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FEATURE

**Ethics in Qualitative Research:
A Practical Guide**

Safary Wa-Mbaleka

Abstract. *Qualitative research continues to grow around the world. More and more scholars and institutions of higher education continue to embrace it. Publications must continue to be on practical ways of conducting qualitative research in general and conducting it especially ethically. This paper is focused primarily on practical ways of enhancing ethical practices in qualitative research. While many qualitative research books and articles discuss ethical considerations, it is good to have a paper that synthesizes effective strategies to enhance ethics in a much more practical way. This paper goes from the definition of ethics to the importance of ethical practices and to the implementation of practical considerations before, during, and after data collection in qualitative research. This paper is not meant to be exhaustive; however, it should be a good guide for qualitative researchers who wish to avail of practical strategies for good ethical practices.*

Keywords: qualitative research, ethics, ethical considerations, data collection, data analysis, data interpretation

Introduction

Many books and articles have been published about qualitative research (QLR). It is true that many QLR books include sections on ethical considerations (see for instance, Birks & Mills, 2011; Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Brinkmann, 2013; Creswell, 2013; Creswell & Poth, 2016; Denzin & Lincoln, 2017; Guest, Namey, & Mitchell, 2013; Lichtman, 2013; Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014; Patton, 2015). In fact, complete books have also been written on ethics in social sciences (see for instance, Lahman, 2017) or specifically on QLR (see for instance, Hammersley & Traianou, 2012; Miller, Birch, Mauthner, & Jessop, 2012; Tolich, 2016). Many discuss ethical considerations as known in research in general while

others expand the discussion to issues pertaining specifically to QLR. The more one reads about ethics in research in general and particularly in QLR, the more it becomes evident that ethical issues are quite complex in QLR. Additionally, the general ethical principles discussed in QLR textbooks can be challenging to apply practically in actual QLR, especially for novice qualitative researchers. What is often lacking is a set of practical guidelines that can be effectively used step by step through the different stages of a QLR study. There is a need for a practical guide that presents strategies that any qualitative researcher can easily use, especially for novice qualitative researchers.

Merriam-Webster defines ethics as “the discipline dealing with what is good and bad and with moral duty and obligation.” Basically, ethical considerations help qualitative researchers to plan their studies within moral bounds. Qualitative researchers have the moral obligation to uphold the highest ethical standard in planning and executing their studies. They are also required to limit the potential risk to the lowest minimum possible. This standard is not only to be seen in the proposal, as has sometimes been informally reported; it must be indeed implemented throughout the research journey (Creswell, 2013; Creswell & Poth, 2016). In fact, given the fact that qualitative researchers are in much closer proximity with their participants than do quantitative researchers, it is quite important to be much more careful with ethical considerations.

Unethical research should never be tolerated. In fact, as stated by Merriam (2009, p. 209), “all research is concerned with producing valid and reliable knowledge in an ethical manner” because that is what is required of all the researchers in order to be “able to trust research results.” This is especially important because qualitative researchers are much more involved in their participants’ personal lives than quantitative researchers are.

Ethical issues in QLR are serious. Unethical practices can negatively affect the participant, the researcher, or the involved institution or organization to which they belong. In some cases, unethical practices can lead to a lawsuit. Also, instead of improving the quality of research participants’ life, an unethical research study can do more harm. Therefore, it is important for all qualitative researchers to understand clearly the importance of ethical standards and to comply with them before, during, and after the research study. This paper aims at guiding qualitative researchers especially in this endeavor mainly from a practical standpoint. While what is proposed here may not necessarily be new, it translates many ethical considerations into practical strategies that any qualitative researcher can effectively implement.

Importance of Ethical Practices

Although some higher education institutions may not have any research ethics-regulating body, it is a common expectation in higher education. Not only is a qualitative researcher expected to seek permission from an institutional ethics review body, but he or she is also required to abide by the ethical standards to his or her best ability throughout the research study (Creswell, 2013). This standard practice in higher education institutions is helpful mainly for the researcher, the participants, and the institutions to which they belong.

Research ethical standards are helpful in many different ways. They protect both the researcher and the participants, as well as their respective institutions, organizations, or communities. It is true that the implementation of the QLR ethical principles may vary from one cultural setting to another; however, the underlying assumption is to do more good than harm in addressing social problems. Qualitative researchers are expected to carry on their study ethically well.

Generally, research in the social sciences is expected to follow certain common ethical standards. Whether the study is quantitative or qualitative, these ethical standards are expected to be followed. All researchers dealing with human participants must therefore abide by them. Below are some of the most commonly-known ethical standards found in ethics review applications (Creswell, 2013; Creswell & Poth, 2016; Lichtman, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016):

- ② *Protection of the participants, the researcher, the research setting, and the affiliated institution, community, or organization.* It is the researcher's duty to protect himself or herself, his or her institution or organization, the research participants, their setting, and their community. Preferably, no one should be hurt as a result of a QLR study; especially not beyond minimal risk. The institution, organization, or community to which participants belong should not be negatively affected because of their participation in a QLR study. This is especially important in QLR because, even if the name of the institution, organization, or community is not mentioned, participants' statements may indirectly reveal their identity.
- ② *Avoidance of physical, emotional, and spiritual harm.* Qualitative researchers should prevent any type of harm. They should use some precautions to avoid participants' physical harm that may be related to the research study. They should prevent and avoid emotional stress. If they foresee some potential emotional stress due to their study, they should prepare a counselor in advance who can provide help during the study. On the spiritual aspect, qualitative researchers should generally avoid changing the participants' religious or cultural beliefs. These are part of the participants' identity.

- ② *Minimization of risk to the lowest level.* Researchers are usually allowed some minimal risk, whenever necessary, especially if they are focused on “greater good.” The only challenge is that “minimal risk” can be defined differently in different cultures, communities, organizations, or institutions. Each ethics review board seems to be best situated to define the “minimal risk” of the institution that is involved.
- ② *Reciprocity.* This ethical principle calls for a win-win situation for both the researcher and the participants or participating institutions/organizations. While the researcher’s advantage is primarily to have access to research data, the research participants should also benefit directly and sometimes indirectly from the study. It is true that some small tokens are acceptable, as long as they cannot create any type of conflict in the community where the research study is conducted. The participants can also benefit from the study by having their voice heard, having a platform to share their stories, being recipients of some policy change or policy creation, or getting involved in community-based projects or programs, which can help improve the participants’ or their community’s life.
- ② *Interest in humanizing and dignifying the research participants.* No matter their status, position, gender, race, religion, or any other factor, participants should always be treated with dignity. A researcher may approach the participants with the assumption that these are of lower status than him or her. Such a practice would be unethical. The qualitative researcher and his or her participants co-construct knowledge through the research study. They are on an equal footing during the research journey.
- ② *Respect for the participants.* Qualitative researchers should respect the participants, their rights, cultures, worldview, and their setting. Participants may be from the lowest socio-economic status and may be the most illiterate people in the world; yet, it is the researcher’s duty to respect them and whatever they have and believe in.
- ② *Special care for special groups of participants.* Qualitative researchers should be aware of special groups that require unique care and particular permission before involving them in a QLR study. Some of these groups include, but are not limited to, minors, people with mental disabilities, inmates, pregnant women, among many others. Any researcher dealing with any special group needs to explore deeper the related and required ethical standards.
- ② *Voluntary participation.* Anyone who is involved in a QLR study should give informed consent or assent without any type of coercion. It is true that sometimes indirect coercion may occur beyond the researcher’s control. For instance, through snowball sampling, if a supervisor requests

an employee (or a professor requests his or her students) to participate in a study; there is some level of coercion that may not be intended or noticed. The researcher should always try to plan ahead and prevent any type of coercion from happening. Participants have the right to drop out of a research study at any time they wish to do so. They also have the right to avoid answering a specific question from an interview or focus group discussion if they decide so. They have the right to choose what they wish to share and what they do not feel like sharing for a research study.

- ❑ *Privacy.* Qualitative researchers should make sure participants' privacy is protected. Participants should be involved in the study, mainly in the place and time of their choice. Qualitative researchers should not be intrusive in participants' place and time.
- ❑ *Confidentiality.* The issue of confidentiality is one of the challenging ones in QLR. Basically, in quantitative research, once the names of the people (or their institution, organization, community) are removed and the results are presented in aggregate, it is usually enough. In the next section, this issue is discussed further.

The trustworthiness of a research study heavily depends on the researcher's ethical practices and the methods he or she uses in conducting a study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). It is therefore important for the qualitative researcher to know well and use effectively the appropriate QLR methods and adhere to high QLR ethical standards. Qualitative researchers should take this reality seriously because "ultimately, for better or worse, the trustworthiness of the data is tied directly to the trustworthiness of those who collect and analyze the data—and their demonstrated competence" (Patton, 2015, p. 706). Qualitative researchers should therefore get well acquainted with proper ethical practices. Ethical practices in QLR should not be about being *politically correct* in a research study; they should truly be about caring about people and improving their life. When the primary focus of a QLR study ceases to be about caring about the participants and improving their life, the study automatically starts becoming unethical.

Ethical Considerations Peculiar to Qualitative Research

While all the ethical standards discussed above are applicable to QLR, there are other issues that qualitative researchers need to consider much more than what is found in quantitative research. In fact, "review boards are too far removed from the research to give adequate protection" to both the researcher and the participants (Stake, 2010, p. 206), especially when dealing with QLR. Some of them are discussed below. Those discussed below may be just a fraction of what can be found out there.

- ❑ *Confidentiality.* In QLR, anonymizing the data may not be enough (Tolich, 2010, 2016). For instance, in direct quotes, the readers who are familiar with the community where data was collected can easily guess who said what. Additionally, when it comes to focus group discussions, the researcher cannot guarantee full confidentiality from and for everyone who participated in that focus group discussion, even when non-disclosure agreements are signed. While there may not be any prescriptive method for qualitative researchers to deal fully with confidentiality issues, they are expected to uphold this ethical principle to the highest standard. Failure to keep confidentiality in a QLR study can be devastating to the participants (Lichtman, 2013). It can also negatively affect the study's trustworthiness or even lead to a lawsuit.
- ❑ *Advocacy.* QLR should be about advocating for the participants or the group to which they belong (Stake, 2010). QLR should be about alleviating the pain or suffering of the participants and improving their life in general.
- ❑ *Participants' voice.* Stake (2010) believes that qualitative researchers are commonly driven by the interest in providing a voice to the underprivileged, the underrepresented, the underserved, or the marginalized—obviously, those without a voice. Many QLR scholars recognize that QLR is not value-free; it is driven by an agenda to provide a voice to the participants.
- ❑ *Personal ethics.* Sometimes, a qualitative researcher may go successfully through the ethics review process but when implementing the study, he or she comes across ethical issues that are specific to certain participants or research settings. Some of these may not even be part of the formal ethics review application (Tolich, 2016). Some of these include what Stake (2010) calls “unique zones of privacy” (p. 205). In this case, the researcher needs to make an ethical decision or consult with the ethics review board or some experienced qualitative researchers (Tolich, 2010).
- ❑ *Prevention of intrusion.* Because qualitative researchers are in close proximity with their participants, it is possible for them to be intrusive in their participant's lives. Stake (2010) proposes different strategies to minimize or prevent intrusion (p. 208). He suggests that avoidance of intrusion “is not through a one-time ‘letter of consent’ but a continuing negotiation of roles and permissions to inquire about matters, personal and otherwise” (p. 208). Qualitative researchers constantly need to assess their intrusion level so that they can address it promptly if ever it occurs.

Bottom line, qualitative researchers must do their work ethically in planning and implementing their research study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Achieving the highest level of the ethicality of a research study is not a work of chance. The researcher must plan and implement carefully an ethical research study. The

subsequent sections of this paper propose different ethical practices to be used at different stages of an ethical QLR study. These are not exhaustive at all; they are simply a good start for much deeper exploration for each qualitative researcher.

Ethical Considerations Before Data Collection

Before data collection can begin, it is important for a qualitative researcher to plan well. This planning requires serious thought about the possible ethical issues that pertain to the study. The researcher must carefully list down all possible ethical issues and how to deal with them. The researcher must go through the ethics review (or institutional review or internal review) process and obtain full approval before data collection (Creswell, 2013; Creswell & Poth, 2016).

Literature shows at least 12 different components of an ethics review proposal (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 2015). These 12 elements are likely to be found among the requirements of many higher education institutions. This list, however, is not exhaustive, although it makes a good foundation for a QLR proposal that adheres effectively to expected ethical considerations.

- ❑ *Purpose of the study.* The QLR proposal must clearly stipulate the title, synthesis, problem, and purpose of the study. The ethics review body must know exactly what the study is about and why it is being proposed. This information is also needed before any prospective participant can give consent or assent to participate. This short description needs to capture accurately and concisely what the proposed QLR study is about. In the proposal, the research proponent may be required to include the research questions and a brief summary of the methodology (including but not limited to research design, research setting, sampling, data collection methods, data analysis methods, and researcher's reflexivity) that will be used.
- ❑ *Reciprocity.* The QLR proposal must state clearly what both the researcher and the research participants will gain from the study. It is obvious that the researcher gets access to data that help him or her to address a specific problem and probably meet certain academic, scholarly, or professional requirements. For the participants, QLR can give them a voice or a platform to address their issues. In some research designs, such as photovoice, some new policies or funding opportunities can be generated as part of the research study (Rosario, Domocmat, & Oniashvili, 2016).
- ❑ *Promises.* Researchers are allowed to give some simple tokens to participants (Taylor, Bogdan, & DeVault, 2016). If they plan to do so, they should state it clearly in the proposal. Caution is given to everyone when giving substantive tokens because that may be viewed either as indirect

coercion or it may be the reason for conflict in a community where some people receive expensive tokens while other members of the same community (who do not participate in the study) do not have such tokens.

- ② *Risk assessment.* As indicated before, researchers are generally allowed minimal risk. The researcher needs to assess carefully the risk involved in participating in the study and make sure there is no more than minimal risk involved (Tracy, 2013). The researcher must then write in the proposal that there is no known risk (or there is a minimal risk) involved in participating in the study. In case there is any known minimal risk, no matter how minimal it is, the researcher must state what that minimal risk is so that the ethics review board and prospective participants are aware of it. It helps both the ethics review board and the prospective participants to assess for themselves whether that risk is truly minimal.
- ② *Privacy and confidentiality.* These two concepts are most likely some of the most known ones as far as ethical considerations are concerned. Qualitative researchers are expected to respect their participants' privacy. They must also keep confidential the participants' information that can identify the participants or their setting. The challenge in QLR, however, is that through direct quotes from participants, people in the community where the participants live can guess the identity of who said what (Tolich, 2010, 2016). It is therefore important for the qualitative researchers to think beyond the simple anonymization of the data—a common practice used in both QLR and quantitative research.
- ② *Informed consent or assent.* Before anyone can participate in a QLR study, the researcher must secure that person's informed consent (for regular participants) or informed assent (for special groups such as children). By default, informed consent or assent is done in writing. The researcher is expected to prepare an informed consent or assent form. It has to be submitted as part of the ethics review proposal. It is important to emphasize here that there are some instances when a verbal consent or assent is used (Wa-Mbaleka, 2018, 2019). For instance, in communities where people may not know how to read and or write, and they value more the spoken word than the written one, it is important to read the informed consent statements and audio-record the verbal consent or assent of the prospective participants.
- ② *Data access and ownership.* The QLR proposal, as well as the informed or assent form, must include how data or the research setting will be accessed. Wherever formal permission is needed, the researcher needs to state how he or she will secure such permission. It is also important to keep in mind that the data first and foremost belong to the participants. That is why they have the right to modify it any time during the research study. The researcher, however, is a co-owner of the data. This privilege is given to

him or her by the participants when they give their informed consent or assent. It is essential, however, for the researcher to state clearly in advance whether there will be other people who will have access to raw data, such as research advisors, thesis or dissertation committees, or co-researchers. Such a statement is also important for the confidentiality requirement.

- ☐ *Interviewer's mental health.* Although it is not always stated in research proposals, qualitative researchers should think carefully about the emotional effect that the study may have on them. If emotional stress is foreseen, the qualitative researcher should already devise a plan to deal with it; for instance, through the use of a professional counselor, both for the researcher and the participants. Additionally, the qualitative researcher needs to think carefully about and plan ways to prevent any intimacy with the participants. While building rapport with participants is highly encouraged to increase the trustworthiness of the study (Lichtman, 2013), the qualitative researchers are prohibited from developing any kind of intimate relationship with their participants (Wa-Mbaleka, 2018).
- ☐ *Ethical advisor.* In most cases, the ethics review board is the official ethics advisor of an institution. Sometimes, however, during the actual QLR study, especially during data collection, something may come up that was not covered through the ethics review process. The researcher should have an ethics advisor or a group of ethics advisors, who can continue guiding the researcher (Tolich, 2010, 2016; Tracy, 2013). In the case of a thesis or dissertation, this task is often assumed by the chairperson of the thesis or dissertation committee.
- ☐ *Data collection boundaries.* In the proposal, as well as in the informed consent form, the researcher must state exactly what data will be collected, why, how, when, and how long it will be collected (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Taylor et al., 2016). Such a description helps the ethics review board to evaluate the ethical feasibility of the study being proposed. Having such a statement in the informed consent form helps the prospective participants understand clearly what is expected of them.
- ☐ *Ethical and methodological choices.* The ethical practices that will be used in the study must be clearly outlined. For instance, a researcher may indicate that he or she will use observations in a classroom, interviews at the participants' office, and document collection at the research site. For each method to be used, the proposal must clearly explain why the chosen methods were considered fit for the study.
- ☐ *Ethical versus legal issues.* While ethical and legal issues may have quite some overlap, the qualitative researcher needs to keep in mind that they are different. The researcher needs not to think only about ethical issues but also the legal implication of the study (Tracy, 2013). For instance, if

someone were to explore a research topic that deals with illegal activities, it may be ethical to keep the information confidential but it may be illegal to keep it confidential when there is an ongoing legal investigation if required by the legal authorities. Additionally, the qualitative researcher needs to follow all the ethical and legal requirements to protect special groups, such as inmates, pregnant women, minors, and participants who are incapable of making their own informed decision.

In preparing the proposal for ethics review, qualitative researchers must take into consideration many different documents and factors. First, they must prepare all the required documents needed for the full proposal, following the institution's template and guidelines. Some of these include the actual proposal, the informed consent or assent form, non-disclosure agreement (in case of focus group discussions will be used), and all letter templates that will be used to secure official permissions or authorizations. Additionally, the proposal packet for ethics review can include appendices for interview protocols, observation checklists, and other similar tools that will be used to collect data effectively and efficiently. Some resources that will be used to record data, such as audio and video recorders, as well as photo cameras, should also be indicated in the proposal. The researcher must briefly explain how each will be used and the reason for that usage.

The use of the triangulation matrix and interview matrix can also help plan the study well, not only for efficiency and effectiveness (Wa-Mbaleka, 2019) but also for ethical purposes. Both should be attached as appendices to the proposal. For the triangulation matrix, it is important to create a matrix that contains all the research questions and the corresponding sources of data. The triangulation matrix helps secure enough triangulated data for each research question. The interview matrix, on the other hand, contains the research questions followed by the corresponding interview questions. Such a matrix allows the researcher to align closely all the interview questions with the research questions; thus, reducing the chance of collecting unrelated data. Collecting data that is not going to be used for the study, simply because of lack of proper planning, is unethical.

The work of ethical practices in QLR starts early on, before data collection can ever begin. Failing to think about it early on when planning the ethical implementation of a QLR study can make it harder for the researcher to carry on his or her study ethically. Abiding by the ethical guidelines and standards of QLR should be something every qualitative researcher aims for. It all starts by planning ethically well the QLR study.

Ethical Considerations During Data Collection

During data collection, the qualitative researcher must implement everything that was planned during the proposal writing stage. The researcher must always

keep in mind that “qualitative researchers are guests in the private spaces of the world. Their manners should be good and their code of ethics strict” (Stake, 2005, p. 459). More than what is found in quantitative research, qualitative researchers are directly involved in the private spaces of their participants. The level of privacy of those spaces can vary from one culture to another, from one group to another, and from one individual to another. It is therefore imperative for the qualitative researcher to be constantly aware of this reality during the whole data collection process.

Tracy (2013) proposes that we follow three types of ethics in the conduct of QLR: universal, situational, and relational ethics. Universal ethics here can be defined as the type of ethics required for all social sciences ethics in general. Situational ethics deals with context-specific ethics. In QLR, contexts vary according to the culture of the target group of participants. Some adjustments may need to be made when carrying on the study in order to contextualize the study. Last, relational ethics is concerned with how the researcher relates to individual participants, their culture, worldview, and setting. Part of collecting trustworthy data is to build trust with the participants. Relational ethics therefore is needed. Below are some practical strategies that can be used during data collection (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Brinkmann, 2013; Creswell, 2013; Creswell & Poth, 2016; Denzin & Lincoln, 2017; Lichtman, 2013):

- ☐ Follow carefully all the planned ethical practices, all the required policies, guidelines, and codes. Deviating from them without any clear explanation (or sometimes without permission) can lead to unethical practice.
- ☐ Be culturally sensitive.
- ☐ Talk less, listen more, and stay focused.
- ☐ Avoid developing intimacy with the participants.
- ☐ Avoid local politics.
- ☐ Show interest and respect to your participants.
- ☐ Treat participants with dignity, no matter their socio-economic status, gender, religion, or other factors.
- ☐ Do not take advantage of your participants.
- ☐ Adhere to the ethical standards required in your research setting.
- ☐ Take into account the needs of special groups.
- ☐ Record accurately the data in the collection process—have a clear audit trail.
- ☐ Allow participants the freedom to share what they wish to share and to withhold what they do not wish to share.

Tolich (2010) introduced another important type of consent that is worth considering in QLR; it is the concept of “process consent.” According to him, what is stated in the informed consent form sometimes may not be enough to deal with all the complex issues that may arise in the conduct of a QLR study. He proposes that, as the study goes on, the researchers may feel the need to update the participants on the ethical dilemmas that come up and then seek additional consent or assent that covers new processes that may have generated new ethical concerns. Again, this issue is much more likely to happen in QLR than in quantitative research.

During the data collection in a QLR study, the researcher must focus on respecting the participants, their culture, and their setting. Additionally, he or she must continuously be driven by giving the participants a voice, to contribute to improving their life. All the QLR data collection methods must uphold the dignity of the participants. The participants should directly or indirectly feel that they are cared for in the study.

Ethical Considerations During Data Analysis and Interpretation

Ethical practices do not stop at the end of data collection. Even after data collection is over, the qualitative researcher must abide by certain standards. Literature discusses differently the best practices that can guide the qualitative researchers in ethical data analysis and interpretation (Haynes, 2018; Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2017; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Miles et al., 2014; Patton, 2015; Stake, 2010; Tolich, 2010). The following are some of the most fundamental ones that all qualitative researchers should uphold after data collection or during data analysis and interpretation:

- ☐ Reiterate confidentiality to the participants and make sure to keep it.
- ☐ Reinstate anyone emotionally affected to their normal emotional state.
- ☐ Withdraw from the research setting with the least disturbance possible.
- ☐ Back up all your data because, for instance, you may not be able to replicate the same interview with the same participants if you lose the audio recordings.
- ☐ Remove all identifiers from the data before data analysis. Anonymize the data.
- ☐ While checking your own biases, analyze and report data accurately.
- ☐ Back up all claims with relevant evidence from the collected data; the common practice is to use some direct quotes (or pictures) from the raw data.

- ❑ Conduct member check with all the participants so that they have the opportunity to amend any part of the data, data analysis, or data interpretation if necessary.
- ❑ Conduct peer review (with other qualitative researchers and experts from the field).

Ethical Considerations After Study Completion

Qualitative researchers should always keep in mind that the main reason why we conduct research is to improve human life. At the end of the research study, the researcher should be able to address the question, “so what?” as far as the research participants are concerned. He or she should explain how the study addressed the problem or how it improved (or will improve) the life of the participants. The researcher should be able to state clearly the new contribution of the study to the existing body of knowledge. Below are some of the practices that relate to ethical standards after the completion of the study (Rosario et al., 2016; Tullis, 2013; Wa-Mbaleka, 2018).

- ❑ Share the findings with the participants.
- ❑ When possible, devise and implement some intervention plans or projects such as workshops, seminars, community projects, scholarships, education through informal publications (e.g., through newspaper, magazine, radio, television).
- ❑ Decide about what to do with the illegal activities that you encountered in the study or the research setting.
- ❑ Discard carefully the transcripts and other data documents after the required time.
- ❑ “Do not present publicly or publish anything you would not show the persons mentioned in the text” (Tullis, 2013, p. 257); that is, do not betray your participants.
- ❑ Continue keeping your participants’ confidentiality.

Four Ethical Challenges in Qualitative Research

This paper has presented several practical guidelines for qualitative researchers at different stages of their study. Four challenges are still in the literature and are not yet well addressed. There are certainly more ethical challenges but these four

should be in the mind of qualitative researchers today. More discussion on these issues is needed to help address current and new ethical issues in QLR.

First, when faced with illegal and maybe immoral or unethical behaviors or activities in the research setting, “knowing when and how to intervene is perhaps the most perplexing dilemma facing qualitative [researchers]” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 263). Some qualitative researchers may feel that they are bound by the confidentiality requirement that prevents them from reporting such issues. Others may believe that it is an ethical obligation to report unethical or immoral behaviors or activities. In fact, “the literature on research ethics generally supports a noninterventionist position in fieldwork” (Taylor et al., 2016, p. 96) but this is an ethical and legal challenge too. Still, others may feel that it is only when it is a matter of life and death that the qualitative researcher should be involved in reporting such issues. At this point, it is up to every qualitative researcher to pick a position based on his or her understanding and evidence available to him or her. There is no single way of addressing this ethical issue.

Second, social media and the internet present a vast wealth of data that can be used for QLR; unfortunately, this data poses privacy and confidentiality challenges (Lichtman, 2013). While some attempts are being made in this area, there is still much to be addressed about the ethical guidelines and standards pertaining to the use of social media and the internet as QLR data sources. What makes it even more challenging is the ever-changing nature of both social media and the internet.

Third, once the ethics review body approves a proposal, there seems to be little control over the actual implementation of the ethics plan. It is unusual, if it has ever happened at all, to have a member of the ethics review board join the researcher (or the student) in data collection and analysis. Once the ethical standards are written down in the proposal, the ethics watchdog is happy and seems to ignore the actual implementation. Do they ever wonder how many researchers with approved ethics review proposals get to implement the study ethically as was proposed? Do they truly care about the researcher and the research participants or are they just concerned with protecting their institution or organization? Are they simply driven by standards, structures, and procedures? Is there anything that can ever be done about it? All these questions are worth exploring in the ongoing growth of QLR ethics.

The last challenge deals with data collected through focus discussion groups. To ensure confidentiality in focus group discussions, it is common for qualitative researchers to require each member of the group to sign a non-disclosure agreement, which requires them to keep confidential anything that is said during the group discussion. Unfortunately, the qualitative researcher cannot fully guarantee that all the focus group members will keep that information confidential (Tolich, 2010, 2016). Qualitative researchers are encouraged to think of other ways of addressing this possible breach of confidentiality, which is likely to happen in or after many focus group discussions.

Conclusion

Ethical issues and practices in QLR are quite complex. While not everyone is expected to be an expert in QLR ethics, everyone is expected to abide by certain fundamental principles. I too do not consider myself an expert in QLR ethics; it is just that I believe that the content of this paper could help other struggling qualitative researchers to get started on the right path for ethical practices. This paper has presented some practical guidelines and best practices that can guide qualitative researchers at different stages of their QLR studies. What is presented here is just the start. Readers are encouraged to dig deeper by reading more about ethical practices in QLR. They also need to know that with technological advancement, there are more and more ethical issues that they can expect to encounter. This means that the work of QLR ethics will always have room for more exploration.

For a synopsis of the best ethical practices at different stages of a QLR study, readers are referred to Table 3.2 of Creswell (2013, pp. 58-59). That table presents a quick guide for busy qualitative researchers. It does not, however, exclude the need for a deeper personal exploration of existing literature on ethics in QLR. Learning more about QLR ethics should actually be considered an ethical duty of all qualitative researchers because, by learning more about QLR ethics, the researchers are more likely to conduct more ethical QLR.

Bottom line, qualitative researchers must abide by QLR ethical standards before, during, and after data collection, analysis, and interpretation. Qualitative researchers need to be truthful and they must work with integrity. They must show courtesy, respect, and humility. They must always treat their participants with dignity. They must be culturally sensitive. They must have empathy which would lead them to address the participants' problems. They must have a clear audit trail so that readers can assess their study's ethicality. They should do everything professionally and ethically. They should talk less and listen more in order to learn more. They should continually learn about QLR ethics.

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Safary Wa-Mbaleka, EdD, PhD
Associate Professor, Adventist University of Africa
Nairobi, Kenya
Wa-MbalekaS@aua.ac.ke