



Qualitative Research Methods in the Social Sciences
Innovation, Integration and Impact

Qualitative Researcher

Issue 2 Spring 2006
ISSN 1748-7315

Contents

Ethics, risk and well-being Ben Fincham	Page 1
Analytic integration and multiple qualitative data sets Jo Moran-Ellis, Victoria D. Alexander, Ann Cronin, Jane Fielding and Hilary Thomas	Page 2
Are ethics committees ethical? Martyn Hammersley	Page 4
A new virtual training environment to support researchers using online methods Jane Wellens, Clare Madge, Henrietta O'Connor, Rob Shaw and Tristram Hooley	Page 8
Call for submissions to Commissioned Inquiry	Page 10
ESRC Research Methods Festival	Page 11
NatCen: Making the evidence count	Page 11
News and forthcoming events	Page 12

Ethics, risk and well-being

Ben Fincham

Welcome to the second edition of *Qualitative Researcher*, including articles by Jo Moran-Ellis and colleagues, Martyn Hammersley and Jane Wellens and colleagues. In their article Moran-Ellis et al. start to unravel the mysteries of the process of integration in mixing qualitative data sets. Martyn Hammersley asks whether ethics committees can deliver what they promise. Jane Wellens and colleagues tell us of their new, and important, Online Research Methods training package. The quality and relevance of these contributions highlights the growing reputation of *Qualitative Researcher* as a forum for high calibre debate and discussion amongst social science researchers in the UK. All three of these articles address issues of current concern for the social sciences, and relate closely to activities currently underway in Qualiti. For example, in his article Martyn Hammersley draws our attention to the problem of governance and autonomy in research. Whilst many of us bemoan the apparent strait-jacketing of research, there are situations where research has been conducted in conditions that could be considered unacceptably risky. Whilst many of us ask whether the model of ethical governance can be usefully applied to qualitative social science research, the flip side is to consider whether the price of autonomy in research is an increase in the risk to well-being of researchers. In the light of such questions Qualiti is conducting a unique inquiry into the risk to well-being of researchers involved in qualitative re-

search. Through stories and narratives gathered from researchers, research supervisors, members of ethics committees and anyone else involved in qualitative research we aim to provide a comprehensive overview of current practice and opinion regarding researcher well-being in the social sciences. Risks to the well-being of fieldworkers can take many forms, probably the most common being the emotional impact of spending time with – and perhaps empathising with – research participants under sometimes desperate circumstances. There are occasions when researchers may encounter situations that threaten their physical health. Researchers might find themselves harassed or victimised because of gender or ethnic status. There are also issues surrounding the impact of some qualitative research on relations with partners and family. The kinds of experiences that have compromised researcher well-being call into question current research management practices, but also provoke a debate about whether the data gathered in situations that are not 'safe' or 'good for you' are worth the risk.

We would like to invite submissions based on the experiences of anyone else involved in any aspect of the conduct and management of qualitative research. Submissions may embrace practical, regulatory and/or ethical issues and risks may include threats to mental/emotional health as well as exposure to physical hazards. This evidence will be gathered via a moderated web-based forum. On



this forum contributors will be asked to submit evidence under one of four topic themes. This evidence will then be placed on the website in an appropriate topic stream. Aside from gathering evidence, the Commissioned Inquiry will

also generate online discussions around issues arising from the contributions. It is anticipated that the Inquiry's final outcome will be determined by the nature and content of contributions. Further details of how to participate can be

found on page 10 or at http://www.cardiff.ac.uk/socsi/qualiti/commissioned_inq_2.html

Ben Fincham is a research associate with Qualiiti at Cardiff University

Analytic integration and multiple qualitative data sets

Jo Moran-Ellis, Victoria D. Alexander, Ann Cronin, Jane Fielding, Hilary Thomas

In recent times increasing attention has been paid to the practicalities and pragmatics of undertaking research (see for example Corden and Sainsbury 2006; Coffey et al 2005; Emmel et al 2005; Wiles et al, 2004). Our own study – the PPIMs project¹ – began with an interest in making visible the intellectual and practical work that necessarily accompanies using multiple methods and methodological approaches to study a substantive area. Through a reflexive focus on practices and processes we examined how the goal of integrating multiple methods impacts on each stage of the process of research in a project which explored people's experiences of everyday vulnerabilities and the ways in which they strategically managed these. We used three different research methods (qualitative interviews, secondary analysis of quantitative data sets, and visual data) with a range of participants.

Early on in the project we became aware of the need to reflect critically on the concept of integration itself. Questioning just how integration was achieved in other studies, and how we could achieve it in the context of our research design, led us to problematise the descriptors frequently used to characterise the relationships between different methods/data sets within multiple methods research designs. Even a cursory survey of abstracts and textbooks showed that the different ways of deploying multiple methods in a single research project may be interchangeably described as combining, mixing, or integrating. However

whilst the descriptors appeared to be synonyms, the research designs they were describing were far from methodologically synonymous. There was considerable variation in how the methods used were positioned in relation to each other and to the research question. In some designs one method would be used to improve or develop another; in others one method would be in a supporting role, adding 'flesh to the bones' of the findings of another method. Less commonly, the research design accorded equal weight to the findings of all the methods used for answering the research question.

We also noted that the terms integration and triangulation were frequently elided. Reflecting critically on the difference between process and outcome we came to the conclusion that integration described a relationship between methods brought about by decisions to operationalise and implement the research whilst triangulation described an epistemological claim (Moran-Ellis *et al*, 2006). On this basis, then, at the very least we felt that integration should be understood as separate to triangulation. Further critical reflection, including paying attention to the fact that we ourselves had used the term integration in our original formulation of the PPIMs project quite loosely, suggested that there might be value in exploring whether integration describes a specific relationship between methods which is not captured by the terms 'combining' and 'mixing'. This reflection was underpinned by considerations of

how the term is used both in other disciplinary fields and semantically in everyday discourses.

In other contexts, such as those concerning electronics circuitry or transport facilities, the concept of integration is used to identify a particular relationship between objects which are different in nature to each other but that interact in such a way as to constitute an overall system. The interaction between the objects occurs at interfaces which overcome their material differences enabling conjunction whilst preserving their individual contributions to the system as a whole. This can be seen most clearly in the example of an integrated transport system (Moran-Ellis *et al* 2006) comprised of different types of transport suited to local conditions and with interfaces of time, space and place that allow passengers to move smoothly as they travel from one form of transport to another in order to complete a journey. At the same time each mode of transport retains its own material characteristics, none takes precedence and the interfaces require practical coordination and accomplishment by the transport providers.

Drawing on this as a metaphor for multiple methods research *integrating* methods would then be characterised by each method used retaining its own character; the findings of each contributing equally to answering the research question in their own paradigmatic terms; and the methods interfacing with each other

through juxtaposition. Following on from this, certain components are then required in a research design which aims to integrate methods or data sets. This differentiates integration of multiple methods from other designs where methods/data might be positioned in a different relationship to each other and to the research question.

If integration is used to denote a specific relationship between methods as we have set out above, it becomes evident that it may be achieved at a number of points in the research process from research instrument design through to interpretation of findings or it may be deferred until a specific stage such as analysis. In practice, the latter is common. Integration may be inevitably deferred to the point of analysis in certain research designs. These may include those where data are generated in sequential waves (for whatever reasons) or where an overarching research question is framed via a sub-set of linked but distinctive research questions relevant to the different research methods being used. In addition, where the data generated differ in 'type', for example textual and visual, or where the research instruments necessarily differ in content, integration prior to analysis may be undesirable if it would undermine the epistemological contribution of the different methods. This may be particularly the case for research which uses multiple qualitative research methods which need to retain their inherent epistemological sensitivity to participants' views and experiences of the phenomenon being studied.

This then leads to the question of how integration might be achieved at the analytic stage. To reiterate, where multiple data analysis is *integrated* each method should contribute data and findings from its own epistemological frame, and individual method integrity should be preserved. In addition, alignment to the overall research question needs to be ensured for the integrated analysis to be

relevant. We propose that this can be achieved by using an approach to analysis which we have called 'following the thread'.

'Following the thread' consists of four key steps. Firstly each data set is initially analysed using the analytic method appropriate to that data and emergent findings and further analytic questions are identified. Secondly, where a particular finding seems 'promising' this is picked up as a thread to be followed through into the other data sets. The identification of a 'promising' emergent finding may be sparked by the relationship between it and the over-arching research question, or by the resonance of it with one or more of the other data sets. Whatever the source, a lead on the analysis is established, grounded in an inductive approach, which can then be developed through an iterative interrogation of all the data sets. In our own work the theme of 'homes and houses' emerged as a notable point of articulation for talk about everyday vulnerabilities and how these might be managed within the interviews with homeless participants. Picking up this thread we asked: *'Does this concept figure as an articulation point for other sub-groups of participants and in the other sets of data – visual and (in our case) statistical? If so, is it similar or different? If not, why not?'* These questions were used to develop the analysis and the interrogations of the data sets.

Thirdly, categories, codes and emergent findings which are identified through the cross-data set iterations are juxtaposed to create a data repertoire. This repertoire is then further analysed to refine and extend the analysis of the relationship between everyday vulnerabilities and homes and houses. Finally, the findings from the thread can then be synthesised with other threads that have been similarly picked up and followed to build up empirical and theoretical understandings without predetermining whether the phenomenon being researched is multifaceted, complex or singular, and with-

out prejudicing the contribution each research method can make epistemologically to the overarching research question.

From our experience of a multiple methods research design which involved different qualitative methods (as well as quantitative data) we found that a number of pragmatic and conceptual advantages accrue from using the 'following the thread' approach to achieve analytic integration. Conceptually these were: preservation of epistemological insights available from each of the research methods employed; exploration of how the concept/phenomenon being investigated 'changes' (or not) in different methodological contexts; and illumination of the degree to which the phenomenon is homogeneous or heterogeneous in different domains. The pragmatic advantages stemmed from opportunities for a refocusing of the broader research question within each data set as was appropriate to an inductive approach; and a means of managing a large volume of qualitative data which were diverse in nature and type. We would not wish to claim this as a completely novel approach, it may indeed characterise what often happens in multiple qualitative methods research at an intuitive level. Rather our aim is to develop clarity of thinking about the practicalities and processes involved in multiple methods research in order to explore how the potential created by using multiple methods can both be systematised and maximised. From our own experience of implementing a multiple methods research design we identified the challenge of analytic integration as being one which merited particular attention in this respect.

¹ ESRC award H333250054: *Investigating Practice and Process in Integrating Methodologies: A Demonstrator Project*.

References

Coffey, A., Dicks, B., Mason, B., Renold, E., Soyinka, B. and Williams, M.

(2005) *Ethnography for the Digital Age* Available at: <http://www.ccsr.ac.uk/methods/projects/posters/coffey.shtml>

Corden, A and Sainsbury, R (2006) 'Verbatim quotations: whose views count'. *Qualitative Researcher*, Issue 1 and available at: <http://www.ccsr.ac.uk/methods/projects/posters/verbatimquotations.shtml>

Emmel, N., Sales, A., Hughes, K. and Greenhalgh, J. (2005) *Developing methodological strategies to recruit and research socially excluded groups*. Available at: <http://www.ccsr.ac.uk/methods/projects/posters/emmel.shtml>

Moran-Ellis, J., Alexander V. D., Cronin, A., Dickinson, M., Fielding, J. and Thomas, H. (2005) *Practice and process in inte-*

grating methodologies. Available at: <http://www.ccsr.ac.uk/methods/projects/posters/ppims.shtml>

Moran-Ellis, J.; Alexander, V.D.; Cronin, A.; Dickinson, M.; Fielding, J.; Slaney, J. and Thomas, H. (2006) 'Triangulation and integration: processes, claims and implications'. *Qualitative Research*, **6** (1) 45–59, 2006

Moran-Ellis, J., Alexander, V.D., Cronin, A., Dickinson, M., Fielding, J., Slaney, J. and Thomas, H. (2004) *Following a thread – An approach to integrating multi-method data sets* Paper given at ESRC Research Methods Programme, Methods Festival Conference, Oxford, July 2004

Wiles R, Heath S. and Crow G. (2004) *Informed consent and the research process*.

Available at: <http://www.ccsr.ac.uk/methods/projects/posters/wiles.shtml>

This article is based on our workshop paper presented at the Quality Seminar 'Combining Social Research Methods, Data and Analyses', University of Surrey, 22nd February 2006

Jo Moran-Ellis, Victoria D. Alexander, Ann Cronin, and Jane Fielding are in the Department of Sociology, University of Surrey. Hilary Thomas is in the Centre for Research into Primary and Community Care, at the University of Hertfordshire. The team members share an interest in research methods, bringing together work across a range of qualitative and quantitative approaches and diverse substantive expertise.

Are ethics committees ethical?

Martyn Hammersley

Research ethics committees (also sometimes known as institutional review boards) have existed in many British universities for some time. However, generally speaking, their role in relation to social science research has not been very great, by contrast with the situation in the United States.¹ This is beginning to change, and the ESRC has just produced its own research ethics framework, which reinforces the role of ethics committees, to which academics and institutions applying for funds will be required to conform (ESRC 2005). This framework lays out a set of 'principles', which are actually formulated as injunctions (for example, 'research participants must participate in a voluntary way, free from any coercion' and 'harm to research participants must be avoided'), and a set of procedures outlining the operation of ethical regulation within institutions. It is made clear that failure to comply with these procedures will rule out ESRC funding. Curiously, this is against the background of a claim that

'almost without exception, social science research in the UK has been carried out to high ethical standards' (ESRC 2005:1).

In this paper I want to suggest that there are some serious questions to be asked about the role of research ethics committees, both in terms of what they are able to do and of what they have the authority or right to do. In summary, the problems are as follows: the literature on research ethics indicates that there are significant disagreements among social scientists about key ethical issues; researchers' decisions about how to pursue their inquiries involve weighing ethical and other considerations against one another, and this requires detailed knowledge of the contexts concerned; even aside from the question of whether ethics committees have the expertise they claim, there is the issue of what right their members have, or a university has, to tell individual researchers and research teams how best to do their work; finally, there are the problematic

consequences of the bureaucratic framework now being imposed, which are likely to be especially serious for qualitative work.

Few, if any, researchers would deny that there is an important ethical dimension to their work. At the same time, the very extensive published literature on research ethics shows that there have long been serious disagreements about ethical issues: about what it is and is not legitimate for researchers to do in particular sorts of circumstance, and perhaps even about which ethical considerations should normally take primacy (see Shils 1959). For example, there are those who believe that interview data belongs to interviewees, so that their permission must be sought for any specific subsequent use of it (Walker 1978). At the other extreme, there are researchers who regard deception as unavoidable if research is to be done on powerful groups or on politically sensitive topics; perhaps even believing that many influential indi-

viduals and groups in society should be open to public scrutiny via research irrespective of their willingness to participate (Lehman and Young 1974; Douglas 1976). More recently, there have been debates about an ethics of care or a feminist, communitarian ethics versus liberal conceptions (Mauthner et al 2002; Christians 2005).

The ESRC framework document claims to 'reflect [...] current good practice' (ESRC 2005:1). Yet, how can the guidelines achieve this when there exist such sharp disagreements? This indicates a first problem concerning the authority of ethics committees: on what grounds are they to resolve discrepant views? This is a serious problem because disagreements among social scientists reflect the character of ethical judgment: in general, this is not a field where there is usually a single agreed answer, and it is probably a field in which there is rarely a single right answer. Philosophers writing about ethics have not only presented arguments that would lead to very different conclusions in particular cases, but some have also recognised the conflict that operates among the various principles to which most people are committed.²

Despite disclaimers, the tendency within the ESRC framework document, as in the orientation of most ethics committees, is to rely on a medical and psychological model in which informed consent is crucial. This is done against the background of great concern about some instances of medical research which, it is believed, failed to meet this requirement.³ These are judged not only to have been wrong but also to have damaged the public reputation of research. There is a felt need, then, to avoid any repetition of such incidents. Yet, the level of harm involved in most social research, from most points of view, is comparatively low. Despite this, like some of the ethical codes that preceded it, the ESRC framework treats fully informed consent as a requirement except in 'very specific

and exceptional research contexts' (ESRC 2005:1). Of course, most social scientists would recognise the desirability of informing people about their research and of voluntary participation in it. However, outside of the laboratory, informed consent becomes a much less straightforward matter and one over which the researcher has quite limited control. Furthermore, securing informed consent can have serious consequences for the level of reactivity that is likely to operate, and even for whether the research will be feasible. It is also often difficult to make reliable judgments about the consequences of providing particular sorts of information, or of seeking consent for particular kinds of data collection, at the start of the research process.

These problems are particularly severe in the case of qualitative research, and the medical or psychological model is especially inappropriate here. Such research has often been compared to investigative journalism, and given this one might wonder whether the sorts of ethical and legal frameworks associated with that occupation might not be a better model. This is because conflicts of interest among different groups within society, as well as conflicts of ethical principle, are frequently involved. While there are vulnerable groups that need protection from research, there are also powerful interests who may well seek to use ethical regulation to prevent themselves being researched or to control the information released. Of course, there is considerable disagreement about what is and is not ethically acceptable in journalism, and legal restrictions are not universally accepted or observed. But, at the very least, this parallel broadens the perspective on ethical arguments about social science. In particular, this might help to prevent restrictions being placed upon qualitative research that make some strategies virtually impossible, these including not just covert methods but potentially any kind of participant observation in contexts where there is a large or

varying population, since here it would be very difficult and disruptive to ensure informed consent.⁴

The second problem concerns the nature of the practical decisions made by researchers, both in planning their work and over its course. It has often been recognised in discussions of ethics that good practical judgments will not usually amount to a straightforward application of rules. One reason for this is that, as already noted, multiple ethical considerations may be involved that pull in opposite directions. This may be a matter of different ethical principles clashing, or it may concern how the same principle applies to different groups: for example, to take an example mentioned in the ESRC framework document (p24), how does one weigh parents' rights to give permission for their child to be involved in a research project against the rights of the child to decide whether or not to participate? Here, respecting the rights of parents can be at odds with respect for the autonomy of children.⁵ Equally important is that ethics cannot be separated from other considerations in the practice of research, including methodological matters. If one accepts that the researcher has an obligation, though not an overriding obligation, to pursue research in the most effective manner possible, then this commitment will often come into conflict with ethical considerations. Sometimes, the latter will rightly be taken to block what would have been the most effective method, but in other cases there will need to be some weighing up of considerations on both sides in order to decide what should be done.⁶ Any commitment to adhere to 'high ethical standards' (ESRC 2005:1) is at odds with the need for such balancing of various other considerations against ethical ones.

A third point is that ethical guidelines must always be interpreted in context. Even where we agree that a certain universal ethical principle applies, we are still likely to make differential judgments

about what it implies in a particular case, this varies according to whom is involved, what would amount to full information and/or what could reasonably be taken as consent, the likelihood and degree of harm that could result, and so on. In other words, we must take account of context in our judgments, in the course of balancing various ethical considerations against one another, and against other issues. Yet how are ethics committees to gain the sort of contextual knowledge about each research project required here? The very character of ethics committees may be a problem too. Their remit is to try to ensure that researchers do not engage in unethical behaviour: they do not have any responsibility for ensuring that the obligation to produce sound knowledge is pursued effectively, in the way that a researcher does. And if they extend their remit to cover this, then the problems I have outlined above are compounded, since methodology is no more a consensual and abstract matter than is research ethics.

The points I have made here all challenge the idea that research ethics committees can have the expertise that is being claimed for them, both by universities and now by the ESRC. And the unavailability of this expertise undermines the authority of those committees. What I am suggesting, then, is that by their very nature ethics committees may be constitutionally incapable of consistently reaching sound judgments about what is and is not ethically acceptable for a researcher to do in a particular project. The ESRC framework document acknowledges some of the problems, but it simply glosses over their implications. What is involved here is, to a large extent, a matter of pretence: ethics committees are to operate as if making research decisions were a matter of applying a coherent set of ethical rules that do not conflict with any other considerations, or that override them, and that good decisions can be made without having much contextual knowledge. To

some degree those who must deal with these committees will also have to participate in such pretence, but it is not clear that this is a good thing to do; it is not even likely to ensure that the conduct of research is more ethically appropriate than it otherwise would be.

Next, I want to look at the issue of whether ethics committees have any right to tell researchers what they can or cannot do, within the realm of what is legal. A first point here is that, to the extent that they do this, they are taking some of the responsibility away from individual researchers. Responsibility operates in a zero-sum fashion. If a researcher is not free to pursue his or her work in a particular way, because an ethics committee has ruled against this, then at least some of the responsibility for the consequences that flow from this decision lie with the ethics committee not with the researcher. There is, of course, room for dispute about exactly what did and did not follow from any restriction, but the general point holds. Moreover, it works in the other direction as well: if an ethics committee declares that a particular strategy is ethically acceptable then any unacceptable consequences that follow from it are their responsibility as much as the researcher's. It is also worth pointing out that there may be a tendency for such reductions in responsibility to leave individual researchers or research teams in a position where they feel less obligation to act in ways that they regard as ethical, since after all they no longer have control over their own research, the ethics committee has taken responsibility for the ethicality of their research design. Indeed, on occasion, they may not be able to act in ways that they regard as ethically appropriate because of constraints laid down by the committee. Of course, as with the many other kinds of regulatory governance now operating within public sector institutions, the regulators will probably wish both to constrain professional practice and at the same time to hold practitioners fully

accountable for any consequences. The ethical incoherence of this approach needs to be underlined.

This leads me to another point: what freedom should researchers have to pursue their research? Could the operation of ethics committees amount to an infringement of their autonomy?⁷ The answer to the second of these questions must be 'yes', but the key issue is just where the line is to be drawn between legitimate and illegitimate interference. Of course, it will be argued that ethics committees are made up of researchers' peers, so that what is in operation here is the kind of collective control that is characteristic of, and legitimate within, professions. However, this does not alter the fact that there can be illegitimate interference. Moreover, there are important questions to be asked about how the members of ethics committees are appointed: in what sense will they be representative of the research community that is relevant to any specific study? Generally speaking, this will not be the case; indeed, there may be no-one from the relevant field on the committee. Also, we should remember that ethics committees are formally responsible to university managements, who will have additional interests and concerns. Indeed, ESRC insists that they should be part of the usual governance procedures of universities, and that their performance should be monitored. This is different from the ideal of professional self-regulation. Moreover, the motivation behind setting up ethics committees is not just a concern with protecting the public from unethical researcher behaviour but also with protecting organisations, not just universities but also funders, from legal action by anyone who believes that they have been mistreated. This raises all manner of interesting issues about how far an organisation has a right to protect itself at the expense of its members or clients.

It is worth noting the unusual character of research ethics committees, as con-

ceived by ESRC, against the background of the operation of legal and other regulatory institutions. First, to a large extent, they combine the functions of legislature, judiciary, and police force, functions that are normally properly kept separate. Furthermore, whereas policing and judicial functions normally operate retrospectively, in response to the commitment of an offence, in this case researchers are required to clear their future behaviour with the authorities before engaging in it; and then presumably to practise self-surveillance and to report back any possible infringements. This is an unusually tight form of regulation, one that may be appropriate where the practices involved could cause very serious harm, for example to the health of patients. It does not seem appropriate where the risk of great harm (comparatively speaking) is extremely small.

Finally, there is the issue of the likely consequences of research ethics committees on social science research. Obvious ones are the time taken away from actually doing research in circumstances where this is increasingly hard to find; and the fact that, for reasons already explained, the decisions made by ethics committees may not be good ones, and may even undermine the ethical responsibility of researchers. There are more specific problems that apply especially to qualitative research. The ESRC framework document states that 'where a study design is emergent, the [University research ethics committee] should agree procedures for continuing ethical review (for example through a Project Advisory Group) with the researchers as a condition of approval' (ESRC 2005: 15). In other words, ethical approval must be sought continually throughout the research process. This could amount to doing research by committee, and cannot but greatly compound the already considerable difficulties involved in qualitative inquiry.

So, do research ethics committees have any legitimacy in relation to social science research? I think they have some legitimate functions. First, they could give non-binding advice to researchers who consult them about practical problems that have ethical dimensions. Secondly, they could serve as forums in which ethical principles and cases could be discussed, in a way that would help individual researchers and research teams to engage in more reflective practice. However, I do not believe that they should, or indeed can, have the regulative function that they currently claim, and that is now being endorsed by the ESRC.

¹ Of course, British social scientists working in the field of health also have to contend with NHS ethics committees. For a discussion of recent developments in the US, albeit from a rather different perspective to that adopted here, see Lincoln 2005.

² For philosophical approaches to ethics which highlight the problem, see Mackie 1977 and Larmore 1989.

³ One of the standard examples used is the Tuskegee experiment, in which some African American men with syphilis were not treated in order to study the course of the disease. See Shweder (2004) for the argument that the usual account of this experiment may be based on some serious misconceptions of what was involved.

⁴ The ESRC Framework insists on full informed consent, allowing relaxation of this, including covert research, only in exceptional circumstances where an approach compliant with its principles is not possible. In effect, this will mean that what is and is not judged legitimate will depend upon the judgments made by ethics committee members about what would and would not be 'possible'; and I will argue later that they are not well-placed to make sound judgments about this.

⁵ The authors of the ESRC framework document suggest that 'every effort should be made to deal with consent through dialogue with both children and their parents (or legal equivalent)' (p24). This may be viable and desirable where only a small number of children are involved in a study, though not unproblematic even here; it could be prohibitively expensive in terms of researcher time and resources where more than one or two such cases are involved.

⁶ Incidentally, if one defines the goal of research as involving more than the production of knowledge, for example as emancipatory in some sense, or as improving the quality of education, or as serving social justice, or bringing about democracy, then the conflicts are multiplied.

⁷ The principle of autonomy is at the heart of the requirement of informed consent, but must surely apply to researchers as well as to the people they study.

References

- Christians, C. G. (2005) 'Ethics and politics in qualitative research', in N. K. Denzin and Y. S. Lincoln (eds.) *Handbook of qualitative research*, Third edition. Thousand Oaks CA: Sage.
- Douglas, J. D. (1976) *Investigative social research*. Beverly Hills CA: Sage.
- Economic and Social Research Council (2005) *Research Ethics Framework*. Swindon, ESRC. Available at: http://www.esrcsocietytoday.ac.uk/ESRCInfoCentre/Images/ESRC_Re_Ethics_Frame_tcm6-11291.pdf
- Larmore, C. (1987) *Patterns of moral complexity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lehman, T. and Young, T. R. (1974) 'From conflict theory to conflict meth-

odology: an emerging paradigm for sociology'. *Sociological Quarterly*, **44** (1) 15-28.

Lincoln, Y. S. (2005) 'Institutional review boards and methodological conservatism: the challenge to and from phenomenological paradigms', in N. K. Denzin and Y. S. Lincoln (eds.) *Handbook of Qualitative Research*. Thousand Oaks CA: Sage.

Mackie, J. L. (1977) *Ethics: Inventing right and wrong* Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Mauthner, M., Birch, M., Jessop, J., and

Miller, T. (eds.) (2002) *Ethics in qualitative research*. London: Sage.

Shils, E. (1959) 'Social inquiry and the autonomy of the individual', in D. P. Lerner (ed.) *The Human Meaning of the Human Sciences*. New York, Meridian.

Shweder, R. A. (2004) 'Tuskegee re-examined', *Spiked*. Available at: <http://www.spiked-online.com/Articles/0000000CA34A.htm>

Walker, R. (1978) 'The conduct of educational case studies: ethics, theories and

procedures', in B. Dockerell and D. Hamilton (eds.) *Rethinking Educational Research*. London, Hodder and Stoughton.

Martyn Hammersley is Professor of Educational and Social Research at the Open University. Much of his work has been concerned with the methodological issues surrounding social research. His most recent books are: *Taking Sides in Social Research* (Routledge, 2000); and *Educational Research, Policymaking and Practice* (Paul Chapman, 2002).

A new virtual training environment to support researchers using online methods

Jane Wellens, Clare Madge, Henrietta O'Connor, Rob Shaw, Tristram Hooley

Online research methods (ORMs) are computer mediated methodological approaches to data collection which are facilitated in a 'virtual' environment. In simpler terms, ORMs are usually traditional methods of data collection adapted to use online. Therefore, research methods ranging from questionnaire surveys to participant observation have been adapted for online use through tools such as email, websites and various software packages. ORMs provide great methodological potential and versatility for research in all fields of social science. It has been suggested that the use of these methods mitigates the distance of space, enables research to be easily internationalised without the usual associated travel costs and can be valuable for researchers contacting groups or individuals who may otherwise be difficult to reach, such as the less physically mobile. The growth and impact of the Internet in recent years has meant that the use of online research methods has proven to be an increasingly alluring option for social scientists. As such online research methods are becoming more established as a legitimate means of data collection removing some of the

'considerable anxiety about just how far existing tried and tested research methods are appropriate for technologically mediated interactions' (Hine 2005: 1). However, there has been some variety across different disciplines in the extent to which online methods have taken hold, and in the level of awareness of the theoretical, practical, and technical issues involved. As Mann and Stewart (2000: 5) noted 'until now ... researchers have had to proceed with few practical or theoretical guidelines'.

This is definitely the message that University of Leicester researchers Clare Madge (Department of Geography) and Henrietta O'Connor (Centre for Labour Market Studies) received whenever they reported the results of their 'Cyberparents' project (<http://www.geog.le.ac.uk/baby/>), which employed online questionnaires and synchronous online interviews to examine how, why and in what ways new parents use the Internet as an information source about parenting and as a form of social support. Demand for training, and in particular hands-on training was expressed to Clare and Henrietta at presen-

tations and in response to publication of their research (Madge & O'Connor, 2002, 2005; O'Connor & Madge, 2001, 2004). They were also commissioned to contribute to books on online methods and the 'Cyberparents' research was incorporated as a teaching resource at a number of academic institutions. All of this further emphasised to them the interdisciplinary interest in, and relevance of ORMs to the social science community.

Based on their experience and this demand they collaborated with University of Leicester colleagues Jane Wellens (Educational Developer), Tristram Hooley (Postgraduate Training Co-ordinator) and Rob Shaw (Educational Technologist) to develop a practical training package focusing specifically on the potentials and problems of ORMs. The project was part of Phase 2 of the ESRCs Research Methods Programme. The team felt given the nature of subject matter, an online learning resource was the ideal means of delivering training in ORMs, offering users choice over how and when to access the package, along with the flexibility to explore different

content areas according to need, and prior knowledge and experience.

The package they developed 'Exploring ORMs in a Virtual Training Environment' aims to make training in these methods widely available across disciplines, and to highlight the potentials and problems that they bring. It provides:

- a high-quality online portal to provide training in online research methods;
- a self-supporting online resource to enhance understanding of both the theoretical and practical aspects of online research methods including online questionnaires, and virtual synchronous and asynchronous interviews;
- access to a wide range of successful good practice case studies;
- discussion of the ethical issues of online research;
- important resource links; and comprehensive technical guidance.

Throughout, the package emphasises the team's belief that there is a need for online researchers to tread with caution and practice their 'craft' with reflexivity. They strongly believe that online research is not going to replace onsite research but rather it is another option in the researchers' methodological 'toolkit'. Therefore the use of ORMs must be carefully considered and their long-term success will ultimately depend on the quality and credibility of the information that they generate.

The training package is structured into four main sections. The introduction provides a general background to ORMs and introduces the site. Four modules provide the main training element of the package and address *Online Questionnaires, Online Interviews, Ethics and Technical Aspects*. Within each of these modules a series of interdisciplinary case studies, taken from research projects which have used online methods, are used to illustrate the methods 'in action'. The Resources section acts as a portal to key

information and links in the area of ORMs. The Project Background section offers a range of general information about the project and also captures the social production of the website through the reflections of the project team throughout the development process, one aim being to share the lessons learnt with similar projects.

The package is targeted at a wide audience including researchers and post-graduates in the HE sector, and researchers working for other organisations, such as those involved with public policy and market research. It has therefore been designed with the different requirements of these users in mind. For example, it is possible to either 'dip in and out' of the package or to work through the modules systematically. Each module includes a built in series of learning activities through which users can test their knowledge and understanding, but these do not have to be completed in order to move forward. For academic users, one useful feature is the 'personal references list' facility which allows users to collect a 'shopping basket' of references as they navigate the package. These can subsequently be printed or downloaded as text or End-Note-ready XML.

From the outset, a programme of rigorous evaluation was established to ensure ongoing feedback could be obtained and used to inform the design and development process. Demonstrating best practice, the evaluation programme aimed to ensure the training package would meet the needs of different user communities as effectively as possible through the use of heuristic evaluation, usability studies, trialling and user studies and content evaluation by recognised subject experts in the field of ORMs.

Some of the external evaluators' comments on the final package include:

'This will be an invaluable resource. It is clear, it is comprehensive, and it makes sensible

evaluations of prevailing opinion and practice' - Christine Hine, University of Surrey

'This is self-study online training of the very best kind: practical and hands-on; theoretically sound; technically exacting; supportive and inspirational. I wish this facility had been available when I started my own online research career' - Chris Mann, Oxford Internet Institute

'Lots of nice aspects, well laid out and easy to navigate. I would recommend it to students and colleagues as an initial portal into learning more about online research methods, and as a resource for access to further more specialist, detailed sources' - Claire Hewson, University of Bolton

'This is an excellent web resource. Overall, the site is well thought out and covers most of the key issues which one would expect to see with regard to any method. Thus, it provides a comprehensive learning tool for researchers and I am sure will be widely used in the future' - Parvati Raghuram, Open University

'I think the Technical Guide is absolutely excellent. It is clear, well written and easy to navigate. The content is comprehensive, clear and well researched. I have already found it very useful myself and would have no hesitation in recommending it to anyone who is thinking of developing an online survey' - Christine Gratton, University of Nottingham

The 'Exploring ORMs in a Virtual Training Environment' package is available at www.geog.le.ac.uk/orm. Although the website is designed for self-study use online, a range of face-to-face and online training and dissemination activities are planned to ensure that the training package will enhance current training programmes for the research community and contribute to the body of research in online methods and online learning.

Forthcoming events are detailed on the project website and include an M61/M69 event at the University of Leicester on March 14th and a training event jointly

organised with the NCRM at the University of Cambridge on May 4th. An official launch event will take place on Thursday April 27th at the Royal Statistical Society in London. The programme includes an introduction to the package as well as discussions of its social production and evaluation, how the package can be used for teaching and training, and ethical dilemmas and the future for online research. Anyone interested in attending the launch can find further details and register at the ESRC Research Methods Programme web site <http://www.ccsr.ac.uk/methods/events/>

References

Hine, C. (2005) Virtual methods and the sociology of cyber-social-scientific knowledge, in Hine, C. (ed.) *Virtual Methods: Issues in Social Research on the Internet*. Oxford, Berg. pp. 1-13.

Mann, C. and Stewart, F. (2000) *Internet Communication and Qualitative Research*. London, Sage.

Madge, C. and O'Connor, H. (2002) Online with e-mums: Exploring the Internet as a medium for research. *Area*, 34, 1, 92-102.

Madge, C. and O'Connor, H. (2005) Mothers in the making? Exploring notations of liminality in hybrid cyber/space. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 30, 1, 83-97.

O'Connor, H. and Madge, C. (2001) Cyber-mothers: Online synchronous interviewing using conferencing software. *Sociological Research Online*, 5, 4. <http://www.socresonline.org.uk/5/4/oconnor.html>

O'Connor, H. and Madge, C. (2004) My mum's thirty years out of date: The role of the Internet in the transition to motherhood. *Community, Work and Family*, 7, 3, 351-369

Jane Wellens, Clare Madge, Henrietta O'Connor, Rob Shaw, Tristram Hooley are all based at the University of Leicester and share an interests in online research methods and educational development. Originally a geographer, Jane now works in the Staff Development Centre and has responsibility for supporting the initial and continuing professional development of research staff, Clare is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Geography, Henrietta is a lecturer in the Centre for Labour Market Studies, Rob is the project's Educational Technologist and Tris is Postgraduate Training Co-ordinator, based in the Student Learning Centre



Commissioned Inquiry — Call for Evidence

Risk to well-being of researchers in qualitative research

Submissions/evidence are invited as part of an inquiry into risks to the well-being of researchers in qualitative research. Those persons submitting evidence may wish to draw our attention to lessons to be learned from experience. We are interested in submissions based on the experiences of researchers, research supervisors, members of ethics committees and anyone else involved in any aspect of the conduct and management of qualitative research. Submissions may embrace practical, regulatory and/or ethical issues and risks may include threats to mental/emotional

health as well as exposure to physical hazards. The Inquiry is being conducted as part of the activities being undertaken by Qualiti, the Cardiff Node of the UK Economic and Social Research Council's National Research Methods Centre. The inquiry aims to collate and analyse accounts of qualitative research where issues of risk may have been present and publish recommendations based on the evidence gathered.

Moderated Forum

Evidence for the inquiry will be gathered via a moderated web-based forum. On

this forum contributors will be asked to submit evidence under one of four topic themes. This evidence will then be placed on the website in an appropriate topic stream. It is anticipated that aside from gathering evidence this will also generate online discussion around issues arising from evidence. Please visit our website http://www.cardiff.ac.uk/socsi/qualiti/commissioned_inq_2.html for further details and follow the link to the submissions page.

Erratum

In one of the references in Martyn Hammersley's article 'Close encounters of the political kind' (Issue 1, December 2005) the names of three authors were left out. We apologize for this mistake and are

printing the correct reference below:

Spencer, L., Ritchie, J., Lewis, J. and Dillon, L. (2003) *Quality in Qualitative Evaluation: a framework for assessing research*

evidence, report produced by the National Centre for Social Research for the Cabinet Office, London, UK Government Chief Social Researchers' Office.

ESRC Research Methods Festival

Venue: St Catherine's College, Oxford

Date: 17 - 20 July 2006

Overall aims of the Festival

The Festival aims to engage social scientists across a wide range of disciplines and sectors and at different points in their research careers. We are aiming to stimulate interest, raise issues, highlight opportunities and showcase new developments.

Programme

The Festival runs from 3.30pm on Monday 17 July to 5.30pm on Thursday 20 July. Most sessions are organised as half-days, but some are only 45 minutes and some are all day. Most sessions need to be booked and will close when numbers reach capacity.

Costs

Registration is £20 per day and includes lunch, coffee and tea (£10 for full-time students). Dinner is £20 for a 3-course meal; rooms cost £42 for standard and £59 for en suite.

Booking

Booking is completed online. First go to the programme and book the sessions of

interest and then chose your accommodation and meals. You can book for as little as half a day or for the entire Festival.

PhD students are invited to offer a poster and can apply for free accommodation.

Booking for the festival is now open. To book sessions, accommodation and meals please visit:

<http://www.ccsr.ac.uk/methods/festival>

Social activities

Lots of networking opportunities; free wine receptions on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday accompanied by music from the Jazz Menagerie; guided tours of Oxford.

Programme themes

Themes running through the festival include: Resources for research; What is?; Substantive themes; Ethnography; Ethical issues; Mixed methods; Qualitative methods; Research for policy; Survey methods; Developments in statis-

tics; Support for PhD students and researchers; e-Social Science. Individual sessions will take a variety of forms and cater to different levels of expertise, ranging from short taster sessions to all day workshops and master classes.

Who is the festival for?

Everyone! Particularly: Geographers; Local authority researchers; Policy researchers; Economists; Anthropologists/ethnographers; Psychologists; Sociologists; Statisticians/survey researchers; Business sector; Methods teachers; PhD students.

Organisation

The festival is organised by Angela Dale, ESRC Research Methods Programme (RMP) Director; Ruth Durrell, RMP Administrator; Sam Smith, IT; Gill Meadows and Katey Matthews, providing administrative assistance. Collaborators include the ESRC National Centre for Research Methods and a number of ESRC Research and Resource Centres and Programmes.

Making the evidence count: the role of qualitative research in developing policy

Venue: National Centre for Social Research, London

Date: 6th June, 2006

The conference is being held to celebrate the 21st anniversary of NatCen's Qualitative Research Unit. Its focus is on considering the way qualitative research is currently used in the formation and development of policy, and we hope it will be an opportunity for col-

leagues from the research and policy worlds to come together and celebrate some of the achievements of qualitative research, share ideas and think about future strategies. The day will include keynote speakers from within and outside government, panel discussions and a

series of themed workshops on the role of qualitative research in developing policy. If you would like more information on the day, including details of how to book a place, please contact Ros Tennant (020 7549 9557) or Matt Barnard (020 7549 9550).

News and Forthcoming Events

Qualiti Spring Seminar Series:

Seminar 3: Qualitative research in new ethical times

Cardiff University
Thursday 4th May

Seminar will consider qualitative research in relation to ethical dimensions of contemporary research governance and in the context of methodological innovation

Seminar 4: Theorising qualitative methods: paradigms and methods

Department of Sociology, Edinburgh University
Thursday 15th June 2006

Seminar explores some of the ways in which theoretical frameworks and epistemological understandings are and can be used to inform qualitative research practice.

Further details of these seminars can be found at: <http://www.cardiff.ac.uk/socsi/qualiti/events.html>

NCRM Training Events:

An introduction to online research methods

Homerton College, Cambridge
4th May 2006

Workshop will introduce participants to a selection of online research methods with a focus on online questionnaires and virtual interviews. The morning will cover general, theoretical and methodological issues, while the afternoon will offer hands-on opportunities and address ethical concerns.

Mixed method evaluation: From synthesis to policy

Cabinet Office, London
5th May 2006

This workshop will explore issues of theory, method and synthesis in mixed method evaluation through interrogating practical examples. It will also consider the implications of mixed method approaches in understanding policy formation and implementation.

Systematic research synthesis – user led synthesis

Institute of Education, SSRU, London
11th May 2006

Workshop will be of interest to those wishing to develop an understanding of: the philosophy and purpose of broad user participation in the preparation of systematic reviews; methods user participation; and the state of practice of participation in research synthesis.

Systematic research synthesis: synthesis of user views research

Institute of Education, SSRU, London
25th May 2006

Workshop will address: the value of syntheses of research into people's views; how methods for synthesising views research compare with methods for other kinds of study; key challenges in the systematic synthesis of views studies. Participants are encouraged to build activity around examples of systematic reviews from their own areas of interest.

Further information about these events is available at: <http://www.ncrm.ac.uk/index.php>

Congress of Qualitative Inquiry

University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, US
4th – 6th May 2006

Second international Congress of Qualitative Inquiry will explore experiences with and criticisms of Institutional Review Boards under the theme of "Ethics, politics and human subject research". It will also investigate new ways of decolonizing traditional methodologies.

Further details at: <http://www.qi2006.org/mandate.html>

Mixed Methods Conference and Workshops 2006

Fitzwilliam College, Cambridge
8th - 11th July 2006 (Workshops 8th-9th July, Conference 10th - 11th July)

Event will address three key themes: philosophical and methodological issues in mixed methods design; real world applications of mixed methods research; mixing art and science in imaginative ways.

Details are on: <http://www.health-homerton.ac.uk/research/events/MM2006home.html>

ESA Qualitative Methods Research Network

3rd Mid-Term Conference: Advances in qualitative research practice

Cardiff University, Cardiff
4th - 6th September 2006

Conference will gather an international, and specifically European, forum for the discussion of substantive methodological issues. Papers are invited throwing light on the practice, administration and application of qualitative research in different social spheres.

More information at: <http://www.cardiff.ac.uk/socsi/qualiti/ESA/index.html>

Qualitative Researcher ISSN 1748-7315

Qualitative Researcher provides an interdisciplinary forum for social scientists to share their research and discuss questions arising from the application, innovation and dissemination of qualitative research. *Qualitative Researcher* invites contributions in the form of opinion pieces and polemics that stimulate debate; brief articles presenting current empirical research projects; and reports of instances of methodological innovation. Submissions should be between 1500 and 2000 words and as a reflection of *Qualitative Researcher's* pragmatic and inclusive orientation endnotes and references should be kept to a minimum.

Qualitative Researcher is edited and published by Qualiti, a node of the UK ESRC National Centre for Research Methods. For enquiries and submissions, please contact qualiti@cardiff.ac.uk

Editorial Team:

Ben Fincham
finchamb@cardiff.ac.uk

Susanne Langer
langers@cardiff.ac.uk

Gareth Williams
williamsgh1@cardiff.ac.uk

Correspondence:

Qualiti
Cardiff School of Social Sciences
Glamorgan Building
King Edward VII
Cardiff CF10 3WT
Tel +44 (0)2920 875 345
Fax +44 (0)2920 874 759

<http://www.cardiff.ac.uk/socsi/qualiti>
Email: qualiti@cardiff.ac.uk

Views expressed in this journal do not necessarily reflect those of Cardiff University, Qualiti, the ESRC National Centre for Research Methods or the Economic and Social Research Council

