

Book Review: Ethics in Qualitative Research: Controversies and Contexts

by blog admin

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All social researchers need to think about ethical issues. But what are ethical issues? And how should they be approached? ***Ethics in Qualitative Research*** explores conflicting philosophical assumptions, the diverse social contexts in which ethical problems arise, and the complexities of handling them in practice. **Jen Tarr** finds the book straddles a difficult line between an introductory research text and a position paper on ethical regulation, at times failing to fill either role fully.



Ethics in Qualitative Research: Controversies and Contexts. Martyn Hammersley and Anna Traianou. Sage. May 2012.

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[Martyn Hammersley](#) has built a reputation for challenging many of the orthodoxies of qualitative research, through books like [What's Wrong with Ethnography?](#) (1992) or the more recent [Methodology: Who Needs It?](#) (2011). In this book, he and co-author [Anna Traianou](#) challenge the contemporary orthodoxy of what they call "ethics creep", the increasing formality and bureaucratisation of ethics in the social sciences, and highlight important questions about the role of social research itself.

The book takes up the issue of research ethics as it applies specifically to qualitative research. The authors argue that qualitative work is an area in which ethical regulation is particularly problematic, because flexible and emergent research designs make it difficult to adequately predict beforehand what the ethical issues may be. The 'hypothesis testing' approaches more common in medicine and natural science rarely apply in qualitative research, and it is common not to clearly know all the aims and objectives at the beginning of the research, making it difficult to anticipate contingencies.

The introduction and first chapter, which comprehensively outline the history of ethical regulation and sketch basic philosophical positions on ethics, will be useful to readers in any qualitative or quantitative discipline who are wondering about the meaning of research ethics and the role of ethics panels and institutional review boards as currently constituted. The authors trace how social science research ethics evolved from medical ethics and the Nuremburg Code of 1947 which sought to regulate medical research in the wake of Nazi experiments on people in institutions and concentration camps. For the social sciences, further impetus for regulation stemmed from researcher involvement in work for external organisations such as the CIA, and from the need for professionalization and concerns to regulate professional competence. With increased regulation there has also been a shift from retrospective evaluation of complaints to prospective assessment of risks, with ethics panels and review boards given the power to stop a research project before it begins.

Hammersley and Traianou go on to summarise and contrast philosophical positions on ethics including deontology, consequentialism, situationism, virtue ethics, and relational ethics or the ethics of care. They argue that their own approach will be closer to some of these positions than others, but this is relatively unexplored. While the chapter is valuable as a stand-alone overview it is not always clear how it advances their own argument.

**ETHICS IN
QUALITATIVE
RESEARCH**

CONTROVERSIES AND CONTEXTS

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From here the book takes a polemic turn, setting out the argument that research ethics is, or should be, a form of occupational ethics: “It is about what social researchers ought, and ought not, to do as *researchers*, and/or about what count as virtues and vices *in doing research*” (p. 36). Therefore the distinction needs to be made between values that are intrinsic versus those that are extrinsic to research as an occupation. More controversially, the authors argue that the goal of social research is the production of knowledge, specifically knowledge which is relevant to general interest, policy, or which enhances the state of knowledge in a discipline. In doing so, they explicitly reject the idea that researchers can make political or social goals part of the research process, thereby discarding most contemporary critical theory and analysis, feminist research, or action research approaches to name only a few. Similarly, they embrace truth as the primary standard for evaluating the knowledge claims made by researchers, simultaneously rejecting any counterargument that truth might be relative, contested or multiple. They focus on the values they see as intrinsic to social research: dedication, objectivity, and independence.

Proceeding from this rather purist view of research, they go on to outline extrinsic ethical considerations: reducing the risk of harm to participants; the value of autonomy and gaining informed consent for research; and the protection of anonymity and confidentiality for participants. None of these values are unchallenged or uncomplicated, and Hammersley and Traianou rehearse the arguments for and against norms such as anonymity, for instance. Throughout these later chapters, brief examples are drawn from online and visual research methods, two new areas where ethical guidance is still in the formative stages. Unfortunately these discussions, especially in the case of visual ethics, are relatively brief and uninformative compared to the rest of the text and would have benefited from more attention, given that they are hot topics in research ethics.

The authors conclude with a discussion about “challenging moralism”, summarising their own arguments and acknowledging that their approach rejects much of the contemporary reality of social research as it is currently practised, particularly qualitative research. They are equally critical of the over-regulation of social research by ethics boards, suggesting that they are often not the most qualified judges of whether projects are likely to be ethical.

As a whole, the book straddles a difficult line between an introductory research ethics text which would be valuable to students and a position paper on ethical regulation which contributes to the latest thinking in this area, at times failing to fill either role fully. Still, it’s a serious commentary on the state of research ethics and qualitative methods more generally and an important contribution to contemporary debates in the field.

Jen Tarr is Lecturer in Research Methodology in the Methodology Institute at the London School of Economics. She holds a PhD in Sociology from Goldsmiths College, University of London. She was previously a lecturer in Sociology at Trinity College Dublin, and has also taught at Goldsmiths College and the University of Sussex and been a Research Fellow at the London College of Fashion. [Read reviews by Jen.](#)