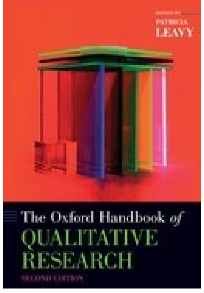

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CHAPTER

4 The Centrality of Ethics in Qualitative Practice

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Abstract

This chapter outlines and illustrates some of the main ethical issues that have received attention in the literature—such as minimization of harm, respect for individual autonomy, and the preservation of privacy. It then examines why research ethics has come to be treated by qualitative researchers as increasingly central to their work. Key factors include the rise of ethical regulation and the diversification of approaches to qualitative inquiry, with a tendency for some recent approaches to treat ethics as fundamental to its very nature. In the final part of the chapter, it is noted that there is an important sense in which ethical commitments are indeed central to research: Inquiry must be underpinned by epistemic values and phrónēsis that facilitate the production of knowledge. However, it is argued that the increasingly common tendency to make central those principles concerned with how the people being studied should be treated constitutes a form of moralism, this being characterized as the *vice of overdoing morality*. The chapter closes with an attempt to outline the proper role that research ethics ought to play in qualitative research.

Keywords: ethical principles, situated judgments, ethical regulation, moralism, phrónēsis, ethics committees, qualitative research, knowledge production, objectivity ethical principles, situated judgments, ethical regulation, moralism, phrónēsis, ethics committees, qualitative research, knowledge production, objectivity ethical principles, situated judgments, ethical regulation, moralism, phrónēsis, ethics committees, qualitative research, knowledge production, objectivity

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Introduction

IN recent years research ethics has come to be treated as much more central to the research process than it was in the past, particularly in the case of qualitative inquiry. Social researchers have long been concerned with ethical issues, and there is a substantial literature dating from at least the 1960s concerned with how access is to be gained, what harm can come to participants in particular sorts of research, how the autonomy of the participants should be respected, what sorts of reciprocity should be involved between researcher and researched, what should and should not be included in research reports in order to respect privacy, and so on. However, generally speaking, until quite recently ethics was seen as an ancillary matter: as important but not central to the very task of research. In recent years, this has changed significantly.

I will explore this change later and assess it. First, however, I will outline the nature of qualitative research ethics and some of the debates that surround it.

What Is Qualitative Research Ethics?

Most discussions of research ethics focus primarily on how researchers should treat the people they are studying or from whom they obtain data. A number of principles are usually identified here, such as minimizing harm, respecting people's autonomy, avoiding exploitation, and preserving their privacy. There are also some procedures, notably securing *informed consent*, that are frequently used and sometimes seen as defining what is required if research is to be ethical. In this section I will focus on minimizing harm and protecting privacy, as well as giving attention to the notion of informed consent and the issues of confidentiality and anonymization.

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Minimizing Harm

One of the most important ethical concerns in carrying out any research relates to any potential for harm involved. This concern has been central to much discussion of research ethics generally, especially in the field of medicine, where research often involves painful, and perhaps even dangerous, interventions: the administration of drugs or surgical treatments of various kinds. But harm is an issue that arises in other areas of investigation as well, including where qualitative research methods are employed.

It is not straightforward to identify what counts as harm. Potential threats of harm arising from research can fall into the following categories:

Pain, physical injury, and permanent disability

Psychological damage, for instance, emotional distress, erosion of self-confidence, stress-related illness

Material damage of some kind, for example loss of freedom through imprisonment, dismissal from a job, reduction in income or wealth, damage to property

Damage to reputation or status or to relations with significant others, for example through the disclosure of information that was previously unknown to some relevant audience

Damage to a project in which people are engaged, to some group or organization to which they belong, or perhaps even to some institution or occupation in which they participate

The fact that serious harm of the kinds just listed *could* be produced by research does not imply that it is common or is usually very likely. Indeed, it seems that in most qualitative work the danger of significant harm of any of these types is low and its occurrence has been rare. But this judgment assumes, among other things, that it is possible to assess the seriousness of harm with a reasonable degree of reliability and/or consensus. This is also required if we are to make defensible decisions, when doing research, about whether risking some potential harm is justifiable. Some accounts of research ethics require that harm should be entirely avoided, but given the range of types of potential harm, of varying levels of seriousness, it is frequently impossible to avoid the risk of harm completely. Judgment must be made about the level of risk involved and about the seriousness of the harm that could occur. Although making such judgments is not straightforward and is open to dispute, in my view it is possible to do so in ways that are reasonable under the circumstances (Hammersley and Traianou, 2012, ch. 3). However, some types of study are generally seen as involving heightened risk for participants. Thus, research topics can be more or less "sensitive" (Renzetti & Lee, 1993), specific sorts of data are viewed as involving danger, and some kinds of participants are often believed to be more vulnerable and therefore seen as needing protection.[1] In the case of the use of visual methods with children, for example, significant ethical concerns relate to the publication of images. The fear is that these images could be misused, that the children pictured will be immediately recognizable to people who already know them, or perhaps that the children will become identifiable by others and that this could have negative consequences. Various strategies are used by researchers to minimize this danger. ↳ p. 88 For example, Flewitt (2005) mentioned blurring faces to protect identities, as well as the possibility of producing sketches of video stills and photographs that minimize identifiability. However, these techniques have themselves been challenged on ethical grounds, for instance, as "an example of the 'Othering' of young children in research" (Nutbrown, 2010, p. 3). The response of many researchers who use visual data to these risks of harm is to take precautions that seem reasonable in the circumstances and very often to obtain informed consent from participants, as far as this is possible. The people being studied are not the only ones who can be harmed by research. Others include organizations from which funds were obtained, institutions within which researchers work, colleagues in those institutions, journals or publishers, broader groups or categories of person with whom the researcher has not had direct contact but who might be affected by publication of the findings, and even researchers themselves (see Lee, 1995; Lee-Treweek & Linogle, 2000; Lyng, 1998). Indeed, in some contexts qualitative researchers may be exposed to the risk of physical harm, whether that of assault (Jacobs, 2006; Kelly, 2004) or the risk of disease (Lankshear, 2000). Warwick (1992) mentioned two other relevant types of harm in relation to researchers: legal jeopardy, the danger of prosecution and even imprisonment; and the psychological effects arising from engaging in deception and manipulation, both in terms of feelings of guilt and self-doubt and in terms of effects on personal behavior outside research contexts (see also Homan, 1982, p. 117). One context in which these dangers take on particular significance is where research is carried out in a team: Here, the individuals taking on a leadership role will be responsible, at least to some degree, for the welfare of their junior colleagues (Bloor, Fincham, & Sampson, 2010).

Respecting Autonomy

It is often argued that in carrying out research, people’s autonomy, in other words their capacity and right to make decisions about their own lives, should be respected. This value underpins the frequently emphasized requirement of *informed consent*.[2]

However, gaining informed consent is not always necessary, for example in relation to what is in the public domain. Furthermore, it is not always possible, and it is not clear that it is ever *fully* achievable (see Hammersley & Traianou, 2012, ch. 4). Where it is believed to be required, in principle, but is not possible, researchers are faced with a decision about whether to abandon their investigations or to continue without the consent of the people being studied. This issue may arise, for instance, where the real names and contact addresses of participants are not known (as in some online research, see Buchanan, 2010; Sveningsson-Elm, 2009), where there is a high turnover of participants, or where seeking informed consent would seriously disrupt the processes being studied. Such problems can be faced, in particular, in some forms of online research.

Among social science researchers, there has been much debate around whether *covert* research is ever justified and, if so, under what conditions (Bulmer, 1982; Herrera, 1999; Leo, 1996). Some commentators argue that it is virtually never legitimate (Bok, 1978; Homan, 2001; Shils, 1959; Warwick, 1982). Others insist that covert research is an acceptable and necessary strategy in particular research settings (Calvey, 2017, 2018; Douglas, 1976; Homan, 1980; Roulet et al., 2017). These discussions have identified a range of considerations that must be taken into account. In my view, however, any judgment about whether covert research is legitimate must be made in relation to specific cases rather than being ↳ formulated either as a general prohibition or as a global permissive statement. This is because covertness can vary significantly and so, too, can conditions in the field that are relevant to making a judgment about its legitimacy.

As already noted, there are some types of research where the requirement of informed consent may not apply. This is true in the case of publicly available documents or observation in settings that are public; however, as I will discuss later, issues exist regarding what counts as public or private. These issues arise in some forms of online research, as well as in more traditional varieties. Where informed consent is judged to be a requirement, there must be reflection on how it can best be secured: what is needed if people are to be properly *informed* (how much information should be supplied, how should people’s level of understanding be gauged, and so on) and how can it be ensured that people are in a position to freely *consent* or decline to be involved in the research? In the context of formal interviews, this may be relatively straightforward. It is much less so where access to a setting is being negotiated to observe events there and to engage participants in informal conversations. Gatekeepers may exert considerable control over access to settings, effectively speaking on behalf of others involved there. So, the question arises: Is *their* informed consent sufficient, or does the informed consent of all participants need to be secured, and, if so, how is this to be achieved?

Moreover, there are often significant cultural differences in views about who can and should give consent for who to be involved in what. In many Western societies, it is usually assumed that, in principle, adults should be treated as free agents in terms of their decisions, even if this is curtailed in particular institutional or group settings. By contrast, in the case of children and that of adults who have learning disabilities or mental health problems, there are disputes centering on their capacity to consent in a manner that takes account of their own interests (Farrell, 2005; Heath et al., 2007). Finally, in some non-Western cultures and in some subcultures within Western societies, autonomy is given little weight. The head of a kin group or a community leader may be regarded as having the proper authority to give permission for members of the family or community to participate in research. And, once permission has been granted, there may be an obligation of those members to cooperate with the researcher. Such cultural differences are important in ethical as well as in practical terms and can pose serious difficulties: Should the researcher respect the conventions of the established culture or insist that individuals freely consent?

Finally, another important issue concerns by what means consent is obtained, in other words what counts, and should count, as consent having been given. Here, questions exist about whether there can be implicit as well as explicit consent (Herrera, 1999) and about whether explicit consent can be oral or must take the form of a written contract. Aside from the question of whether the people concerned are literate, there is cultural variation in interpretations of oral and written agreements. For example, insistence on written consent may be regarded as insulting or threatening by some people and may have undesirable effects on the research relationship (see, for example, Colic-Peisker, 2004, p. 88).[3]

Privacy

In some important respects, the conflict between the demand for publicity built into the mission of social science and a commitment to respecting privacy is at its sharpest in the case of qualitative research. It makes a considerable difference whether what is being ↳ studied is a public or a private setting, and this distinction can also be applied to the sorts of information that a researcher is seeking. But how is what is public and what is private to be determined? This is far from straightforward and can be a matter of dispute. Researchers' judgments about privacy may be affected by the field relationships that develop around them or those that they are concerned with cultivating (see Hey, 2002; Hudson, 2004). Interview questions, the use of diaries, or the collection of visual data may result in "disclosure of behaviours or attitudes which would normally be kept private and personal, which might result in offence or lead to social censure or disapproval, and/or which might cause the respondent discomfort to express" (Wellings et al., 2000, p. 256). Here, too, judgments about what is private, how private it is, and to what extent it is appropriate to try to elicit information about it must be made.

Equally important in discussions about privacy is the ethical question of whether it is legitimate to investigate a particular topic that is seen as *sensitive*, in other words a topic that touches on private matters, as Goodrum and Keys (2007) noted in discussing studies of bereavement and abortion. A related question is whether it is acceptable to study a topic that others, perhaps including the people from whom data are to be collected, are likely to regard as private, irrespective of whether the researcher holds this view. As Renzetti and Lee (1993) pointed out, however, predictions of what will prove to be sensitive inquiries as far as participants are concerned are open to error, and judgments regarding sensitivity, even about the same topic, will vary across audiences. For instance, as they noted, some groups—religious fundamentalists, for example—"quite literally regard research into their beliefs and activities as anathema" (Renzetti & Lee, 1993, p. 6). And this sort of tension, sometimes formulated in terms of conflicting "ways of knowing," has been at the center of debates about research on "indigenous cultures" (see Chilisa, 2009; Denzin, Lincoln, & Smith, 2008; Smith, 1999; Walker et al., 2006).

One of the areas where privacy has been a particular issue is online qualitative research, especially the kind that employs naturally occurring online data. While the nature and ethos of the Internet can give rise to the assumption that it is a public domain or sphere, in which whatever is available can automatically be treated as open to legitimate use by researchers, there is considerable variation in the character of websites and the material they contain.[4] Judgments about their status as public or private must be made and are frequently contentious. Furthermore, as Allen (1996) pointed out, different parts of the same site can vary in this respect. Therefore, as with physical locations, there is a range of considerations that may need to be taken into account in deciding what is and is not private or *how* private it is. One criterion concerns the nature of the material: the extent to which it relates to the sorts of experience, activities, or locations that would generally be deemed private. This is not always clear-cut. For example, in her study of a Swedish Web community, Sveningsson Elm (2009, p. 82) argued that the users' practices suggested that they did not consider their personal pages—including their photo albums, diaries, and personal profiles—private. By contrast, Hudson and Bruckman (2005) argued that "people in public online environments often act as if these environments were private"(p. 298). Another criterion is the degree to which the website is openly accessible to anyone. In this respect, too, there may be variations across different parts of the same website, with some content hidden and only available to those invited to gain access, for example private rooms within publicly accessible chatrooms (see Bakardjieva & Freenberg, 2001).

Up to now, I have concentrated on the ways in which qualitative researchers might invade privacy, but p. 91 equally important is how researchers handle the data they collect, given that ↳ some of it may be private or secret, and how they report and disseminate their findings. The precautionary principle that usually operates here is *confidentiality*, and there are a number of strategies researchers use to protect it. The most common strategy is *anonymization*, which involves replacing the actual names of participants with invented ones.[5] A second strategy used by researchers is to omit from accounts any personal characteristics of people or contextual features of places that may allow them to be identified; alternatively, these characteristics may be changed to provide disguise (see Hopkins, 1993; Piper & Sikes, 2010; Sparkes, 1995). It is important, however, to remember that anonymity is a matter of degree. When being referred to in research reports, people are not either identifiable or anonymous. Rather, their identities will be more or less difficult to recognize for different audiences. And sometimes anonymization may not succeed in preventing their being recognized by some people. Aside from the practical difficulties associated with anonymization, there have also been questions about whether it is a legitimate strategy for researchers to adopt (Jerolmack & Murphy, 2017; Lubet, 2018, ch. 7; Murphy & Jerolmack, 2016; Nespor, 2000; Reyes, 2018; Richardson, 1973, p. 45; Walford 2002, 2005, 2008). It has been argued, for example, that if researchers cannot guarantee that anonymity will be preserved, with confidentiality thereby protected—and they rarely can—then they should not promise it. Others point out that replacing the names of people, and especially of places, with pseudonyms can lead to inaccuracy: It may prevent readers from using background knowledge that they already have to understand what is reported. Anonymization has also been questioned on the basis that participants sometimes *want* to be named in research reports and/or want their organization and community to be identifiable (see Grinyer, 2002; Wiles et al., 2007). Indeed, it has sometimes been insisted that informants *own* the data that they have supplied and that their link with those data should not be broken (Lincoln & Guba, 1989, p. 236; Simons, 2009; Walker, 1993), that they ought to be viewed as authors of the data, so that they have a right to be named as sources. In my view, confidentiality with regard to data is an important ethical principle in qualitative research, and anonymization is a useful strategy in achieving it. To abandon confidentiality would make some research impossible and damage the quality of much of the rest. But sometimes it will not be appropriate, and a range of considerations must be taken into account in making this determination, including the nature of the participants and the researcher's relations with them. Much the same is true with regard to omitting or changing details about people and places studied.

I have outlined some of the central ethical issues involved in qualitative inquiry and some of the complexities surrounding them. In the remainder of this chapter I want to focus on the role that these issues should play in the practice of research. As I noted earlier, they have come to be treated as much more central than in the past.

The Increased Centrality of Research Ethics

Two developments have changed the perceived significance of research ethics for many researchers in the early 21st century: the rise of ethical regulation and the emergence of conceptions of qualitative inquiry that treat it as an essentially ethical enterprise.[6]

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The Rise of Ethical Regulation

The move toward the ethical regulation of social science began many years ago when some social science subject associations established codes to guide the behavior of their members. This was stimulated in part by earlier developments within medical research after the Second World War, these being prompted by the appalling experiments carried out by Nazi doctors on people in institutions and in concentration camps. The Nuremburg Code of 1947 specified ethical principles that should guide medical experiments; these principles were later applied more widely, notably in psychology. They were subsequently clarified, developed, and supplemented in the World Medical Association's Helsinki Declaration of 1964 and in the Belmont Report of 1979 in the United States. The last of these was prompted by further scandals, for instance the Tuskegee project in the southern United States, in which African American men were not given treatment for syphilis to allow researchers to understand the variable course of the disease.[7]

Also important for the development of ethics codes by social science associations were various controversies about the role of social research in relation to foreign policy. For example, during the Second World War some anthropologists in the United States were employed by a U.S. government agency that was responsible for the internment of people of Japanese descent in California (Mills, 2003, p. 40; Opler, 1986; Starn, 1986; see also Price, 2008), and this led the Society for Applied Anthropology to produce a code of ethics in 1948, probably the first social science association to do so. In the 1960s and 1970s, there was a series of further controversies around anthropologists' and other social scientists' involvement in government-sponsored projects concerned with military operations and counterinsurgency in Latin America and East Asia (Wakin, 1992, ch. 2).[8] The most famous one was Project Camelot, where anthropologists, sociologists, political scientists, and psychologists were to be funded as part of a proposed CIA project concerned with "assessing the potential for internal war within national societies" and identifying "those actions which a government might take to relieve conditions which are assessed as giving rise to a potential for internal war" (Horowitz, 1967, p. 5).

In social science, the ethics codes developed by professional associations did not amount to ethical regulation, strictly speaking, by contrast with the situation in medicine, where codes were generally accompanied by procedures through which complaints could be made and punishment administered. While medical associations could often prevent their members from continuing to practice, at least within their jurisdiction, this was rarely, if ever, possible for social science associations. In short, their codes were largely advisory in function, with little or no policing of members to ensure compliance.

In recent decades, however, there has been a major shift in the ethical regulation of social science. One aspect of this is that the locus has moved from professional associations to the organizations in which social scientists are employed or with which they must deal in carrying out their research: universities, research institutes, and research sites like hospitals. This process began in the United States, with the introduction of federal regulations in the early 1980s. These regulations required the establishment of institutional review boards to assess research proposals within all institutions receiving funds from what was then the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. What forced universities to comply in setting up these boards was that future federal funding for projects was dependent on it. While the review board system was primarily concerned with medical research, the remit of these boards covered social science as well. And their flexibility in interpreting ethical principles across research fields has varied considerably (Israel & Hay, 2006, pp. 41–45). Furthermore, over time, there has been a process of *ethics creep* involving an intensification of regulation and its extension to examine all aspects of the research process (Haggerty, 2004).[9]

In the United Kingdom, the shift toward this kind of ethical regulation was more recent. Here, too, it began in the field of health, with the Department of Health requiring hospitals to set up research ethics committees and later providing guidelines for the establishment and operation of these committees. And more recent changes have led to much tighter regulation through the National Health Service Research Governance Framework, which was introduced in 2001 and now covers most research conducted in healthcare settings in the United Kingdom, not just medical research (UK Policy Framework for Health and Social Care Research, 2018).

These changes in the health field were important factors in stimulating increased regulation across UK social science, paralleling similar moves in many other countries (van den Hoonaard, 2011). Ethics committees had been present in some universities, but they were usually concerned with medical research and/or with the treatment of animals by biologists and of children by psychologists. However, in 2005, the Economic and Social Research Council published its *Research Ethics Framework*, which was formulated very much in the language of "research governance." In effect, it required that most research proposals coming to it be subject to vetting procedures within universities before they could be funded. In the wake of this, universities extended the remit of existing ethics committees to deal with social research or set up new procedures, although this continues to be done in a variety of ways and with differing degrees of operational effect. More recently, regulation has been tightened and extended through a revised framework (Economic and Social Research Council, 2015; Stanley & Wise, 2010). Similar developments have taken place in other Western countries such as Canada, Australia, and New Zealand (see van den Hoonaard & Hamilton, 2016) and at the European Union level in the context of applying for funding.

The most significant aspect of this shift from codes to regulation is that whereas even within professional medical associations the application of codes had been retrospective, responding to complaints, the operation of the new institutional review boards and ethics committees is prospective, effectively determining whether particular research projects can proceed. Furthermore, the process frequently entails a "mandatory requirement for the prior and meticulous review of social research proposals by groups that are representative of a wider constituency than the research community" (Homan 1991, p. 17). In other words, research proposals are to be judged not only by members of the relevant research community but also by committees that include academics from across diverse disciplines and, increasingly, by lay representatives as well.

It should be clear that this rise in ethical regulation has made the consideration of ethical issues a much more central concern for researchers, at least in the sense that they are now forced, prospectively, to give an account of ethical considerations in relation to their research and how they will deal with them. Moreover, researchers may well have to engage in considerable negotiation with ethics committees to gain agreement to proceed, negotiation that is by no means always successful. A common requirement of regulatory bodies is that research be carried out to "high" or even "the highest" ethical standards. For example, the UK Research Integrity Office stated that "we promote integrity and high ethical standards," and it recently produced a document that emphasizes the "training and development" of ↳ researchers to ensure that they meet the "highest standards" of "research conduct." This document is entirely about compliance, with no hint that there could be problems or disagreements about what would and would not be ethical or what would be justifiable in broader terms with regard to social research. For instance, one concrete requirement is that fully informed consent be obtained from all research participants (UKRIO 2009 p. 14). In a similar way, for all research projects funded by the European Union under Horizon 2020, "ethics is an integral part of research from beginning to end, and ethical compliance is seen as pivotal to achieve real research excellence." On paper, at least, such statements prioritize research ethics over other aspects of the research process (see also Economic and Social Research Council, 2015; McCulloch, 2018).

The nature of what is demanded in the context of ethical regulation is open to question and has been the subject of considerable criticism. The reorganization and tightening of ethical regulation have had particularly sharp consequences for qualitative research because the model of inquiry on which regulatory guidelines and arrangements have been based is usually at odds with its character. This biomedical model assumes clear specification of objectives and means of achieving them at the start of the research process, a preoccupation with the testing of hypotheses, and the scheduled production of promised outcomes. It also presumes that research consists of the administration of research instruments in researcher-controlled environments (Reiss, 1979). By contrast, qualitative research generally operates on the basis of a flexible and emergent mode of research design in which the task—in the early stages of data collection, at least—is to clarify and develop understanding of the research problem. As a result, it is difficult for qualitative researchers to anticipate, at the beginning, what sorts of data will need to be collected. Furthermore, qualitative research typically takes place in "natural" settings, over which researchers have little control. Even when interviews are involved, they are usually relatively unstructured in character and carried out in territory that is not controlled by the researcher. All these features make it difficult to anticipate what contingencies might arise at various stages of the research process and to plan in any detail how ethical issues will be dealt with.

The growing dissatisfaction with the ways in which ethical regulation has been developed over the past 2 decades, particularly in the context of qualitative research, has generated considerable literature. Some of this literature has concerned the principles on which regulation should be based, some has been designed to assist researchers in thinking about research ethics in ways that allow them to navigate the requirements of ethics committees, and a considerable amount has been concerned with the negative effects of ethical regulation for qualitative work. In general, the majority of authors reject the *biomedical* or *bioethical* model of research ethics and are in favor of some kind of reform.[10]

The other factor I mentioned that is making ethics more central for researchers is the rise of views of qualitative inquiry that treat it as essentially ethical in character. I will examine these views in the next section.

Changes within Qualitative Research

Qualitative inquiry raises distinctive ethical issues because, as already indicated, it generally involves p. 95 emergent and flexible research designs and usually entails collecting relatively ↳ unstructured data in naturalistic settings. And there has been much discussion of the ethical issues it raises since the middle of the 20th century. This was often stimulated by studies that attracted adverse publicity or were seen as involving severe problems (see Hammersley & Traianou, 2012, ch. 1).

Besides debates around specific studies, increasing attention to research ethics has also been generated in recent years by the proliferation of sharply discrepant approaches to qualitative research. There are now deep divisions within the research community, relating not just to the means to be employed, but also to what is seen as the goal of and rationale for qualitative research.

In early debates about quantitative versus qualitative approaches, one sort of criticism made of quantitative work concerned ethics. It was argued that it tends to force people's responses into categories determined by researchers, thereby reducing them to objects that can be counted and represented as statistics, rather than portraying them as persons and agents (see, for example, Mills, 1959, ch. 5). These features were seen as closely associated with the practical functions served by quantitative research, notably in being used by governments and big business to control and manipulate employees, citizens, and consumers.

However, with the rise in influence of qualitative work and its fragmentation into competing approaches, ethical criticisms came to be directed at some older forms of this type of research as well. For instance, the involvement of early anthropological ethnography in the operation of European colonialism was highlighted, with the suggestion that it continues to serve as an arm of neocolonialism (Asad, 1973; Lewis, 1973; Pels, 1997). Furthermore, there was a claim that qualitative research is, if anything, even more capable of intruding into people's private lives than quantitative work. Through participant observation, researchers can gain direct access to these lives, observing what they say and do firsthand. This has sometimes been denounced as surveillance (Nicolaus, 1968; see also J. Barnes, 1979, p. 22) or voyeurism (Denzin, 1992). Similarly, open-ended interviewing was criticized, notably by feminists, on the grounds that it could encourage people to disclose aspects of their past and of their experience that they might wish to keep private, disclosure being a result of false rapport strategically developed by interviewers (Finch, 1984; Oakley, 2016; Tang, 2002). More fundamentally, the asymmetrical roles played in the research process by researchers in relation to those they are researching came to be challenged as constituting a *hierarchical* relationship that involves the exercise of power and that is fundamentally exploitative in character (Stacey, 1988).

Besides these charges, there were also criticisms that much qualitative research is politically trivial, in the sense that it has little or no impact in changing the world and therefore (it was argued) is of little or no value. For example, at the height of the Vietnam War, when radicals were challenging their profession to take a stand against it, Gjessing (1968) suggested that, unless the whole direction of anthropological inquiry were changed, anthropologists would be "playing an intellectual game in which nobody outside our own tiny circle is interested" (p. 397).

To remedy these defects, it was insisted by many that qualitative research must be aimed directly at emancipation, in other words at challenging oppression, social inequalities, or human rights abuses. Thus, over the course of the 1970s and 1980s there were calls for a "liberation anthropology" (Huizer & Mannheim, 1979) and for qualitative inquiry to "become critical" (see Hymes, 1972). Sometimes it was argued that what is required is a form of participatory action research (Hall, Gillett, & Tandon, 1982), one p. 96 that recognizes the ↳ agency of those who need political support in overturning the status quo. Not surprisingly, these criticisms and proposals were often formulated in ethical terms.

Later, these differences in attitude about the methods and goals of social research and about what counts as ethical research practice deepened and diversified, sometimes turning into fundamental philosophical and political divisions, with some approaches treating the realization of particular ethical values as the primary consideration in qualitative inquiry. For example, many feminists criticized mainstream social research for its commitment to abstract ethical principles, proposing instead an ethics of care that gives central concern to the *interdependence* of human beings and their responsibilities to each other; for adopting Western conceptions of the subject; and/or for maintaining a distinction between researchers and researched that reinforces power differences and thereby undermines the production of "authentic" data (Mauthner, Birch, Jessop, & Miller, 2002; Miller, Birch, Mauthner, & Jessop, 2012). Within disability studies, there was growing resistance to research by nondisabled researchers (C. Barnes 2009; Oliver, 1992), just as under the influence of antiracism there were challenges to Whites studying Blacks. In the field of childhood studies, which emerged in the 1980s, there has been an insistence that research must be designed to secure children's rights, that it must represent their voices, and, increasingly, that children should themselves carry out research (Alderson, 2000; Kellett, 2010; Nind, 2017). Parallel developments have also taken place in relation to research on "indigenous communities" (see Chilisa, 2009; Denzin et al., 2008; Smith, 1999).

While these developments have been strongly shaped by sociopolitical changes and "new social movements" like feminism and disability activism, they have also been influenced by shifts in ideas about the nature and value of social scientific research (see Hammersley, 2013). The predominant view in the 1960s and 1970s insisted that the sole operational aim of inquiry is to produce knowledge, albeit knowledge that is relevant to some general human interest, to a body of disciplinary knowledge, and/or to a public policy issue. This traditional view, closely associated with the concept of science, was always subject to challenge, but, from the 1980s onward, many qualitative researchers began to distance themselves from it, looking more toward the humanities and arts. In part, this reflected wider cultural challenges to the status and character of science as well as attacks on Enlightenment thinking, inspired by critical theory and poststructuralism, portraying it as legitimating oppression and as hiding Western interests behind the veil of objectivity and universalism (see, for example, Clifford & Marcus, 1986).

In important respects, these developments transformed research ethics and gave it heightened relevance. Ethical issues have come to be seen as crucial both in relation to the goals of research and in relation to how it is carried out. Where previously ethical considerations set boundaries within which inquiry could legitimately be pursued, increasingly in the early 21st century they are seen as defining the nature of the task or as demanding exemplification in the research process.

The Dangers of Moralism

While research ethics is certainly an important aspect of social research, some fundamental questions can be raised about the ways in which it has come to be treated as central to research as a result of the rise of ethical regulation and of changes in qualitative inquiry. ↳ In many ways, this reflects what might be labeled *moralism*, a term that has been defined as "the vice of overdoing morality" (Coady, 2005, p. 101; see also Taylor, 2012).[11]

Perhaps the most obvious expression of moralism is the claim that qualitative research is, or should be, *essentially* ethical. For example, Clegg and Slife (2009) argued that it is "an inherently ethical enterprise" (p. 36), while Mertens and Ginsberg (2009) insisted that "ethics is foundational to the *telos* of the research enterprise" (p. 2). Similarly, Caplan (2003) claimed that "the ethics of anthropology […] goes to the heart of the discipline: the premises on which its practitioners operate, its epistemology, theory and praxis" (p. 3). In other words, it is concerned with "*What* is anthropology for? *Who* is it for?" Many qualitative researchers outside anthropology would concur that what is at issue here is the whole rationale for and orientation of qualitative inquiry (see Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

There is an important sense in which this claim about the centrality of ethics is true: Social research is necessarily founded on certain intrinsic value commitments. Traditionally, these commitments centered on the goal of producing knowledge, but in the early 21st century, the desirability, or even possibility, of this has been opened up to question, and the values often seen as central to qualitative research are of a very different kind: They are practical rather than epistemic values, concerned, for example, with promoting "equality," "inclusion," or "emancipation."[12] In my view, this move away from treating only epistemic values as being at the center of qualitative research amounts to a form of moralism. This can take at least two forms:

1.

The belief that other values than *truth* should be treated as *integral to the goal of research*, so that researchers must direct their work toward, for example, promoting justice, emancipating or giving voice to marginalized groups, or serving other practical activities of various kinds, such as the promotion of health or education.

2.

The requirement that *in the course of carrying out their work* researchers must seek to "realize" one or more practical values, that they should adhere to "the highest ethical standards" with regard, for instance, to the avoidance of harm, protection of privacy, respect for autonomy, equity, care, or some other nonepistemic value.

It is not uncommon to find these two kinds of moralism combined, leading to the demand, for example, that research both be aimed at producing findings that increase social justice and be carried out in ways that exemplify this value. In my view, both these forms of moralism must be subjected to fundamental assessment.

Redefining the Goal of Qualitative Research

It is a feature of all specialized occupations that they involve the adoption of a relatively narrow perspective, focusing on a particular task and what is directly relevant to it, thereby downplaying other matters that are important from other perspectives. It is precisely from this narrowness that increased gains in tackling the specific task arise. While it is important to recognize that this specialization also involves losses, it should not be assumed that the gains are available otherwise. Thus, academic research as a specialized activity maximizes the chances of producing sound knowledge. While it should always be practiced in ways that are constrained by practical values, these values being primarily concerned with how ↳ other people ought to be treated, this is quite different from treating those extrinsic values as constituting the goal of the occupation.[13]

In these terms, then, the common claim, for example, that a major function of qualitative research is to "give voice" to marginalized groups involves a fundamental misconception. The task of any research project is to answer a set of factual questions. While this may involve drawing data from people whose views are rarely heard or listened to, it will also usually be necessary to *interpret* these views and, where they are being used as a source of information about the world, to *evaluate* their likely validity. In addition, it will almost always be essential to draw data from other people who are not regarded as marginalized or oppressed and who may even be viewed as oppressors (Becker, 1967); furthermore, it is important that the validity of *their* accounts is not simply dismissed (Hammersley, 1998).

Also ruled out by the position I am adopting here is any argument to the effect that research must be directed toward benefitting the people studied, an idea that underpins the notion of participatory research. For example, in the field of childhood studies it is often insisted that research should not be carried out *on* children but always *for* and *with* them, treating them as having a right to participate in research decision-making (Alderson & Morrow, 2010). Similar views are to be found, with regard to other sorts of research participants, among feminists (Fonow & Cook, 1991; Mies, 1983; Miller et al., 2012) and disability researchers (C. Barnes, 2009; Oliver, 1992) and in relation to research about "indigenous" communities (Smith, 1999).

In my view, these arguments involve a violation of the distinctive character of research: a failure to recognize that it is a specialized activity whose distinctive and exclusive goal is the production of knowledge.[14] In other words, they undermine the very concept of research as a professional occupation. In particular, the concept of participatory inquiry apparently amounts to an attempt to erase the researcher role and the responsibilities and license intrinsically associated with it.

Realizing Practical Values within the Research Process

The second kind of moralism I identified is not concerned with the *goal* of research but rather with the *means* by which it is pursued. Here, the requirement is that researchers seek fully to exemplify some set of practical values—such as avoidance of harm, protection of privacy, respect for autonomy, equity, care—in how they carry out their work. Alternatively, there is the more generalized demand that they abide by "the highest ethical standards," a phrase that, as noted earlier, is common in statements underpinning ethical regulation.

Examples of this second kind of moralism include the idea that obedience to the criminal law is *always* required and that all infringements by others must be reported, or that informed consent must be treated as an absolute human right (Alderson & Morrow, 2011; Homan, 2001). In my view, these kinds of ethical absolutism amount to an unrealistic constraint on inquiry. For example, the insistence that the law must always be obeyed would make some kinds of qualitative research very difficult, if not impossible. This is most obviously true in the field of criminology, but the problem extends beyond that area, since deviance of one kind or another is a feature in many settings. The point is not that researchers should feel free to break the law, in their own country or some other country, whenever it is convenient, or that they should expect p. 99 immunity from prosecution. It is rather that there ↳ may be occasions when this is necessary for the research and justifiable in those terms. Relevant here is the seriousness of any offense. It is not uncommon for qualitative researchers to witness illegal behavior and to break the law by not reporting it. Much more rare is when they themselves commit serious offenses, as in the famous example of Whyte's (1993, pp. 312–317) participation in election vote rigging. Similarly, earlier I outlined some of the complexities surrounding informed consent and why this sometimes cannot be achieved in qualitative inquiry. The key point is that ethical considerations must be weighed against other relevant considerations in making decisions about how to pursue research.

Adherence to "High Standards": An Indefensible Requirement

My argument is that while qualitative research is properly constrained by practical values, what these values mean and what weight should be given to them in any particular situation must be shaped by what is required if the production of knowledge is to be pursued effectively. For these reasons, practical values will sometimes need to be compromised. What can reasonably be expected of qualitative researchers is *not* adherence to the highest standards, but rather that their behavior is *acceptable* in terms of practical values, *taking account of the constraints operating in the situations concerned*. It is also important to remember that social scientists are members of a profession operating *within* societies and that all they can distinctively claim is a high commitment to a specific goal and to the values associated with it, not some general ethical superiority.

A label that could be applied to the position adopted here is *Machiavellianism* (Hammersley & Traianou, 2011), a term that carries an evaluative load that, like *moralism*, is ambiguous if not downright negative. However, contrary to what is sometimes assumed, Machiavelli did not propose that rulers, and other political agents, should pursue evil ends. Rather, he argued that they will often have to use means that are regarded as morally questionable, such as deception, and even sometimes those that are abhorrent, like war, *to effectively pursue ends that are good.*[15] According to Strauss (1978), Machiavelli was the first of the early modern political philosophers, whose ethical thinking starts not from "how people ought to live," in the manner of the ancients, but rather from "how people actually live" (p. 84). In Max Weber's terms, Machiavelli rejected an "ethics of ultimate ends" in favor of an "ethic of responsibility" (see Bruun, 2007, pp. 250–259).

One of the problems with the second kind of moralism, then, is that it is premised on an unrealistic view of human nature and society. Conflicting ideals and interests, and struggle over them, are endemic in social life; and as a result, the use of coercion, manipulation, and deception is widespread. Given this, moralism is not a viable basis for carrying out any activity, including qualitative inquiry (Douglas, 1976; Duster et al., 1979; Littrell, 1993). If researchers are to get their work done in *the world as it is* and produce reliable knowledge, they will often have to engage in actions that fall short of "the highest standards."

Another way of trying to capture the point I am making is the idea that researchers must claim a certain moral license if they are to pursue their task effectively. This is also true of many other occupational roles, notably but not exclusively those labeled professions. For example, it is the task of the doctor to try to secure or preserve the health of patients, not to save their souls or to serve the interests of a kin group or a nation-p. 100 state. Moreover, ↳ in pursuing this narrowly specified task it may be necessary to use means that, from the point of view of some extrinsic values, are undesirable. For example, doctors and other medical personnel will often find it necessary to cause embarrassment or pain and perhaps also to turn a blind eye to legal as well as moral offenses (drug use, for instance). Similarly, the task of lawyers is not to aim directly at achieving justice; instead, they are obliged to be partisan on behalf of their clients and to operate in terms of the existing law, downplaying some aspects of a case in favor of others with a view to serving the client best. Furthermore, in pursuing their work they can demand answers from witnesses to highly intrusive questions *in public* and challenge their honesty to undermine the persuasiveness of unfavorable evidence.[16]

So, in serving their goals, occupations may need to be allowed to breach some moral rules that would normally apply. If, by contrast, it is insisted that these rules are always fully enforced, that high standards are adhered to in terms of *applying extrinsic values*, then the scope for exercising the discretion needed to pursue specialized occupations, and thereby to achieve the benefits they offer, will be reduced considerably. In my view, this is an argument that applies to social research.

What Sorts of License Can and Should Qualitative Researchers Claim?

For one thing, in collecting data, researchers may find it necessary to tolerate, and risk being seen as condoning, behavior that they believe (and that others would believe) is wrong. I should perhaps stress here that my argument is not that all immoral or illegal acts must be tolerated, only that researchers should have the leeway to tolerate some such acts when they judge it to be necessary and defensible in doing their work. This includes tolerating the expression of beliefs that one finds offensive or disturbing (Huff, 1999). If the researcher is not able to be tolerant in this way, then access to much data may be blocked, or made relatively inaccessible, in many fields of inquiry. Similarly, it may sometimes be necessary to deceive people, at least passively (for instance, through not correcting misapprehensions), if the data required are to be obtained. This is most obviously true in the case of groups and organizations that seek to exercise considerable power over their members and over their external environments: from political and business elites, through state and commercial agencies of various kinds, to exclusive religious or political groups. Such deception may also be necessary where individuals or groups have a hostile attitude toward science or social research (see, for instance, Homan, 1980). A further example is that it may be necessary to ask questions whose implications could be taken to be politically questionable, say as sexist or racist. Equally important, researchers may need to entertain lines of argument whose potential implications could be viewed as objectionable, distressing, or repulsive by lay audiences and perhaps even by the researcher her- or himself. Any insistence that researchers be “authentic,” in the sense of *fully* living up to their own personal values or to those of others, would put very serious obstacles in the way of pursuing social research, often ones that simply make it impossible to do it well.[17]

In the case of professions like medicine and law, the moral license claimed is justified by appeal to the benefits produced (both for particular individuals and for the wider society), whereas with qualitative inquiry it might be argued that there are no equivalent benefits or at least the benefit is much less. Thus, for

academic research, at least, there is no client ↳ group, and the knowledge it produces is sometimes seen as trivial. However, the balance between the level and kinds of “moral deviance” involved in the work of different occupations, and the benefits they generate, is a matter of judgment, and one about which there will often be disagreement. For my part, I believe that the minimal moral license required to pursue qualitative research *is* justified by the potential benefit it can bring in terms of knowledge and understanding of the social world.

Ethical Reflexivity and the Problem of Being “Too Ethical”

What lies at the heart of moralism, of all kinds, is the assumption that it is impossible to be “too ethical” (see Leiter, 2001; Louden, 1988). Closely associated with this is an unrestrained form of ethical reflexivity that generates the conclusion that social research involves a high risk of severe ethical dangers for the people studied, so that rigorous precautions must be taken to protect them; or that for research to be worthwhile, and therefore ethically justifiable, it must aim at more than the “mere” production of knowledge. Also frequently involved seems to be the assumption that there are value judgments that could frame research that everyone would or should accept and whose implications for particular situations are quite clear and determinate. However, none of these assumptions is sound. While it is essential that researchers continually adopt a reflexive stance toward their work—with regard to ethical, methodological, and other issues—there are significant limits to how much and what kinds of reflexivity they should exercise in the sense of what they should treat as open to question. Questioning all assumptions leads to an inability to engage in any form of action.

Perhaps the other profession that qualitative research approximates most closely in character is investigative journalism. The position adopted here is similar to the attitude of Janet Malcolm toward the ethics of her profession. Journalists, she suggested, face a “moral impasse.” In a famous opening sentence, she declared that “every journalist who is not too stupid or too full of himself to notice what is going on knows that what he does is morally indefensible” (Malcolm, 1991, p. 3). However, she does not take this as grounds for abandoning the occupation or for adopting a highly moralistic stance in her work. Rather, her concern is to highlight the difficulties and unavoidable ethical dilemmas involved in investigative journalism. She elaborates on the problem as follows:

> Unlike other relationships that have a purpose beyond themselves and are clearly delineated as such (dentist–patient, lawyer–client, teacher–student), the writer–subject relationship seems to depend for its life on a kind of fuzziness and murkiness, if not utter covertness, of purpose. If everybody put his cards on the table, the game would be over. The journalist must do his work in a kind of deliberately induced state of moral anarchy.

She described this as a "baffling and unfortunate occupational hazard" (Malcolm 1991, pp. 142–143). I believe that much the same can be said about qualitative research, though researchers are not faced with the same level of ethical difficulties as the journalist, largely because they are usually able to disguise the people and places being referred to, whereas journalists cannot.

It is perhaps necessary to re-emphasize that my argument is not that the pursuit of research should be unconstrained by practical values. Some restraint of this kind is ↳ essential: Researchers should not feel free to pursue their research goals irrespective of all other considerations and costs. The issue is the *degree* to which, and *ways in which*, non-epistemic; values should shape the actions of the researcher, and, equally important, who is to make decisions about it. There is no general answer to the question of how much weight should be given to particular practical values; this must be decided on a case-by-case basis. However, what we *can* say is that it is individual researchers or research teams who must decide in particular cases what is and is not acceptable in light of both intrinsic and extrinsic values. Such decisions should not be made by funding bodies, gatekeepers, ethics committees, governments, or anyone else. At the same time, researchers must develop the ability to make wise and skillful judgment in dealing, in the best way possible, with the contingencies that arise, taking account of all the considerations that are relevant, including those that conflict with one another. This is not a matter of the end justifying the use of any means, but rather that both ends and means must be ranked in terms of desirability (on various grounds), with *phrónēsis* (wise judgment) being deployed to "weigh" the relative desirability of achieving a particular end against the use of means of varying degrees of likely effectiveness and desirability (Traianou, 2018). Others can express views about the decisions that researchers have made and take action on the basis of these views, but researchers are not obliged automatically to treat their complaints or their actions as legitimate, even if they must nevertheless face the consequences that follow.

Conclusion

Whether ethics is seen as central to qualitative inquiry, or to social research more generally, depends a good deal on what the word *ethics* is taken to mean. It is frequently treated as primarily or entirely concerned with how researchers treat people in the field: whether they minimize harm to them, respect their autonomy and privacy, and so on. If ethics is interpreted in this way, then in my view ethics is not central to qualitative research: It does not form part of its core task, which is to produce knowledge. Ethical considerations, in this sense, relate to what are and are not acceptable means in pursuing knowledge: They represent an external constraint on the selection of methods and strategies by researchers, albeit an essential one.

However, *research ethics* can be interpreted in a broader sense to include all the values that are relevant to the pursuit of inquiry. If we interpret the term in this way, then *some* of the values concerned are indeed central to the practice of research. After all, inquiry necessarily depends on the assumption that gaining knowledge of the social world is desirable, and implicated here also is the value of truth. Moreover, the pursuit of inquiry demands a number of virtues: an openness to unpleasant facts that are at odds with one's preferences, a willingness to consider and address criticism, a commitment to objectivity, in the sense of seeking to minimize the chances of one's own values and interests leading to error, and so on. These values and virtues are central to the practice of research of any kind.

Notes

1. Categories of vulnerable participants include, most notably, the very young; people suffering from serious illness; those who have intellectual impairments, either temporary (for ↳ example, as a result of the effects of alcohol or drugs) or more long-lasting (a learning disability or mental illness); and those in marginal positions within society. However, others can be vulnerable in particular respects under certain conditions, for example, psychotherapists (Oeye et al., 2007) and teachers (McWilliam & Jones, 2005). On "researching the vulnerable," see Liamputtong, 2007. See van den Hoonaard, 2018, for a challenge to the concept of vulnerability.

2. For a review of the social science literature on informed consent, see Wiles et al., 2005.

3. On the issue of written consent forms, see Coomber, 2002; Singer, 1980.

4. There is now a considerable literature discussing these new opportunities as regards qualitative inquiry and the ethical issues associated with them. See, for example, Buchanan, 2004; Hine, 2000, 2005; Markham, 2005; and Markham & Baym, 2009.

5. There are also issues regarding how pseudonyms are chosen. Several strategies are possible, for example inventing them in a haphazard manner, taking them from fictional sources, formulating them to capture the character of the people concerned (see, for instance, Beynon, 1985), or allowing participants to choose them.

6. There are several other secondary reasons for this change. One is the use of new technologies (from digital photography and audio and video recording to the analysis of virtual materials from the Internet). This has introduced some distinctive problems, or at least it has given old problems a new form (Buchanan, 2003; Markham & Baym, 2009; Prosser, 2000; Wiles et al., 2008;). Another factor is data protection legislation, in the United Kingdom and elsewhere, which carries implications for how researchers store and report data and for its deposition in archives and its reuse. For interpretations of the implications of this legislation in the United Kingdom, see Akeroyd, 1988; Alderson & Morrow, 2011, pp. 36–37; Le Voi, 2006; SRA, 1995. For further discussion of current ethical regulation regimes, see Schrag, 2010; Stark, 2012; van den Hoonaard, 2012. On ethical issues and archiving, see Corti et al., 2000; Erdos, 2011a, 2001b; Thompson, 2003; Williams et al., 2011.

7. The Tuskegee case is one of several “atrocity stories” (Dingwall, 1977) used in discussions of research ethics, particularly in justifying ethical regulation. However, it is open to conflicting interpretations: see Cave & Holm, 2003; Reverby, 2000, 2013; and Shweder, 2004. Kimmel (1996) provided an account of the development of ethics codes in U.S. psychology, see also Diener & Crandall, 1978, pp. 17–22.

8. More recently, there has been concern over the involvement of anthropologists in the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan; see Fluehr-Lobban, 2008.

9. It has been claimed that a process of deregulation has begun in the United States; see Shweder & Nisbett, 2017.

10. See Dingwall, 2008, 2016; Emmerich, 2018; Hammersley, 2009, 2010; Traianou, 2018.

11. There is a parallel between moralism and the religious enthusiasm that the philosopher John Locke and others objected to in the 17th century as part of their defense of political liberalism (Locke, 1689/1975, ch. 19). See Tucker, 1972.

12. I have put these words in quotation marks because each of them is uncertain, and in some respects problematic, in meaning.

13. There are some legitimate ways in which extrinsic values can play a positive role in occupational activities. For instance, a lawyer can specialize in providing legal services for the poor or doctors can focus on those in most serious need. And there is also some room for this kind of selectivity on the part of qualitative researchers. Practical research can be designed to provide information required by particular interest groups, for instance a charity or political organization. And, while this sort of targeting is not possible in ↳ academic work, where the aim is to contribute to a body of disciplinary knowledge designed to serve as a general resource, academic researchers *can* legitimately select topics for investigation in terms of their perceived importance.

14. Fish (2008) provided a typically bullish defense of the traditional role of the scholar, encapsulated in the title of his book, *Save the World on Your Own Time*. Thus, he insisted that academic researchers “do not try to do anyone else’s job” and “do not let anyone else do their job.” This echoes a similar sentiment expressed many years ago by Polsky (1969, p. 140), who suggested that if someone wants to engage in social work, or for that matter police work, that is their privilege, but they should not do so in the name of social science.

15. The ends he had in mind were not universalistic ones, but those specific to a particular political community. In this sense, he was a communitarian rather than a liberal universalist. See also Parrish, 2007.

16. Where a researcher takes on a participant role in the field, he or she may also have to exercise moral license distinctive to that role. O’Brian (2010) reported that she had to perform “the routine tasks of door security work, including vetting customers at point of entry and managing violent and disorderly customers inside venues. I was also required to undertake the gender specific tasks performed by female bouncers such as searching female bodies, monitoring female toilets and performing first-aid tasks” (p. 119).

17. Note that the costs of moralism are often obscured because the task of establishing the likely validity of research conclusions is underestimated. In some areas, this is possible because most, if not all, researchers in a field are committed to the same extrinsic values and are conditioned to believe conclusions that they take to be in line with those values.

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