

Mauthner, M., Birch, M., Jessop, J. & Miller, T. (eds.) (2002). **Ethics in Qualitative Research**. London: Sage (172 p.)

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In recent years there has been a boom in the popularity of qualitative research in the social sciences. Qualitative research is ideal for exploring subjective experience and describing the life-world. At the same time, ethics or moral philosophy has witnessed a qualitative turn. Quasi-scientific approaches like Kantian ethics (deontological ethics) and utilitarianism (consequentialism), which claim to be able to procedurally establish or calculate the morally right action in any situation, are losing ground, and new (and old) alternative approaches become accepted (and recycled): care ethics, narrative ethics, virtue ethics, situation ethics, feminist ethics and many others. The standing question is: Is ethics more like science or like art? Kantians and utilitarians think that ethics resembles science, where one can, and must, give explicit accounts of what one does at all stages of a decision procedure. The softer approaches, which often resemble qualitative research, portray ethics more like an art, involving a non-codifiable process of perceiving, judging and acting. The chief problem with the “science-approach” to ethics is the great gap that seems to exist between abstract procedures and concrete moral practice. Too often, abstract rules and principles simply seem unable to help us in our lives. Even if we establish as a rule that sexual harassment, for example, is morally wrong, then we need to know what counts as sexual harassment in any given situation, and here we cannot go on forever demanding rules for how to apply rules. At some point we need to be able to perceive and judge responsibly in concrete situations, and this is where ethics comes to look more like art than science, and rest more on experience than method.

The book *Ethics in Qualitative Research*, edited by Melanie Mauthner, Maxine Birch, Julie Jessop, and Tina Miller, addresses the gap between the concrete *practice* of doing research and the *theoretical* principles formulated in ethical guidelines. It thus questions the “tick box approach” to ethical standards, as the editors say in the introduction, and clearly falls within the art-approach to ethics. In qualitative research, the researcher is rarely able to predict the course of the research process in advance, and the static, formalized guidelines found in method textbooks (and formulated by professional boards) are often not enough to deal with the difficulties of doing qualitative research with humans, particularly because such research is “characterized by fluidity and inductive uncertainty” (p. 2). In most books on research methods, the ethics section is often the final one, giving the impression of being added somewhat arbitrarily, and discussed in complete detachment from the “important” contents. Very often the ethics section merely describes rules and guidelines for ethical behaviour in the research process – how to treat subjects etc. – but as this book testifies, there are many ethical issues that such a narrow approach leaves untouched, e.g. regarding the ethics of knowledge production in a wider sense.

Ethical problems in qualitative research particularly arise because of the complexities of “researching private lives and placing accounts in the public arena” (p. 1).

Rather than formulating general rules that will solve or avoid all ethical dilemmas, the contributors to the book struggle to describe ways of *dealing* with such ethical dilemmas. The editors point out that ethical concerns require “contextualised methods of reasoning” (p. 3), not abstract rules, and all contributors contextualise the themes under discussion by drawing in examples from their own work as qualitative researchers. The examples presented to the reader are complex, and cannot be formulated in a few sentences. When psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg devised his famous Kantian method of moral assessment, the dilemma given to the research subjects (the Heinz dilemma) was a very short description of two possible courses of action, and the subject then had to choose one, and account for her choice. The problem is that this is neither how we face moral dilemmas in everyday life, nor in research practice. In real life, situations are much more complex, and we are usually able to inquire further, contextualise, and ask other people for advice. The contributors to *Ethics in Qualitative Research* are all aware of the complexity of ethical situations and moral decision making, which is seen in their thorough phenomenological descriptions of ethical dilemmas from their own research.

The book has eight chapters in addition to the introduction. In what follows I shall go through them briefly. All contributors consider themselves to be feminists, albeit in a very self-critical fashion. In **chapter 1**, Rosalind Edwards and Melanie Mauthner write about “Ethics and feminist research: Theory and practice”. Edwards and Mauthner find that there is much in common between feminist research and an ethics of care. Carol Gilligan formulated an ethics of care in her ground-breaking book *In a Different Voice* from 1982, which opposed Kohlberg’s abstract theory. The ethics of care has since made a significant impact, but it can be criticised for its idyllic portrait of the emotionally laden relation of care and empathy; a portrait, which easily neglects the power relation inherent in human relations, not least the relations between researcher and researched. Edwards and Mauthner are aware of the naïveté of a simple ethics of care, and they argue that “rather than ignoring or blurring power positions, ethical practice needs to pay attention to them” (p. 27). Ethics is about how to deal with conflict and ambivalence, and it should not be an attempt to eliminate it, as authors like Gilligan sometimes presuppose. Edwards and Mauthner also address the problems related to formalizing the research procedures so that all ethical issues can be determined at the start of a project. This is illusory, and ethical guidelines often aim to “avoid ethical dilemmas through asserting formalistic principles, rather than providing guidance on how to deal with them” (p. 18).

In **chapter 2**, Val Gillies and Pam Alldred write about “The ethics of intention: Research as a political tool”. Gillies and Alldred are interested in research as a political tool from a feminist angle. They are interested, not in “modernist” research ethics about how to treat participants, but in the “postmodern” questions about the ethics of knowledge itself, “for instance, the political role played by research findings or by the relations set up by the knowledge claims” (p. 32). They are concerned, however, that a postmodern sceptical attitude towards truth can make it hard to legitimize political research: “how do we address issues of intention for research when feminist aims themselves have also been subject to the same questioning as has ‘Truth’?”

Their answer, as I understand it, is pragmatic: “it is not simply knowledge of women’s lives, but knowledge that *works for* women that counts” (p. 38). Here, extremely interesting dilemmas are discussed, e.g. the danger of representing the voices of other people (especially those from “weaker” groups). Daphne Patai is quoted; who claims that research carried out by a stronger part on a weaker part is *never* ethically justified, because it too easily becomes a kind of colonization. Gillies and Alldred consider this claim but end up arguing that it can just as well be marginalizing and serve a politics of exclusion *not* to speak for others.

Tina Miller and Linda Bell ask “Consenting to what?” in **chapter 3**. They address the ethical problems in getting access to participants in research projects. From accounts of their own experiences, they point to the inadequacy of limiting the ethical considerations to initial ethical agreements to be signed by participants, since it is impossible at this stage to know what one agrees to, and they therefore give the advice that “‘consent’ should be ongoing and renegotiated between researcher and researched throughout the research process” (p. 53). Linda Bell and Linda Nutt follow up in **chapter 4** on “Divided Loyalties”, tackling the ethical issues that arise when the researcher has several roles, i.e., both researcher and employee/practitioner (e.g. in the fields of health and social care). It seems that there can be no universal rules as to when one should take one role, rather than the other, and this is documented in the authors’ own narratives.

Chapter 5 is by Maxine Birch and Tina Miller and concerns “Encouraging participation”. What are the ethical problems in participant observation and longitudinal interviews that often become intimate, private relations? Birch and Miller are aware of the problems in practicing a “feminist ethnography”, which encourages equality between researchers and researched. Such equality may mask “a deeper, more dangerous form of exploitation” (p. 98). This is documented in the fieldwork of one of the authors as participant observer in a therapy group in the context of alternative health. Being a member of the group involved an ethical commitment to be true to group membership, but as a genuine group member, the researcher was unwilling to discuss her research role beyond the initial introduction and initiation into the group, which was perceived as ethically questionable.

Chapter 6 is called “‘Doing rapport’ and the ethics of ‘faking friendship’”, and here Jean Duncombe and Julie Jessop go further into the ethical intricacies related to the intimacy and mutuality of qualitative research. They find a parallel between ‘rapport’ (a therapeutic term) in interviewing and the kind of “emotion work” that women perform in their jobs. Both involve a kind of commercialization of human feeling. Qualitative interviewers often fake friendship in order to obtain a good relationship, but this is quite clearly unethical. Duncombe and Jessop present telling quotes from qualitative textbooks emphasising “the warm and caring researcher” as “the way to achieving such effectiveness” in the interview (p. 110). The authors discuss the risk of “reading between the lines” in the interview, e.g., answering “I know” when the participant says “You know what I mean”. Such reading, or rather *hearing*, between the lines builds rapport, but the researcher runs the risk of projecting her own understanding onto the participants.

Andrea Doucet and Natasha Mauthner introduce the idea of “Knowing responsibly” in **chapter 7**. This is a concept from the feminist philosopher Lorraine Code, who has focused on “the social and political responsibility attached to those who are involved in ‘power-based knowledge construction processes’” (p. 124). Consequently, “knowing well” is not just “knowing much” about something, but also “knowing responsibly”, i.e., building ethical research relationships with readers, users and varied communities, which involves being “as transparent, as is reasonably possible, about the epistemological, ontological, theoretical, and personal assumptions that inform our research” (p. 125).

Finally, Alldred and Gillies’s **chapter 8** is a very interesting exploration of “Eliciting research accounts”. They ask the question if interview research builds on a modernist liberalist-humanist idea of a rational, unencumbered self. They criticise the fact that researchers have an unthematized “right” to interpret the words of the interviewees, and they find that the interview person’s subjectivity is often unproblematically constituted in the interview, in the research agreement, and in the transcription in a way that affirms the concept of the unitary rational subject. Alldred and Gillies pose good questions, but do not really suggest any alternatives apart from a wish “to promote research that [...] eschews uncritical acceptance of the culturally dominant mode of subjectivity for a recognition of more diverse ways of being.” (p. 162).

The words just quoted are the final ones in the book, and, in my view, they call for the authors of all chapters to say more than they do. The clear strength of the book is the many examples that illustrate many ethical questions that have rarely been made explicit elsewhere. The authors are courageous enough to admit their own ethical qualms, including the problems in their own feminist approach. This is honest and deserves much credit. As stated earlier, the book criticises those ethical guidelines that aim to “avoid ethical dilemmas through asserting formalistic principles, rather than providing guidance on how to deal with them” (p. 18). But does the book provide such guidance? In a way, yes, but not thoroughly so. The examples brought forth surely makes the reader more equipped to deal with dilemmas in the reader’s own research, but there are no suggestions as to how the researcher should be educated more broadly to deal with ethical issues. The authors rightly say that learning abstract rules and guidelines cannot be the whole story, and this is a good point, but, in my view, they could have said more about the cultivation of the researchers’ moral sense, as Jette Fog has put it (in *Med samtalen som udgangspunkt*. Akademisk Forlag, 1994). What are the differences between the experienced and the inexperienced researcher as regards how ethical dilemmas are perceived? Can one *learn* ethical competence? And if so, how? These are questions that are not just relevant for researchers, but also for practitioners.

All in all, it is a fine book. It is clearly written and very readable. It is relevant to a wide audience within psychology and the social sciences. Its feministic perspective is important, and even more important is the self-critical attitude that runs through the book. The most relevant message of the book is, in my view, that the wave of warm, empathic and caring research in qualitative inquiry is not ethical in itself. Rather, as many examples of the book disclose, it can be a subtle and unacknowledged form of power exertion.