

Chapter 4

Ethical Issues in Qualitative Research

FOCUS YOUR READING

- Researchers are responsible for ensuring that participants are not harmed, privacy is maintained, and the participants have provided informed consent.
- Qualitative researchers do not have clear standards governing their activities.
- Universities rely on review boards to decide which research activities to approve.

If it is not right do not do it; if it is not true do not say it.

—Marcus Aurelius

A few years ago, I was doing a phenomenological study of teenage girls. I was interested in learning how they coped with conflicting messages about doing well in school and not being seen as “too smart.” The school system had approved my proposal, and I had also received permission from the parents of the girls. I promised confidentiality to the girls. My plan called for me to do a minimum of two interviews with each girl. I was well into my second interview with Susan when the tears started to slowly roll down her cheeks. We were talking about how she wanted to do well, but she sensed that the boys might not like her if she was too “brainy.” But then she switched topics and really opened up. She started to tell me about how her stepfather was getting too friendly with her and had touched her in those “special places.” I knew then that I was on very sensitive

ground. Fortunately, or perhaps not so, our scheduled time together was coming to an end. I completed the interview and told her I would be in touch. Now I was in quite a dilemma. What was I to do? I had promised to keep all information confidential, but if her stepfather was sexually abusing her, was I obligated to report it? And to whom? Was she telling me the truth or just trying to “con” me? What would you do?

I tell you this story not to shock you but to get you thinking about the kinds of dilemmas in which you might find yourself when doing qualitative research. Even though I had followed all procedures, received permissions, informed my participants, and promised confidentiality, I had learned some information that troubled me. I felt I had a responsibility to Susan not to reveal the confidence. I also felt I had a responsibility to her if she was being abused. However, I really did not know whether the story she told me was true. Because I was not part of the school system and had no supervisor there, I did not know what to do with the information.

This story illustrates a delicate balance you might face between trying to do what is right in terms of maintaining privacy and, at the same time, recognizing that you have received information that might be damaging to the participant. Should you tell someone? If so, who? What about the promise you made to maintain privacy?

You might not have thought about ethics while you were planning your research. Yet, recently, much has been written on the topic. I want you to think about what kinds of issues you might face and how you would handle them. In this chapter, I introduce you to some of the basic principles associated with ethics and recent controversies concerning universities and monitoring of qualitative research plans. I know you will find the information challenging. I hope it will cause you to think carefully about your research and about the people you study.

The scenario I described above is not something you will encounter on a regular basis. But I began with it to point out that you might find yourself in a situation that is unexpected and for which you will need to use judgment and good sense.

You know that much of qualitative research involves interactions with individuals. As a consequence of developing rapport with participants and getting them to trust you, you may find they open up to you in very personal ways. When this happens, you face an ethical challenge. What should you do with information you obtain that might be damaging to the individual or to others?

You might think that there are clear guidelines available to you as a researcher to assist you if you encounter such challenges, but this is not the case. In your role as a teacher, counselor, administrator, or therapist, you are guided by a code of conduct or set of ethics established by licensing boards or by the organization for which you work. In contrast, researchers do not have a formal licensing body. A number of organizations offer guidelines about ethical standards, but many lack an enforcement mechanism. The *Ethical Standards of the American Educational Research Association* were adopted in 1992 and revised in 2000 to “evoke voluntary compliance by moral persuasion” (American Educational Research Association, 2005). Many universities use review boards to set and enforce standards. Many large school systems have guidelines.

In this chapter, I begin with definitions of ethical behavior. Next, I look at the major principles associated with the ethics of conducting research. I also address problems with the standards. Following, I review some significant examples of unethical behavior in the general scientific community as well as examine inappropriate behavior in the field of qualitative research. I look next at some special problems faced by qualitative researchers. I conclude with the issues of setting and enforcing standards of behavior.

Did You Know



It was in 1906, when the Pure Food and Drug Act was passed, that regulations regarding the use of human subjects in research came into being.

■ Ethical Behavior: Definitions and Background

As I began this chapter, I asked myself, “What is the meaning of ethics and ethical behavior?” Seems straightforward, doesn’t it? In laymen’s terms, we all know what we mean when we say ethics or ethical behavior. I think there are various commonsense responses to the question. It means doing what is right. It means treating people fairly. It means not hurting anyone.

We deal with ethical issues on a daily basis. Should you report someone who cheats on an exam or copies someone else’s writing? Should you return that extra dollar given to you by a clerk or keep a wallet found on the street? Should you give children additional time to finish an exam or provide answers to difficult questions on a test?

Randy Cohen, who writes a weekly column—The Ethicist—for *The New York Times*, provides a popular and accessible vehicle for us to examine our belief system. Here is a recent problem and his response; his tone is wonderful.

One of my grad students copied a term paper from the Internet, cutting and pasting from various uncredited sources. The university’s rules say expulsion or an F in the course is appropriate, but I proposed that she search out the several dozen articles she used to “compose” her paper and write each author an apology. I will mail the letters. My department chair thinks this is unethical—a cruel and unusual punishment. You?

—P. R., Houston

Unusual? Quite likely, but that’s not necessarily a bad thing. A roomy and inexpensive Manhattan apartment is unusual. Cruel? I think not. This cheater is even spared the torment of visiting the post office to mail the apologies. But effectual? I doubt it. And that is key. Your task as a professor is to reinforce a respect for academic integrity and to preserve it in your classroom. I’m skeptical that your method will do either (R. Cohen, 2007).

Cohen’s weekly column illustrates the public’s need for guidance in handling issues they face daily. What Cohen does so well is to present the issue and his response in a no-nonsense, easy-to-understand manner. I do not know who sets his moral compass, but I suspect he does. You can learn more about him through various National Public Radio (NPR) interviews (<http://www.npr.org/programs/atc/ethicist/>). There is no Cohen around for the ethical dilemmas researchers face. We need to rely on various guidelines from several sources. Ultimately, we need to rely on our own moral compass.

Here is a general definition: Ethical behavior represents a set of moral principles, rules, or standards governing a person or a profession. We understand that to be ethical is to “do good and avoid evil.”

This general definition is helpful as we try to understand research ethics. Below, I discuss what I consider to be the major principles of ethical behavior associated with research that involves human subjects, rather than research on animals. In particular, I am interested in qualitative research, although I offer you some background on unethical conduct in general.

Although research on human subjects has been conducted since the Middle Ages, codes of conduct regarding appropriate researcher behavior did not emerge until the 20th century. It was not until the 1960s, when federal government funding became available, that more researchers became interested in school-based research. At first, there were no clear guidelines. But as more research was conducted in schools, it became necessary for many institutions to establish review boards. Universities followed suit and set up procedures to review student research.

■ Major Principles Associated With Ethical Conduct

The principles of ethical conduct that I identify below represent an amalgam gleaned from many sources.

- **Do No Harm.** Of all the principles associated with research ethics, I think it is safe to say that this admonition is the cornerstone of ethical conduct. There should be a reasonable expectation by those participating in a research study that they will not be involved in any situation in which they might be harmed. Although this is the standard we are most concerned about violating, I think it is fairly safe to assume that the research you plan and conduct will not be harmful to participants. This principle is often applied to studies involving drugs or a treatment that might be harmful to participants. You might have read about mistreatment during experiments. The 1971 Stanford Prison Experiment, in which students played the role of guards and prisoners, is one example. When it was found that the guards became increasingly sadistic, the study was terminated. Of course, the kind of qualitative research you plan will not be of this nature. We have become well aware of the potential damage caused by such studies. It is still important, however, for you to make explicit any possible adverse effects of your research.

Bottom Line: It is best to safeguard against doing anything that will harm the participants in your study. If you begin a study and you find that some of your participants seem to have adverse reactions, it is best to discontinue the study, even if it means foregoing your research plan.

- **Privacy and Anonymity.** Any individual participating in a research study has a reasonable expectation that privacy will be guaranteed. Consequently, no identifying information about the individual should be revealed in written or other communication. Further, any group or organization participating in a research study has a reasonable expectation that its identity will not be revealed. I would like you to think about privacy of two kinds: institutional and individual. If you study an institution, how do you keep the information you learn private? Suppose you take pictures of places in the institution and want to

include them in your written product. Suppose the institution you study is sufficiently unusual that it can be identified from a description or from photographs. If you study individuals, you are faced with other challenges. Suppose you have recorded interviews and want to place a hyperlink in your report to the person being interviewed. Will the voice be recognized? Suppose you collaborate with others and maintain files in a database that can be accessed via the Internet, and others gain access. Suppose you use a computer software program that has links to video and audio. How do you guarantee privacy in these cases? Suppose you study individuals of some prominence, and their identities cannot readily be disguised. One idea to consider is to obtain a signed release authorizing you to use such information in your research. With the availability of so much information on the Internet (e.g., YouTube, Facebook), you are faced with challenges that were never considered when the original privacy statements were written. Conversely, you might find yourself facing the opposite problem: Your participants may want their identities revealed. They may want to be acknowledged in your written product. Perhaps they see it as their “15 minutes of fame.” Can you reveal their identities?

Bottom Line: Remove identifying information from your records. Seek permission from the participants if you wish to make public information that might reveal who they are or who the organization is. Use caution in publishing long verbatim quotes, especially if they are damaging to the organization or people in it. Often, these quotes can be located on the Internet and traced to the speaker or author.

- **Confidentiality.** Any individual participating in a research study has a reasonable expectation that information provided to the researcher will be treated in a confidential manner. Consequently, the participant is entitled to expect that such information will not be given to anyone else. Think back to the case of Susan that I presented at the beginning of this chapter. Although I had promised her confidentiality and I had gotten her to open up to me, I now had to deal with information that might prove damaging to her or to others. I chose to investigate the situation further to try to determine the truthfulness of her allegations. Fortunately, she eventually told me that she made the story up to get my attention. During your research, you might learn a considerable amount of personal information because many of the interviews you conduct will be open ended and may move in various directions. As a researcher, you are in a situation that you control. If you sense an interview might be moving in a personal direction, you might have to stop the interview and suggest to the participant that she talk to a counselor or other trusted support person.

Bottom Line: It is your responsibility to keep the information you learn confidential. If you sense that an individual is in an emergency situation, you might decide that you can waive your promise for the good of the individual or of others. You need to be much more sensitive to information that you obtain from minors and others who might be in a vulnerable position.

- **Informed Consent.** Individuals participating in a research study have a reasonable expectation that they will be informed of the nature of the study and may choose whether or not to participate. They also have a reasonable expectation that they will not be

coerced into participation. On the face of it, this might seem to be relatively easy to follow. But if a study is to be done in an organization, individuals within that group (e.g., students, workers) might feel that they cannot refuse when asked. There might be pressure placed on them by peers or by superiors. Although the idea of informed consent appears to be straightforward, there are situations in which informed consent may not be possible. For example, it is more difficult to obtain consent from minors or individuals who do not have a clear understanding of written English or those who are mentally disabled or emotionally fragile. Another issue regarding obtaining informed consent is that your research study—because it is dynamic and subject to twists and turns—might diverge in a direction that causes participants to become uncomfortable or unwilling to continue. Because of this, I believe that the consent people give in advance may not really be “informed.” Recently, researchers have expressed concerns about studying people on the Internet. I have read accounts of individuals who became angry that a researcher was using their discussion board or Listserv for data collection. Whether you lurk in chat rooms or on Listservs or you enter domains of YouTube or Facebook, you are exploring Internet cultures. There is no general procedure to seek consent in these arenas. Researchers are now beginning to explore ways of obtaining consent from such groups.

Bottom Line: Your responsibility is to make sure that participants are informed, to the extent possible, about the nature of your study. Even though it is not always possible to describe the direction your study might take, it is your responsibility to do the best you can to provide complete information. If participants decide to withdraw from the study, they should not feel penalized for so doing. Second, you need to be aware of special problems when you study people online. For example, one concern might be vulnerability of group participants. Another is the level of intrusiveness of the researcher. McCleary (2007) discusses many of these issues from the perspective of social workers; many of these concerns can be transferred to educators.

- **Rapport and Friendship.** Once participants agree to be part of a study, the researcher develops rapport in order to get them to disclose information. I recall when Alice, a student of mine from China, studied the wives of Chinese graduate students who had relocated to a rural college campus. She found herself getting too close to the women she studied. She was concerned about their language difficulties and problems they had adjusting to Western society. Yet, as she became close to these women, she became sad and frustrated that she couldn't do anything about their situation. She was somewhere between rapport and a faked friendship. Duncombe and Jessop (2005) bring out issues related to what they call faking friendship. From their feminist perspective, they suggest that the interviewer might put herself in the position of being a friend so as to get participants to disclose more information than they really want to (pp. 120–121). I think there is a difference between developing rapport and becoming a friend.

Bottom Line: Researchers should make sure that they provide an environment that is trustworthy. At the same time, they need to be sensitive to the power that they hold over participants. Researchers need to avoid setting up a situation in which participants think they are friends with the researcher.

- **Intrusiveness.** Individuals participating in a research study have a reasonable expectation that the conduct of the researcher will not be excessively intrusive. Intrusiveness can mean intruding on their time, intruding on their space, and intruding on their personal lives. As you design a research study, you ought to be able to make a reasonable estimate of the amount of time participation will take. I remember Mary's study of senior female executives with very busy schedules. She needed to make sure that her study would not intrude on their work lives. She scheduled interviews at their offices and tried to limit her interviews to a maximum of one hour. Intrusion into personal space might be an issue for some individuals; they may not want you in their homes or classrooms. You might have to negotiate a neutral location for a discussion. Although you may forgo some important information, the trade-off is worthwhile. Invading personal lives is a very real problem when you are studying the lives of others. Sometimes the conversation gets very personal. I recall a class in which we were practicing interviewing techniques—getting participants to open up and talk to each other. One situation became quite sensitive and one of the class members began to cry. I quickly ended the demonstration, but my eyes were opened to what can happen when rapport develops quickly and when participants have sensitive issues they wish to discuss.

Bottom Line: I don't think there are any easy answers here either. Experience and caution are the watchwords. You might find it difficult to shift roles to neutral researcher, especially if your field is counseling or a related helping profession.

- **Inappropriate Behavior.** Individuals participating in a research study have a reasonable expectation that the researcher will not engage in conduct of a personal or sexual nature. Here, researchers might find themselves getting too close to the participants and blurring boundaries between themselves and others. We probably all know what we mean by inappropriate behavior. We know it should be avoided. Yet, there are documented examples of inappropriate behaviors between teachers and their minor students, between therapists and their patients, and between researchers and their participants.

Bottom Line: If you think you are getting too close to those you are studying, you probably are. Back off and remember that you are a researcher and bound by your code of conduct to treat those you study with respect.

- **Data Interpretation.** A researcher is expected to analyze data in a manner that avoids misstatements, misinterpretations, or fraudulent analysis. The other principles I have discussed involve your interaction with individuals in your study. This principle represents something different. It guides you to use your data to fairly represent what you see and hear. Of course, your own lens will influence you. I am not suggesting that you strive for an objective stance. I think that is more the province of traditional approaches to research. Rather, I am pointing out the potential pitfalls of overinterpreting or misinterpreting the data you collect to present a picture that is not supported by data and evidence.

Bottom Line: You have a responsibility to interpret your data and present evidence so that others can decide to what extent your interpretation is believable.

- **Data Ownership and Rewards.** In general, the researcher owns the work generated. Some researchers choose to archive data and make them available through databanks. Questions have been raised as to who actually owns such data. Some have questioned whether the participants should share in the financial rewards of publishing. Several ethnographers have shared a portion of their royalties with participants. Parry and Mauthner (2004) discuss this issue in their article on the practical, legal, and ethical questions surrounding archived data. They suggest that because qualitative data might be a joint construction between researcher and respondent, there are unique issues related to confidentiality, anonymity, and consent.

Bottom Line: In fact, most researchers do not benefit financially from their writing. It is rare that your work will turn into a bestseller or even be published outside your university. But, if you have a winner on hand, you might think about sharing some of the financial benefits with others.

- **Other Issues.** As you plan your research, you might consider several additional principles raised by some. Roth (2004b) talks about the politics of research application approval and how those who make judgments about research applications are influenced by power and control. The feminist perspective is concerned, to a much greater extent, with power, respect, and risk. Others might take exception to this list. They state the main concern is the ethics of care for our participants and that these traditional ethical standards may not always be appropriate.

■ Problems With the Standards

Enumerating the list of standards is one thing; monitoring and enforcement is another. Governing bodies purport to be neutral and objective in these latter pursuits. However, some believe that applying these criteria to qualitative research is difficult because the standards were originally developed for scientific research. Universities differ considerably in the extent to which they apply the criteria to qualitative research proposals. Many members of these boards have little or no experience with qualitative research. Canella and Lincoln (2007) suggest that regulatory boards create “an illusion of the ethical practice of research” (p. 316). They suggest contradictory positions between a regulatory agency, on the one hand, and a philosophical disposition, on the other (p. 317). Their challenging paper introduces various complex issues. It seems clear to me that the more dynamic and fluid the research, the more difficult it is for review committees to determine whether the proposed research will meet the standards.

Here are some questions to consider.

- Can a written proposal convey a sense of the research to such an extent that a review panel can determine whether the standards will be met?
- How is a review panel to judge a qualitative research proposal in which the researcher is the instrument of research? In which questioning is fluid and dynamic, rather than fixed and static? In which the researcher may modify the plan as she proceeds?
- What happens when the standards are violated?
- How does a review panel that represents the dominant culture at a university evaluate a proposal that does not fit the usual mode? Feminist researchers, among others, are particularly sensitive to the politics of the review process.

You need to be aware of these potential pitfalls as you read the standards and think about your own research plans.

It seems obvious that researchers should pay attention to the principles outlined above. At this point in your reading, I think you will find it helpful to review some of the violations of these principles. First, I look at a few examples of misconduct in the general field of scientific research. Next, I highlight some of the cases in the field of qualitative research.

■ Alleged Misconduct in the General Scientific Community

We would like to believe that all people behave in an ethical manner. In practice, we know this is not true. From the politicians who take bribes, to the clergy who have inappropriate relationships with their parishioners, to the teachers who change grades when pressured, there are all too many examples of individuals who have behaved in unethical ways. While it is true that the vast majority behave ethically, we are no longer shocked or surprised when instances of unethical or inappropriate behavior occur.

Individuals who work in the research field are no different from those in other fields. Most behave ethically, but some do not. Here is an example of an experiment that went drastically astray. The principle of Do No Harm was ignored, overlooked, or forgotten in what is known as the Tuskegee Experiment. In 1972, details of this experiment run by the U.S. Public Health Service became known. The experiment actually began in 1932, when about 400 poor black men with syphilis from Tuskegee, Alabama, were identified for a study about the effects of penicillin on the disease. Even when the drug proved to be a cure in the 1940s, treatment was withheld. The experiment continued for 40 years, and not until the NAACP won a lawsuit in 1973 was some restitution paid. A public apology was finally delivered by President Clinton in 1997. This egregious example, in the name of scientific research, highlights many issues: Individuals without power or status can be mistreated for political or economic reasons; treatment can be denied even when it is shown to be efficacious; government safeguards are not always effective. Several factors are especially troubling about this landmark case: The individuals studied were poor, black men; the study was funded and sanctioned by the government; it took a lawsuit to bring the information to public awareness; the experiment lasted for 40 years; and finally, a public apology to the men in the study and their families was not issued until 65 years later. (For a full account, see National Public Radio's 2002 description of these experiments at <http://www.npr.org/programs/morning/features/2002/jul/tuskegee/>.)

Another principle of ethical behavior is related to data interpretation. You are probably aware of admonitions to interpret data conservatively and not go beyond what the numbers or facts show. Misleading statements are also to be avoided. But what about the researcher who falsifies or manufactures data? What strikes me as so distressing about the following two examples is that the individuals involved were prominent: one a Nobel Prize winner and the other a knighted British psychologist. In his 1992 book *Impure Science*, Bell wrote of the competition for research funds from government and industry and how researchers have falsified data to obtain or keep funding. The case of David Baltimore is especially interesting. As president of the Rockefeller University in the early 1990s, Baltimore, a 1975 Nobel Prize recipient, was accused of research misconduct and cover-up. The allegations were not proven, and Baltimore went on to become president of Cal Tech and the 2007 president of the American Association of the Advancement of Science. His coauthor was accused of fabricating data; the case ultimately went

before the U.S. Congress, and she was barred from receiving grants for 10 years. In 1996, however, the charges were dismissed. What seems clear to me is that high stakes, power, and influence may lead to corruption or the appearance of corruption. Falsifying data or misrepresenting it may seem minor when so much is at stake. For details about the case, read the compelling 1998 account by Kevles. Another example is that of renowned British psychologist Sir Cyril O. Burt. Born in Stratford-upon-Avon in 1883, Burt attended Oxford, worked on intelligence tests, and was chairman of the Psychology Department at University College in London. He was knighted in 1946. Much of his research involved studies of identical twins, and he rose to prominence for the conclusion that identical twins reared apart were closer in intelligence than nonidentical twins reared together. It was not until after his death that others studied his data and concluded that the data were falsified to advance his hypothesis. This case is not completely clear-cut, however, because others reviewed his diaries and did not find any evidence of misrepresentation. Whether or not Burt falsified his data to support his conclusions is unknown. However, it is clear that temptations are there to manipulate data.

While the examples cited are extreme, I bring them to your attention because the researchers who were involved were considered preeminent in their fields. Rather than serving as role models for those in the ranks, these people were alleged to have violated important ethical principles. What seems clear to me from these examples is that when the stakes are high, our ethical compass sometimes goes off kilter.

■ Misconduct in the Qualitative Research Arena

Qualitative researchers have their share of unethical conduct. One case that has recently come to light concerns inappropriate behavior on the part of the researcher. Harry Wolcott, a longtime ethnographer, wrote a case study of a Kwakiutl village and school in 1967, and he has written extensively about qualitative research over the years. In 2002, he wrote about Brad, a young man he studied and befriended. *The Sneaky Kid and Its Aftermath* chronicles his “intimate and tumultuous” relationship with Brad. We learned from Roth’s 2003 review that this book is actually a first-person account of the sexual intimacy between the researcher and the research participant. Subsequently, we learned that the young man beat up the researcher and set fire to his house (see also Plummer’s 2004 review). That Wolcott continues to make contributions to the field of qualitative research is quite a puzzle to me. While Baltimore and Burt seemed to have weathered the storms surrounding their alleged data falsification, Wolcott himself admitted to the behavior and wrote about it publicly.

Another interesting case is that of Laud Humphreys. This case involves the principles of confidentiality and informed consent. During the 1970s, Humphreys acted as a lookout in a study of homosexuals in public places. He took information about them, especially their license plate numbers. Using this information, he later visited these men, saying they were selected for a random survey. While he violated the two principles mentioned above, some believe that the greatest damage had to do with violation of the Do No Harm principle.

Tolich (2002) discussed issues regarding internal confidentiality. In particular, he talked about confidentiality within connected groups. These groups might be families, couples, or mentors and apprentices. When various informants who are members of a particular group become

aware of what other insiders are saying, confidentiality might be compromised. Although Tolich himself didn't violate codes of ethical conduct, he argued that institutional committees need to be aware of internal confidentiality to the same extent that they are aware of external confidentiality.

What appears clear is that researchers may find themselves knowingly or unknowingly violating research codes of ethics. In this next section, I discuss special problems associated with qualitative research and ethical conduct.

■ What Are the Special Problems for the Qualitative Researcher?

Principles and theory are good, as far as they go. But it is now time for me to get practical. I'd like to consider several different kinds of research projects in which you might become involved. The first issue concerns potential difficulties in maintaining privacy and keeping information confidential. This example comes from a study a student of mine conducted several years ago. Judy and several of her colleagues had taken the initiative to start a preschool in a poor area in a large city adjacent to the suburb in which they lived. They had worked for several years, raising funds and getting the school operational. Data were gathered, primarily through interviews with the five founders of the organization. She went through the appropriate channels to receive approval. Now, some years later, I think about the potential ethical issues regarding this study. I see a possible dilemma for Judy. While she had promised the organization privacy, it was common knowledge in Judy's community and the community in which the school existed that she had started this school. When she published her findings, even though she disguised names and locations, how could it be expected that many would not know which school and which leaders were interviewed? How could she reasonably maintain privacy and confidentiality in this situation?

I suspect this might happen fairly often when case studies are conducted. Imagine that you are located in a very remote area. If you study a particular school or classroom, it might be impossible to disguise the identity of the school. Is this a serious violation? Perhaps the problem only arises if the results turn out to be negative in some way. If not, I think the researcher needs to take extra precautions to try to avoid revealing identifying characteristics about the case.

Another student of mine designed a phenomenological study of the lived experiences of families with autistic children. In 2008, as I write this chapter, the issue of autism dominates the news. Estimates on the number of autistic children have risen dramatically. But in the year 2000, when Paul conceived of this study, autism was not talked about very much. Those who had studied the topic focused on the children, but Paul had another idea in mind. He wanted to study family life. He was the president of a school for autistic children. His research involved studying the lived experiences of the families. His participants were recruited from the school he directed. When he wrote his findings, he needed to disguise identifiable information about the school. In fact, those who knew him were well aware of his role at that school. Paul's study is another example of problems of maintaining privacy. A second issue with his study was how to ensure that participation was voluntary. And finally, because he planned to go into homes, he needed to make sure to avoid being intrusive. I do not think participants were unwilling to be studied, but if they did not want to, I think it might have been difficult for them to deny his request, given his relationship to the school. You can see that because of Paul's position in the organization, families whose children were at the

school might have felt that they could not say no. As I remember, however, Paul had quite the opposite situation. Because he was the father of an autistic child, other families felt comfortable opening up to him. Paul was able to avoid ethical dilemmas and instead presented a candid and revealing picture of their lives. I remember Paul sitting in my office in awe of the cooperation he received from these families and the insight he gained into their lives and his own.

These real-life examples should help you see that the divide between what is written on paper and what you encounter is sometimes great. So much of qualitative research evolves as you proceed with data collection and analysis. Plans that you make in your office or at your computer in the quiet of your own space may shift and turn as you proceed in the real world. As you learn about being a qualitative researcher, you might find yourself facing many dilemmas. McGinn and Bosacki (2004) supported the idea of addressing ethical issues in research courses. Here are some questions you should think about.

How do you balance the need to respect those you study and not see them as just objects or subjects? Much of experimental research talks about drawing random samples of subjects. These nameless and faceless individuals are only there to serve as representatives of larger populations, to which you will draw inferences. But qualitative research is not like that. In fact, that is why I keep using the term *participant* rather than *subject*. That is by design. The people you study are real people. Unless you are on the Internet, you will see them. You might even take a liking to them. You might see their personal plights, as Alice did when she studied the wives of Chinese students. But you need to be very cautious about getting too close to the people you study. You cannot save them if they are sick. You cannot offer them counseling if they are troubled.

How do you deal with the politics of review boards? Roth (2004a) cited four fictional case studies related to ethics, politics, and power. He argued, in fact, that he couldn't really write about actual case studies because he would need institutional approval. He concluded that ethics and politics are inseparable. You probably never really thought that research and politics were connected. As I sat at my computer in June 2008, I was reminded only too vividly of the discussions concerning the "gold standard" of research studies (i.e., randomized double-blind experiments). One writer on a qualitative Listserv suggests it is the qualitative research community that needs to demonstrate the appropriateness and rigor of our designs to the larger community. So it is that review boards struggle to determine how best to judge qualitative research proposals. You need to be aware of this as you proceed.

Much of qualitative research involves observing individuals in their natural settings. You can think of these observations as occurring in public spaces. I remember a student who studied how students arranged their physical space in a large university library. She was interested in the extent to which they exhibited open tendencies or closed themselves off by surrounding themselves with books, coats, and papers. She did not obtain consent from these individuals because they were in view of everyone. Maybe she was invading their privacy. You can imagine all kinds of public spaces in which you might want to study people: people at sporting events, schoolchildren on a playground, parents and children interacting at McDonald's. I have spent quite a bit of time observing discipline strategies of young mothers as they interact with their children in various public spaces. I do not think you need to obtain consent in these situations. If you approach the people you are studying, they might think you are crazy. Anthropologists often traveled to exotic lands to study cultures other than their own. Today, researchers are more likely to study Internet cultures. When you are in cyberspace, you don't necessarily know who else is there. And they may not know that you are there.

I have mentioned special problems with regard to conducting studies on the Internet. We know that some people resent others using their discussion groups or other communities as “data” to be mined, as though the writers are not really people. Seeking permission is often problematic. Sometimes you don’t know who the people are. Other times, people report that they feel violated. I think we have much more to learn about this.

Technology seems so wonderful. Writing our papers on computers seems to be the desired approach. I can’t imagine going back to a typewriter or a pad and pen. Yet, with these technological advances come so many responsibilities. Here are some things to think about when doing qualitative research. Many of us use videos, cell phones, or digital cameras to capture the environments we study. But when you publish your study, how do you preserve anonymity when using video? Prettyman and Jackson (2006) highlighted some important ethical questions. For example, how do they guarantee anonymity when using videos and when linking data through a software program that links audio and video in presentations? New technology lets you link quotes directly back to data, which makes it increasingly easy to find where data come from.

You may wonder how you can possibly manage all these issues. In the next section, I provide you with information about how many universities handle the research conducted by faculty and students.

■ Setting and Maintaining Standards

As students, you are bound by the code of conduct and ethical standards imposed by your college or university. Most colleges or universities have established Institutional Review Boards (IRBs). An IRB is a committee whose job is to review, approve, and monitor research involving human subjects. It is designed to provide critical oversight. Actually, IRBs are governed by a federal regulation under The Research Act of 1974. All institutions that receive federal funds, whether directly or indirectly, require IRB approval for all research. When the legislation was passed, research was considered to be of a biomedical or laboratory nature. As social science research has moved away from the purely experimental, review boards have offered interpretations of the rules. You can read examples of the interpretations, as well as some vignettes, at the National Science Foundation (n.d.) Web site. IRBs wield considerable power within a university. It will be your responsibility to prepare a research proposal in such a manner that an IRB will be able to determine whether human subjects are protected from many of the violations mentioned earlier. Many have developed comprehensive instructions and procedures for conducting research.

Typically, an IRB will ask you to prepare a research proposal explaining your study. In addition to preparing a proposal, the board will usually want you to prepare an informed consent letter or form to be signed by all participants. Participation in a research study should be voluntary. Typically, your research will involve either identifying an organization or group you wish to study or identifying individuals who represent a particular group or have a particular characteristic. In the first case, you might gain approval from the organization. However, you must also obtain approval from individuals within the organization. Individuals should not feel as though they are coerced and must participate in a particular study. This may seem straightforward, but the voluntary nature of participation needs to be stressed by you. On the other hand, you might be studying individuals with certain characteristics or traits. In such cases, you would identify them from various sources and then seek their consent.

Here are two examples that might help you see this more clearly. You plan to study educational programs in an adult training facility. You seek approval from the director of the facility. He gives his approval. All participants in the facility are volunteers. Everyone will have to complete an informed consent letter. Or, you decide to investigate teacher interaction within several schools. You receive approval from the school district and from the principals of the several schools. You will still need to obtain signed informed consent letters from the individuals at those facilities.

If your study involves non-English speakers or those with certain disabilities that might make reading difficult, a responsible adult would need to sign the consent.

In some cases, researchers choose an “opt-out” letter rather than an informed consent letter. Such a letter would say something like this: We plan to conduct research at your school on the topic of forming friendships. Your child might be chosen to participate. The time involved will be less than one hour. If you do not want your child to participate, please sign the attached and return it to the school office.

If your research involves studying people who are in public spaces, obtaining informed consent becomes quite tricky. I recall taking my class to study parent-child interactions in a large supermarket. I instructed them to enter the grocery store, obtain a cart, and pretend to be shopping. They were then to find a parent and child together and surreptitiously follow them. We did not get consent because we were in a public space. This entire class project backfired, however. The store manager noticed me lurking at the front of the store, and he thought I was someone from the central office observing him. Eventually, he came up to me and asked what I was doing. One of my students came to me and told me that he had seen a shoplifter but did not confront him. In hindsight, I believe I should have notified the manager of what we were doing. Whether or not we need to obtain informed consent to observe individual behaviors or listen to other people’s conversations is somewhat open to question.

Studying individuals on the Internet has also been the subject of some discussion. We can think of the Internet as either public or private space. I do not believe that IRBs have come to a clear decision on how to treat this kind of data. Increasingly, qualitative researchers have developed projects that involve studying individuals they encounter on the Internet. They might want to study people on MySpace or YouTube, or they might want to study individuals who participate in chat rooms. Whether this is public or private space is unclear. But when a researcher intrudes into private space, resentment may occur. One member of a group said in anger: “I certainly don’t feel . . . it is a safe environment . . . and I will not open myself up to be dissected by students or scientists.” Eysenbach and Till (2001) raised questions about privacy and informed consent. In discussing informed consent, they talked about both passive and active research strategies. Passive research might involve observing communication patterns. Obtaining permission is not needed. In contrast, active research might involve more direct involvement of the researcher. They cautioned that those on the Internet do not expect to be participants in research studies and might even resent a researcher “lurking” in their online community. They offered two suggestions for obtaining informed consent. First, they suggested sending an e-mail giving people the opportunity to withdraw from the list. Alternatively, they talked about asking individuals retroactively if they want to withdraw from the analysis. They did not think obtaining permission from the list owner is adequate. This is similar to getting permission from the head of an organization to have people in the organization participate.

Researchers and institutional review boards must primarily consider whether research is intrusive and has potential for harm, whether the venue is perceived as “private” or “public” space, how confidentiality can be protected, and whether and how informed consent should be obtained.

Eysenbach and Till (2001) also raised questions with regard to privacy. Quoting the exact words of a participant in a newsgroup may violate privacy and confidentiality even if identifying information is removed. You might wonder how this is the case. They suggest that powerful search engines might enable someone to identify the original source, even if the researcher is not able to. It is actually not so simple to distinguish between public and private space.

■ Problems With Review Boards

It seemed so simple. Universities would establish boards to review research conducted by faculty and students. The boards would develop a set of standards for research. When IRBs came into being in the 1970s, there was general agreement about what constituted solid scientific research, so most boards adopted standards to monitor research of that type. But as I have discussed throughout this book, many types of qualitative research take a philosophically different position from traditional research. Many individuals who serve on IRBs are not trained in this type of research and may find it inadequate. Many IRBs have been slow to change. Hemmings (2006) added the point that there are different ethical frameworks and orientations toward what she calls “ethical principles of respect for persons, beneficence, and justice” (p. 12). Finally, Cannella (2004) suggested that qualitative researchers should become activists with regard to such boards.

Because a qualitative research proposal often lacks specificity with regard to questions to be asked or observations to be made, some boards find it difficult to determine whether violations might occur. There is some controversy in the field as to whether, and in what ways, IRBs can remain objective, while at the same time recognizing that qualitative research is, of necessity, fluid and dynamic.

In fact, some lament that IRBs struggle with finding ways to accommodate qualitative research modes, while at the same time enforcing what they perceive to be standards of appropriate conduct for all research. In much the same manner that I suggest that we need to modify our evaluation standards, here, too, I suggest that IRBs should find ways to accommodate what Mauthner et al. (2005) called “qualitative research that is characterized by fluidity and inductive uncertainty” (p. 2). They continue, “most ethical judgments applied to qualitative research designs are negotiated within an organisation’s own internal regulatory body” (p. 4).

Lincoln and Tierney (2004) discussed how IRBs can impede the conduct of qualitative research. They suggested that proposals for such studies often have to be revised numerous times to move them in a more conventional direction. They believed this demonstrates either lack of understanding or prejudice toward nontraditional research. Tierney and Corwin (2007) suggested that IRB regulations are becoming stricter as universities anticipate litigation. They believe that these increased restrictions may impinge on the academic freedom of the researcher. T. Johnson’s

(2008) personal narrative about her difficulty receiving IRB approval for her dissertation is extremely revealing. She had planned to study the phenomenon of sexual dynamics in the classroom. Of course, she knew this was a sensitive topic, but she had the backing of her committee. She quickly learned that she had “forgotten the necessity of performing docility” (p. 213). I think she felt betrayed by her institution that, she said, “had once set me free” (p. 213). She noted that one reason she faced so much difficulty is that her work did not fit the standard concept of scientific methodology.

Ultimately, we are our own monitors and judges of appropriate behavior. Guidelines are helpful; they remind us of the areas to concentrate on. They pinpoint specific principles we might not have considered. IRBs serve as monitors for universities, but they also are political beings. Requirements set by government agencies, private organizations, or school systems also attempt to keep us on track. As a researcher entering the field, you have an obligation to those who provide the valuable information for your study. It is easy to focus on your study and what you need; those you study are equally important. Koro-Ljungberg, Gemignani, Brodeur, and Kmiec (2007) suggested “researchers’ ethical decision making and freedom of choice need to be separate from discussions related to researchers’ compliance, duties, and institutional responsibilities” (Abstract). Boman and Jevne (2000), in their narrative about being charged with an ethical violation, offered this suggestion: “The stories about the dilemmas and the conflicts of our research experiences, often left untold, are paramount to advancing our notions about what constitutes ethical and unethical conduct in qualitative research endeavors” (p. 554).

You might be interested to learn what happened to Susan. She contacted me the next time I was at the school and asked to speak to me. She assured me that she was just testing me to see whether I kept my word. After further questioning, I came to believe that she was now telling me the truth. I only wish all dilemmas would end so easily. Of course, I will never really know which version of the truth Susan was telling.

■ Summary

Ethical behavior is defined as “a set of moral principles, rules, or standards governing a person or profession.” Major principles of ethical conduct include that the researcher should do no harm, that privacy and anonymity of participants must be protected, that confidentiality of information must be maintained, that informed consent of participants needs to be obtained (including assurance that participation is voluntary, with the opportunity to withdraw from the research), that inappropriate behavior must be avoided, and that data must be interpreted honestly without distortion. Finally, the extent to which participants are to share in data ownership and any benefits from the research must be considered.

Although the principles seem straightforward, a series of examples were provided that illustrate the difficulty in adhering to the principles, often because situations may have a complex array of conflicting interests. The role of the IRB was discussed, along with the dilemmas sometimes faced by qualitative researchers in meeting the requirements of the IRB.

INDIVIDUAL ACTIVITY

Purpose: To examine the major principles of ethical conduct.

Activity: Answer the following questions, then share your ideas with the class.

1. *Dealing With Confidentiality.* You conduct a phenomenological study of teenage students from a suburban school system. You conduct an in-depth interview with a teenager to whom you have promised confidentiality. She tells you she is depressed and plans to commit suicide. You believe she means it. Can you break your promise? If so, who do you tell?
2. *Dealing With Anonymity.* You conduct a case study on a small school in a remote location. When you write up the results, it is almost impossible to disguise the school, yet you promised you would treat the data anonymously. How should you deal with this?
3. *Dealing With Inappropriate Relationships.* You conduct an ethnographic study of a young adult over a long period. Your fieldwork takes you to his home, his school, the bars he frequents, his church, and so on. Over time, you become very attached to him. You find your friendship leads to feelings toward him that you cannot control. You know that getting too close is inappropriate, but you find it difficult to control your feelings. What should you do?
4. *Dealing With Informed Consent.* Your plan is to study educational practice among a particular tribe of Native Americans. You approach the leader of the school on the reservation. He gives his permission to study students and teachers. However, when you attempt to get the participation of these groups, no one is willing to sign your permission form. They are willing to talk to you, but they do not trust what you might do with the form. Even though you assure them that you will keep the information private, they see you as someone who represents the leadership and thus are mistrustful. What should you do? How do you convince them that they need to sign the form for you to continue?
5. *Dealing With a Reluctant IRB.* You attend a state school in the Midwest. You have heard that the IRB is quite traditional, yet your study is about teenagers and illegal substances. You have access to a number of individuals through a recreational center. You feel sure that you can get participants to be in your study and open up to you, but you do not want to plan a detailed list of questions because you want the conversation to evolve. You receive support from your advisor and encouragement from your committee members. How do you write a proposal that will get approved?
6. *Dealing With Privacy.* You interview college students about life on campus. One student tells you that his roommate seems seriously depressed and spends much time on the Internet looking at sites for making bombs. Do you tell someone?

Evaluation: Look at how students are able to resolve ethical dilemmas.