, but it also represents a (possible) ethical transgression. Again: Ethical and epistemic issues go hand in hand.

We can now conclude that when we talk about good qualitative research and good qualitative researchers, we use the word ‘good’ in a way that is ambiguous. I have argued that we talk about ethical as well as epistemic goodness, and that this is all as it should be. We run these issues together, I believe, because they really do belong together. Of course, this is not to say anything new. Aristotle (1976) argued a similar point, viz. that “knowing humans well” (which is the business of qualitative researchers) cannot be separated from “acting well among humans”. The modern separation of ethical and epistemic issues (values and facts, prescriptions and descriptions) would have been wholly alien to Aristotle, who never doubted that the human world is filled with value and who was not concerned with limiting “ethics” to a restricted subset of human life. Knowing our world and each other is at once a cognitive/epistemic and an ethical issue, and it is based on the capacity to recognize what is most important in a situation and how best to respond, the virtue of *phronesis* (Fowers & Tjeltveit, 2003). This capacity cannot be codified. The good qualitative researcher does something for which there is no recipe, but this is not mysterious. This also goes for composers, lecturers, craftsmen etc., and all humans who excel in some practice. Nussbaum talks about the “perceiving agent” as an ethical ideal, which she characterizes as follows:

Being responsibly committed to the world of value before her, the perceiving agent can be counted on to investigate and scrutinize the nature of each item and each situation, to respond to what is there before her with full sensitivity and imaginative vigor, not to fall short of what is there to be seen and felt because of evasiveness, scientific abstractness, or a love of simplification. The Aristotelian agent is a person whom we could trust to describe a complex situation with full concreteness of detail and emotional shading, missing nothing of practical relevance. (Nussbaum, 1990:84).

I believe that this description of the perceiving agent is not just the description of an ethical ideal, but implicitly just as much a description of an epistemic ideal, e.g., in the form of the good qualitative researcher, who knows her subject matter well in both senses (ethical and epistemic).

### **2.3 Validity**

If the phenomena of qualitative research in psychology are practical, vague, normative, qualitative and particular, then they belong to the world of intentional phenomena (rather than material phenomena, as Harré rightly pointed out). Unlike the world of materiality, the intentional world is constituted by how we understand it. For example, there can only be such a practice as voting at a democratic election if the people understand what they do (marking a piece of paper in a voting booth) as an act of ‘voting’. We can only have intentions to do certain things if we have some sort of conceptual understanding of what we want to do. The problem is, however, that when psychologists and other human scientists examine the intentional world, then they may act in such a way as to *change* what they are dealing with. As MacIntyre (1985) once remarked, molecules don’t read chemistry textbooks, but people do read psychology books, especially in our age when people’s self-understandings are significantly affected by different forms of psychological knowledge. Our self-understandings are historically contingent and deeply malleable. But if it is true that “the historicity of human practices is as much a feature of psychology as a human practice, as it is of any other activity that people engage in” (Harré, 2004:13), then it seems that the validity of psychologists’ findings cannot consist in simply mirroring the qualitative, intentional world of psychological reality that is studied, for the very quest of understanding it can itself cause deep changes to it (think, for example, of the impact of psychoanalysis on Western culture).

However, as Charles Taylor (1985) has argued, this does not mean that we have to give up the notion of validity. Instead we should see social theory (and qualitative psychological research, I might add) as a specific kind of practice. It is a practice that serves to interpret and articulate the meanings of human activity, and good research in the qualitative, intentional world “clarifies, enriches, and increases the productivity or lucidity of practice, and it can challenge or undermine questionable practices” (Richardson, Fowers & Guignon, 1999:306). Validity in qualitative psychology means *improving* the practices under consideration, and this is a moral issue. I thus suggest that we see the notion of validity, which is perhaps initially a pure epistemic notion, as just as much an ethical issue.

### **3. Qualitative ethicism?**

There are many implications to discuss of the thesis that ethical and epistemic issues are intertwined in qualitative research. One is that ethical *Bildung* of researchers becomes at least as important as learning technical research methodology, and an important task consists of clarifying how qualitative researchers should be educated ethically in order to become able to deal with ethical problems in their research *and* improve the quality of the knowledge produced. However, I shall leave these issues in this context and instead discuss a relevant objection to the central thesis of this paper: By blurring the distinction between science and

ethics in qualitative research, do I not commit an “ethicist” fallacy that portrays qualitative research as automatically liberating, progressive, and inherently ethical?

Qualitative ethicism was baptized and criticized by Hammersley (1999), and it is the tendency to see research almost exclusively in ethical terms, as if the rationale of research was to achieve ethical goals and ideals with the further caveat that qualitative research uniquely embodies such ideals. I tried to argue above that qualitative research necessarily is infused in power relations, and I indicated that qualitative research could not automatically be conceived as liberating, progressive, or inherently ethical. Think of those branches of qualitative market research, for example, that aim to improve the abilities of companies to manipulate and construct our desires for different commercial products. To say the least, it is not crystal clear that these research practices are inherently ethically good. It would be unreasonable to deny the fact that qualitative research can be used for purposes that are ethically questionable.

In this regard, I think we have to distinguish between two sorts of alliances between ethics and qualitative research. The first is the one that says that qualitative research is inherently ethical (in the sense of ethically *good*). I believe that Hammersley and others (e.g. Brinkmann & Kvale, 2005) are justified in criticizing this as unjustified ethicism. This is thus an illusory alliance. The second is the one that says that the qualifications that enable qualitative researchers to produce valid knowledge are in fact (also) moral virtues. The same capabilities enable people to know other people well (science) and to act well as ethical beings (ethics). This, I believe, is a real alliance that is further strengthened by the argument that the subject matter of ethics and qualitative research belong to the same plane of human existence, viz. things that are practical, vague, normative, qualitative and particular. It would be unjustified to conclude that all qualitative research is ethically viable, but if my arguments are valid, then it is similarly unreasonable to think that we can or should separate the ethical from the epistemic issues in research. We cannot, I have argued, discuss the objectivity or validity of research in qualitative psychology without at the same time presupposing some ethical views. Quite often these are left implicit, but I think we could improve the ethical *and* epistemic value of our research by making the ethical presuppositions and implications explicit.

#### **4. Conclusions**

In this paper, I have tried to blur the distinction between ethical and epistemic issues in qualitative research, because I think a sharp analytic distinction between them is untrue to the human situation that does not lend itself to such delimitation. I have blurred the distinction both at the level of *content*, when I argued that ethics and qualitative research are largely concerned with the same plane of existence, and at the level of *qualifications*, when I argued that the capabilities that make good qualitative researchers good are at once ethical and epistemic. I have argued that a key virtue of qualitative researchers is objectivity, the ability to let the object show its nature and object to the researcher’s interpretations and descriptions, and I have further argued that this is at once a moral and a scientific virtue. I have also argued that validity in qualitative research is as much a moral matter about potentially clarifying, enriching or improving the reality that is studied, as it is an epistemic issue about passively mirroring the reality studied. Fundamentally, the human interaction in the qualitative research

process was conceptualized in terms of power and ethics as two sides of the same coin, and I also argued that context bound powers and vulnerabilities (engendering duties and rights) structure the normativity of the research situation. The good qualitative researcher perceives, judges and acts well in this complex field of power and ethics, and this is a task at once ethical and epistemic.

### Note

[1] Of course, we might add, not every vulnerability engenders a right. All matter is corruptible, for example, and thus ‘vulnerable’, but this does not allow us to (absurdly) apply the concept of right to all matter (Harré & Robinson, 1995). The vulnerabilities that engender rights are those that are tied to *interests* of some kind. A further discussion of this, however, will bring me too far away from the main issues of the paper.

### References

- Allred, P. & Gillies, V. (2002). Eliciting Research Accounts: Re/producing Modern Subjects? In M. Mauthner, M. Birch, J. Jessop & T. Miller, editors, *Ethics in Qualitative Research*. pp. 146-165. London: Sage.
- Aristotle (1976). *Nicomachean Ethics*. London: Penguin.
- Brinkmann, S. & Kvale, S. (2005). Confronting the ethics of qualitative research. *Journal of Constructivist Psychology*, 18(2): 157-181.
- Flyvbjerg, B. (2001). *Making Social Science Matter*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Fog, J. (1994). *Med samtalen som udgangspunkt*. Copenhagen: Akademisk forlag.
- Fowers, B.J. & Tjeltveit, A.C. (2003). Introduction. Virtue Obscured and Retrieved: Character, Community, and Practices in Behavioral Science. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 47(4): 387-394.
- Foucault, M. (1977). *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. New York: Pantheon.
- Foucault, M. (1994). The Subject and Power. In J.D. Faubion, editor, *Power: Essential Works of Michel Foucault, Volume 3*. pp 236-348. London: Penguin.
- Hammersley, M. (1999). Some reflections on the current state of qualitative research. *Research Intelligence*, 70: 16-18.
- Harré, R. (2004). Staking our claim for qualitative psychology as science. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 1: 3-14.
- Harré, R. (2005). An Ontology for Duties and Rights. In N.J. Finkel & F.M. Moghaddam, editors, *The Psychology of Rights and Duties: Empirical Contributions and Normative Commentaries*. pp. 223-241. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Harré, R. & Robinson, D.N. (1995). On the Primacy of Duties. *Philosophy*, 70: 513-532.
- Kvale, S. (1996). *InterViews: An Introduction to Qualitative Research Interviewing*. London: Sage.
- Kvale, S. (in press). The Dominance of Dialogical Interview Research. *Qualitative Inquiry*.
- Latour, B. (2000). When things strike back: a possible contribution of ‘science studies’ to the social sciences. *British Journal of Sociology*, 50(1): 107-123.

- Løgstrup, K.E. (1956). *The Ethical Demand*. (This edition 1997). Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.
- MacIntyre, A. (1978). Objectivity in Morality and Objectivity in Science. In H.T. Engelhardt & D. Callahan, editors, *Morals, science, and sociality*. pp. 21-39. Hastings-on-Hudson, NY: Hastings Center
- MacIntyre, A. (1985). How psychology makes itself true – or false. In S. Koch & D.E. Leary, editors, *A Century of Psychology as Science*, pp. 897-903. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Nussbaum, M.C. (1990). The Discernment of Perception: An Aristotelian Conception of Private and Public Rationality. In *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature*. pp. 54-105. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Parker, I. (2005). *Qualitative Psychology: Introducing Radical Research*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Putnam, H. (1990). Beyond the Fact/Value Dichotomy. pp. 135-141. In *Realism With a Human Face*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Richardson, F. C., Fowers, B. J., & Guignon, C. B. (1999). *Re-Envisioning Psychology: Moral Dimensions of Theory and Practice*. San Fransisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Tanggaard, L. (2003). Forskningsinterviewet som diskurser der krydser klinger. *Nordisk Pedagogik*, 23: 21-32.
- Taylor, C. (1985). Social Theory as Practice. In *Philosophy and the Human Sciences: Philosophical Papers 2*. pp. 91- 115. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

### **Acknowledgement**

The author would like to thank Steinar Kvale for much helpful criticism of the paper.