

QUESTION #18

What Kinds of Ethics Challenges Do Qualitative Researchers Face, Typically?

Qualitative researchers explore participants' experiences in great depth and on topics that may be very personal, due to the focus on individuals' perceptions of the study topic. At times, participants serve as co-researchers in the investigation, where the relationships among the team members are very close and may extend over several weeks, months, or years. The ethics challenges that arise in many qualitative projects may focus on

- **Researcher-participant relationships.** Qualitative researchers have complex and varied relationships with their participants. Individuals may be recruited for a single session only and not contacted again, or there may be several follow-up meetings over a long period of time. In these studies, researchers may be quite distanced from the participants and only engage during formal data collection sessions. Participatory, community-based projects may reflect long-standing relationships between researchers and community members; here, researchers may engage with the group in different roles, where the “researcher” role is only one of many ways that they are connected to individuals in the group. Managing the ethical issues and obligations in the various relationships is a key point of consideration when designing and implementing qualitative projects.
- **Informed consent processes.** Researchers must ensure that participants understand the implications of their decision to be involved in a study. That decision must be made in the context of understanding the potential harms and benefits that will arise from the study, along with any potential harm they may face. Participants need to understand how their data will be stored, analyzed, and used, including any details relating to how (or if) they will be identified. Researchers need to consider all implications of the design,

including how the data will be used in future, and be sure that participants are informed of these details as part of the consent process. It is also important to understand that consent is a process and does not end with the signing of a consent form or giving a verbal agreement to participate. Due to the emergent nature of qualitative designs, consent may need to be affirmed at various stages of the project to ensure that participants remain comfortable with their decision to engage in the study.

- **Privacy and confidentiality obligations.** Participants share many details of their lives, in confidence, with qualitative researchers, expecting that their data will be treated with respect and addressing relevant privacy considerations. In some cases, anonymizing the participant can ensure that the results cannot be tracked back to that individual. Where individuals are named, there may be some details that are not analyzed or published as part of the research results. Researchers must be clear with participants as to how their privacy and any confidential details will be treated as part of the consent process. Researchers must also understand any legal or other jurisdictional issues that may conflict with their obligations to participants. For example, if a researcher's professional obligations require them to report certain activities (such as a trained teacher required to report a student who expresses a desire to self-harm), these obligations to report must be explained to participants during the consent process, in advance of the participant disclosing such details.
- **Data storage and management practices.** Researchers must store data, consent forms, and other research materials for designated periods of time (often, five years or more), depending on the jurisdiction where they are conducting the research. Removing identifying details from datasets, for example, may require some materials (such as consent forms) to be stored separately from others (such as anonymized raw data files). Digital and paper formats may require different strategies for storage, particularly where researchers may need to update equipment, change offices, or share files with co-investigators during and after the research is completed. Researchers need to plan how best to store and manage project materials when designing the study, so that they can attend to relevant details in the ethics application, and be able to organize and track materials into the future. Where projects are longitudinal in nature, or where comparative analyses occur many years after data are first gathered, these practices may need to be reviewed and adjusted to ensure that data are treated appropriately.

- **Writing and dissemination practices.** When writing the results of projects, researchers must ensure that they abide by obligations made to participants related to how (or whether) they will be identified. This may involve changing real names to pseudonyms, omitting identifying details in cases where people could be identified easily (such as a specific job title), or changing the names of other people or organizations mentioned during data collection (such as a son's name), where those details would inadvertently identify the participant. Photographs, audio files, and other types of data may also need to be omitted or altered to ensure that participants are not identified, unless the participants have chosen to be identified by their image, voice, or other details captured during data collection. The ways that findings (and participants' voices) are represented in publications and other dissemination venues is another key consideration, particularly with respect to how much control participants will have over how their information appears in the final research documents. The timing of the release of results and the specific venues where data will be disseminated are also key issues that may need to be explored with project participants.

More questions? See #16, #27, and #92.