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## **Moralism and the Situated character of Qualitative Research Practice**

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### **Background**

Ethics has long been a topic for methodological reflection and discussion among social scientists in education and other fields, but in recent years it has come to be treated by many qualitative researchers as a central concern. This is one aspect of what can be referred to as 'moralism' or 'ethicism'. There are several reasons for the increasing salience of research ethics. One is the fact that the growth of ethical regulation in the field of health research has spread out into other areas of inquiry, including social and educational research. This is a development that has particularly sharp consequences for qualitative research, because the model of inquiry on which regulatory guidelines and arrangements are based is often at odds with it. Another reason for the increasing centrality of ethics is that the fragmentation of qualitative research into a diverse array of paradigms has exacerbated differences in attitude about what counts as ethical research practice, turning these into fundamental philosophical and political conflicts. Finally, the increased use of visual and online data has introduced some distinctive problems, or given old problems a new form.

### **Research Questions**

A first question will be: what is research ethics? The meaning of the word 'ethics' is by no means well-defined and variations in its meaning will be briefly explored. Research ethics is a form of occupational ethics, and the implications of this will also be examined, pointing out that comparison with media ethics could be more appropriate than with medical ethics. There are also issues about what counts, and what should not count, as research, particularly in the field of qualitative educational inquiry; and it will be argued that this is of ethical relevance. There has been a tendency for discussions of research ethics to be primarily concerned with the relations of researchers with the people they study, emphasizing notions like informed consent. While these are certainly important, making them central is a key aspect of what we are referring to as moralism. Another aspect of this is a tendency to emphasise procedures or principles, and to neglect the situated character of methodological decisions. It is particularly important to recognise that ethical judgements are rarely unproblematic, and can be subject to fundamental disagreement. This arises both from conflicts among different ethical principles and from differences in the interpretation of each principle in particular contexts. At the same time, most of the ethical issues that arise in qualitative research are of low importance, when compared with those relating to both medical and educational practice.

### **Methods**

In exploring the nature of research ethics and critically examining 'moralism' in research ethics we will draw systematically on the philosophical literature, and on the literatures dealing with research ethics in the social sciences as well as in education. We will build on the views to be found there, but also subject them to careful assessment, developing a distinctive account of the nature and importance of research ethics. While this is not an empirical paper, we will use examples from our own research experience and from the literature to illustrate some of the dilemmas that can face researchers. At the same time, we will caution against the use of 'atrocious stories' in bolstering estimates of the significance of ethical issues in social and educational research. Many of these stories come from the medical field and involve caricatures, as for example in the case of the Tuskegee syphilis study. In a similar way, discussions of 'ethical incidents' within social science often perpetuate significant misinterpretations of the facts involved, as well as involving ethical interpretations that are open to challenge.

## **Frame**

The analytical framework will be developed during the course of the paper, though it will draw on those approaches - such as casuistic, situationist and particularist ethics - which have emphasised that judgments about ethical issues are always made case-by-case within the context of particular activities that have distinctive goals, and in circumstances where a variety of considerations have to be balanced against one another. Another important resource will be those contributions to philosophical ethics that have challenged moralism, for example some of the writings of Bernard Williams. These relate closely to an important contrast in ethical attitude to be found within social scientific discussions of research ethics in the past, between what might be referred to as moralistic and Machiavellian orientations. We will discuss these contributions to ethical theory against the background of the more usual philosophical approaches appealed to in discussions of research ethics, namely deontological and consequentialist perspectives, as well as less commonly mentioned alternatives such as virtue ethics and the ethics of care.

## **Research findings**

A first element of our argument will be about the nature of research ethics. We will explore the different meanings of 'ethics', in everyday and philosophical usage. A second point will be that, as a form of occupational ethics, the primary principle that should govern research is dedication to the goal of pursuing knowledge effectively. Issues to do with how the people studied, or others (such as funders, university managers, colleagues, and students), should be treated come after this, even though they are extremely important. The main part of our argument will be that, contrary to what is implied by moralism, there is no such thing as an ethical decision: there are only decisions that involve ethical considerations. And there are many other sorts of consideration that must be taken into account: methodological, prudential, and legal. Our overall conclusion will be that it is important to think carefully about what 'research ethics' means, to be aware of the conflicting principles that come under that heading, that the distinctive and primary duty of the researcher is to pursue knowledge, and that the situated character of qualitative research in education has important implications for how we should make ethical judgments about our own work and that of others.