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Negotiating Responsibility for Navigating Ethical Issues in Qualitative Research: A Review of Miller, Birch, Mauthner, and Jessop's (2012) *Ethics in Qualitative Research*, Second Edition

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Abstract

Ethics in Qualitative Research (Miller, Birch Mauthner, & Jessop, 2012), now in its second edition, uses a feminist framework to present a variety of issues pertinent to qualitative researchers. Topics include traditional challenges for qualitative researchers (e.g., access to potential participants, informed consent, overlapping roles), as well as those that have garnered more attention in recent years, particularly with regard to uses and consequences of technological advances in research. The book is critical of committees whose function it is to review proposed research and grant research ethics approval (e.g., University Research Ethics Committees [URECs], Research Ethics Boards [REBs], and Institutional Review Boards [IRBs]). The authors of this book are situated within the United Kingdom. The editors take the position that ethics oversight by the researchers themselves is preferable and that such boards and committees are not well equipped to review qualitative research. A rebuttal to this position is presented within this review. *Ethics in Qualitative Research* provides a good overview of ethical issues that researchers face and is effective in merging theory with practice. It would be strengthened by avoiding the debate over URECs or by offering concrete suggestions for how URECs can improve their reviews of qualitative research.

Keywords

Research Ethics, Qualitative Research, UREC, REB, IRB, ESRC, TCPS 2, OHRP

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Negotiating Responsibility for Navigating Ethical Issues in Qualitative Research: A Review of Miller, Birch, Mauthner, and Jessop's (2012) *Ethics in Qualitative Research, Second Edition*

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Ethics in Qualitative Research (Miller, Birch Mauthner, & Jessop, 2012), now in its second edition, uses a feminist framework to present a variety of issues pertinent to qualitative researchers. Topics include traditional challenges for qualitative researchers (e.g., access to potential participants, informed consent, overlapping roles), as well as those that have garnered more attention in recent years, particularly with regard to uses and consequences of technological advances in research. The book is critical of committees whose function it is to review proposed research and grant research ethics approval (e.g., University Research Ethics Committees [URECs], Research Ethics Boards [REBs], and Institutional Review Boards [IRBs]). The authors of this book are situated within the United Kingdom. The editors take the position that ethics oversight by the researchers themselves is preferable and that such boards and committees are not well equipped to review qualitative research. A rebuttal to this position is presented within this review. *Ethics in Qualitative Research* provides a good overview of ethical issues that researchers face and is effective in merging theory with practice. It would be strengthened by avoiding the debate over URECs or by offering concrete suggestions for how URECs can improve their reviews of qualitative research. Keywords: Research Ethics, Qualitative Research, UREC, REB, IRB, ESRC, TCPS 2, OHRP

I was eager to read *Ethics in Qualitative Research*, edited by Tina Miller, Maxine Birch, Melanie Mauthner, and Julie Jessop (2012)—now in its second edition—and for good reason: It brings together two of my favourite topics: research ethics and qualitative research, and it is written from a feminist perspective. This book covers a wide range of topics that are essential for qualitative researchers to consider when planning, conducting, analyzing, and disseminating their work, such as ethical issues to consider when gaining access to potential participants and obtaining informed consent (Chapter 4), the complexities of disclosure and reflection in longitudinal and participant observation research (Chapter 6), challenges of establishing and maintaining rapport (Chapter 7), overlapping roles as researcher and practitioner (Chapter 5), and an assortment of ethical dilemmas that stem from technological advances in the conduct of research (Chapters 2, 10 & 11). Feminist writings on research ethics frequently examine themes such as the power dynamics of the researcher–participant relationship, research as a political tool (Chapter 3), feminist epistemological and methodological approaches (Chapter 8), and the interpretation and construction of meaning throughout all stages of the research process (Chapter 9)—all issues which were well covered in this text.

Disappointingly, I felt as though I was cast in the role of the villain before I even made it to Chapter 1. I am the Chair of a Research Ethics Board, and the editors and authors of this text—all of whom belong to a UK-based research collective called the Women's Workshop on Qualitative/Household Research—are strongly critical of formalized institutional mechanisms for research ethics review, casting them as draconian regulatory

machines with poor understanding of the unique processes and philosophical bases associated with qualitative research, whose requirements impede the research process. Throughout this volume, the editors decry not only of the role of University Research Ethics Committees (URECs)¹ in evaluating the ethical issues involved in conducting qualitative research, but indeed are critical of their very existence, painting a picture of the UREC as a patriarchal monolith exerting its power over researchers, who have no choice but to submit to its whims, however uninformed on the nuances of qualitative research they may be.

In their forward to this edition, the authors reference the decision of the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) in the United Kingdom to implement their Framework for Research Ethics (FRE) in 2006 (as cited in Miller et al., 2012), which stipulates that all ESRC-funded research must be reviewed by a UREC which operates in accordance with the Framework (ESRC, 2012). This parallels the situation in Canada, where any research funded by a Tri-Council Agency² must undergo review by a Research Ethics Board (REB) which follows the second edition of the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS 2; CIHR, NSERC, & SSHRC, 2010). The authors critique the ESRC's decision to tie funding to mandated and ongoing research ethics review by a UREC. Given the feminist ideology underpinning this book, this resistance appears to stem from a belief that such a requirement is inherently patriarchal: In order for a researcher to be eligible for funding, she or he must submit to the control of the UREC, which may or may not be well versed in qualitative research. As a qualitative researcher and a feminist, I can empathize with the concern that the members of some institutions' URECs may not have competency to evaluate the unique ethical considerations inherent in feminist and/or qualitative research, particularly given that in many disciplines, qualitative research is still in the minority and feminist research continues to be marginalized. Nevertheless, it strikes me as short-sighted to suggest that self-reflection, or even review by peers consulted by the investigator (both of which were suggested in this volume), are acceptable alternatives. Even the most self-aware and reflective of researchers has an inherent conflict of interest when tasked with identifying and addressing the potential ethical dilemmas presented by her or his proposed research. This suggestion falls short of providing adequate protection (which I recognize may be deemed paternalistic, and perhaps this forms part of the basis of the authors' objections) for participants and prospective participants in research.

In Canada, our REBs must consist of both women and men, and include, at a minimum, two individuals knowledgeable in research (with an emphasis on the importance that they have the required knowledge to evaluate the proposed research competently), a member knowledgeable in ethics, one member knowledgeable in law (required for biomedical research, recommended for behavioural research), and a member from the community (CIHR, NSERC, & SSHRC, 2010). The Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) in the United States has similar requirements (OHRP, 2011). In my experience, having reviewers with such wide-ranging experiences and training illuminates ethical issues that even the most well-intentioned researcher may not have considered, simply by virtue of her or his personal frame of reference. The inclusion of a community member in particular is a benefit, as non-researchers are often better positioned to put themselves in the role of the research participant than are those who are accustomed to engaging in research from the

¹ This is the term used in this volume, so I have retained it throughout for clarity and out of respect for the cultural context in which this book is based. This type of formal institutional ethics review body is alternately referred to as a Research Ethics Board (REB) in Canada or an Institutional Review Board (IRB) in the United States.

² The Tri-Council agencies are the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR), the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC), and the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada (NSERC).

position of the researcher. As a feminist researcher, I find the inclusion of community members on REBs particularly welcome, as a committee consisting entirely of researchers would be, in essence, a committee which consists entirely of those who have traditionally held the balance of power within the research enterprise. The TCPS 2 includes a chapter specifically about reviewing qualitative research, in which topics such as the nature of knowledge acquisition, emerging research designs, “dynamic, negotiated and ongoing consent process[es]” (p. 137), and partnerships between researchers and participants are explored.

Although the recurring theme of the UREC as a barrier to research marred my overall impression, this book is not without its merits. This book’s strength was in its balance between the theoretical and the applied. The authors do a commendable job of presenting ethical challenges within the context of actual research that they have conducted. These case studies demonstrate problems that can arise (some of which were anticipated by the researchers and some that were not), how they were resolved, and a post-mortem analysis. They also tackle themes of contemporary interest to qualitative researchers, such as the permanent record established when communicating with participants in writing electronically (Chapter 2). This volume explores such issues in depth, synergistically interweaving the theoretical and the practical aspects of conducting qualitative research (the groundwork for which is laid in Chapter 1), as they draw upon real-life examples of research and propose recommendations for ethical practices.

I fully support the authors’ repeated calls to ensure that researchers are better educated about ethical issues and for researchers to be proactive in critically evaluating their own research for potential ethical dilemmas at all stages of the research process. In an ideal world, all researchers would have the welfare of their participants and the betterment of society at the forefront of their minds when planning, conducting, analyzing, and disseminating their research. However, each discipline has its own examples of ethically dubious or downright unethical research. Even with the noblest of intentions, researchers may do something that is ethically problematic, either through ignorance or unacknowledged bias. In fact, a few specific examples in this very book (which I will not mention so as not to bring attention to particular contributors) caught my attention as issues that could have been flagged for further ethical review, as there may have been potential for unintended consequences to participants or potential participants. Even though I myself serve as Chair of an REB, my own research is still subjected to REB review, from which I excuse myself due to a conflict of interest.

Members of URECs obviously are not perfect—myself included—and if a UREC does not include individuals with sufficient expertise in qualitative methodology, I would argue that it is unethical for them to be reviewing qualitative research because they do not hold the requisite competence in that area. However, instead of condemning the existence of URECs and their ilk, the authors’ energy would have been better spent proposing models of UREC review that satisfy the need for oversight while at the same time responding to the unique considerations inherent in qualitative research. Such an approach would have augmented the recommendations that they made throughout the book and would have kept the focus of the discourse squarely on the roles that all individuals involved in research play in ensuring that participants are given the opportunity to take part in ethical, participant-oriented research.

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