

QUESTION #16

What Are the Researcher's Ethical Responsibilities in Qualitative Practice?

In studies involving human participants, qualitative researchers' primary ethical focus is a duty of care toward their research participants. The individuals who participate in studies, whether interviewees, focus group members, or community-based co-investigators, are researchers' primary concern when it comes to ethical responsibilities. The process of formal ethics review allows a researcher to consider the various ways that participants contribute to, benefit from, or may be harmed by the qualitative research being planned. Issues of privacy, confidentiality, data ownership, co-authorship, consent, representation of findings, and many other issues must be explored and addressed in the design of the study. For example, considering whether participants' names should be anonymized is an important consideration; in some studies, research participants may wish to be identified (where it would be unethical not to respect their wishes), while in other studies, participants' identities may need to be protected. A key consideration is how best to balance the goals of the study, participants' needs, and ethics guidelines that apply in the particular jurisdiction. Researchers need to ensure that participants understand the risks and benefits if they choose to participate in the study, as well as implementing appropriate designs and data management practices that will respect participants' rights.

Qualitative researchers also have ethical responsibilities in relation to team members and other individuals who are involved in the research. Using sound research practices (such as keeping field notes to track research decisions, sharing data files with team members, and managing budgets appropriately) is paramount. Having discussions about co-authorship expectations (such as author order, the role of research assistants in the writing process, and intellectual property rights) should be done at an early stage of the research process. Hiring, supervisory, and budget practices are all important responsibilities of qualitative researchers, where ethics may play a role in the conduct of the research. The concept

of “research ethics” extends far beyond the researcher’s interactions with human participants. Rather, “ethical practice” is about acting with integrity at all stages of project design, implementation, and dissemination. Where researchers are unsure about the implications of a particular decision, they need to seek guidance from colleagues, research offices, journal editors, granting agencies and other trusted advisors.

More questions? See #18, #20, and #27.

Do not copy, post, or distribute