

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS WHEN USING QUALITATIVE METHODS IN EVALUATION

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Abstract: This article discusses some of the ethical dilemmas that can arise when evaluators utilize qualitative methodologies. The dilemmas discussed are those not easily dealt with by referring to one of the existing codes of research ethics. The author does not offer solutions to these complex dilemmas, but suggests that their identification and the ensuing discussion will assist evaluators in designing an evaluation study.

Résumé: Le présent article examine certains dilemmes éthiques qui peuvent se présenter lorsque des évaluateurs utilisent des méthodologies qualitatives. Les dilemmes en question sont ceux qu'il est impossible de régler en se reportant simplement à un des codes existants de l'éthique en matière de recherche. Bien que ce document n'offre pas de solutions à ces dilemmes éthiques fort complexes, il est espéré que leur repérage et le débat qui s'ensuivra faciliteront le processus de planification que les évaluateurs suivent lorsqu'ils élaborent une étude d'évaluation.

█ In comparison to the amount of published material on how to conduct meaningful research and evaluations, the amount of space allocated to the discussion of ethical behavior in these endeavors is minute. Yet every researcher and evaluator makes numerous ethical decisions on each project in which they are involved. These ethical decisions are sometimes made consciously and sometimes unconsciously. Unconscious decisions are made when an evaluator chooses an option without realizing that it will have an ethical impact on that evaluator, the participant, or the client.

Many of the ethical decisions to be made during the course of an evaluation project are simple because they can be based directly on easy-to-follow ethical guidelines established by one of the many professional organizations. For example, since I am involved mainly in educational research and evaluation, I adhere to the ethical

standards published by the American Educational Research Association (AERA, 1992). There are, however, many ethical situations that arise for which these guidelines are of little value.

When the issue of research ethics is raised, the initial response given by the majority of my colleagues is that they are aware of all potential problem areas and can easily address them. However, after a short discussion with these colleagues, I usually find that although they know the basic guidelines (e.g., informed consent, no harm to the subjects/participants, confidentiality of identity and scores/responses, honesty in reporting the data), few have thought about these issues in any depth, and still fewer are clear on how to deal with problems that fall in the “gray areas.” A further complication has been the development and increasing use of methods that fall under the general heading of qualitative research. These methods require a much closer working relationship with the individuals under investigation. In the quantitative research models the “subjects” are to be viewed from afar with uninvolved objectivity, whereas in the qualitative models “informants” are to be observed up close and interacted with (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Eisner, 1991; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Therefore, the use of qualitative research methods requires a different approach to the issue of ethical behavior.

Because qualitative methods are highly personal and interpersonal, because naturalistic inquiry takes the researcher into the real world where people live and work, and because in-depth interviewing opens up what is inside people—qualitative inquiry may be more intrusive and involves greater reactivity than surveys, tests, and other quantitative approaches. (Patton, 1990, p. 365: emphasis in original)

Michalos (1992) provided a philosophical foundation on which ethical thought and discussion can be based. However, his article was very broad, and so it is difficult to apply its basic rules in all evaluation situations. In some situations, the principles of “one’s actions should impartially improve the quality of life” and “no harm to participants” are oversimplifications and, therefore, they cannot always be successfully applied. For example, what if an evaluator has promised to keep all interviews with program personnel confidential, but during the course of the evaluation discovers that one staff member has been avoiding doing any meaningful work owing to personal problems? What should this evaluator do? Should she or he report

the information to the program director, or should the information be kept confidential? If confidentiality is maintained, the evaluator could be hurting the program's clients because they are not getting the service they were promised. However, by breaking the promise of confidentiality, the evaluator might be jeopardizing the staff member's job. Furthermore, if confidentiality is broken, will the remaining staff members be willing to continue their cooperation in the evaluation process? The principles "no harm to participants" and "improved quality of life" turn into the questions "whose life should be improved?" and "to whom should no harm be done?"

The issue of ethics in evaluation is further complicated by the fact that all evaluations are political in nature. Therefore, attempts to deal with ethical decisions within an evaluation project can place evaluators in situations that are extremely complex. In his article on ethics and evaluation, Michalos (1992) stated that because "there is no rule book to turn to in order to decide how people should write their rule books" (p. 68), scientists write their rule books through the art of negotiation. That is, a community of scientists, in our case evaluators, come together as a group and negotiate a set of rules by which we feel our profession should be guided. The basic assumption here is that evaluators are the best individuals to develop these rules because they are the most knowledgeable about evaluations. Taking this process to its next logical step, Michalos stated that this process of rule-making is a political one, or "at least it is fair to say this if one thinks of politics as the art and practice of reaching agreements through negotiation" (Michalos, 1992, p. 68). This implies that the establishment of ethical guidelines for researchers and evaluators is a political process that will change as the political winds change or as new evaluation methods are developed. Therefore, what might be considered ethically correct today may not be ethically correct tomorrow.

However, there is an added complication in evaluation research. Unlike the pure research scientist who is basically working for him/herself, evaluators are employed by individuals who have a "stake" in the project's outcome, and they therefore usually demand a say in the decisions being made. In fact, in some cases "stakeholders" have been known to demand that they make all of the decisions. This leads to the problem that what might be judged ethically correct for one evaluation might not be judged ethically correct for another.

The purpose of this article is to extend the advice of Michalos (1992) through the use of specific examples of ethical dilemmas that evaluators may encounter when they employ qualitative methods in their work. It is hoped that this article will stimulate further thought and discussion related to the complex issues of ethical decision-making.

INFORMED CONSENT

Ethical guidelines established by all professional organizations (e.g., AERA, 1992; APA, 1992; CGA, 1989; CPA, 1992) state that the researcher is responsible for informing the potential participant of the purposes of the research/evaluation study. The concept of informed consent means that the individual(s) under study completely understand not only what is expected of them, but also the possible consequences of having taken part in the study. For example, does the individual who agrees to take part in a qualitative study understand that the nature of qualitative studies is such that the evaluator is always “on”? That is, does the individual realize that the comments she or he makes while having coffee, or at lunch, are considered by the qualitative evaluator to be legitimate data and that this information might be included in the final report? Further, was it explained to the individual that in qualitative studies the evaluator acts more like a friend than an evaluator, and that this “friendship” type of relationship may result in the individual’s revealing secrets that he or she never intended to reveal, let alone find them included in an evaluation report for the employer to read? An evaluator who has good interpersonal skills can develop a client-counselor type of trust relationship that can result in far more intimate information being provided than the informant originally anticipated.

In short, researchers can take advantage of a quasi-therapeutic relationship because of the attractiveness of one of our most treasured gifts to others—the gift of lending serious attention and a sympathetic ear to what someone has to tell us (Eisner, 1991, p. 218).

When evaluators request the involvement in a study of individuals who are not trained in qualitative methodologies, we cannot assume that these untrained individuals will understand all the subtleties of their agreement to take part. An evaluator who is also a counselor has to be particularly cautious, as she or he has specialized skills that could be used to take advantage of a trusting volunteer.

A second issue regarding the concept of informed consent concerns the fact that it is the evaluator's responsibility to protect the identity of the individual participating in the evaluation project. This protection allows the informant the freedom to provide information that might place her or his employment in jeopardy if a supervisor found out about the disclosures. However, in qualitative evaluations the evaluator pays close attention to the context in which the information was collected and therefore provides readers with a detailed description of the environment under study. Because of this detailed description, there is always the risk that someone will be able to recognize and identify the informant(s). Furthermore, what if the informant is in a unique position within the organization? In these situations it may be impossible to protect the identity of the informant. However, most evaluators do not openly discuss these risk factors with their informants before signing them on as part of the study.

For example, a number of years ago I was evaluating an educational program that involved only two program staff. In order to provide safeguards for these two individuals, complex negotiations took place between the two staff members, their immediate supervisor, the school division's representative, and the teachers' union. The main issue involved was: how do you conduct and write an evaluation report that evaluated the program and not the program staff? This was an important issue because, according to the collective agreement between the school division and teachers' union, only the principal and superintendent have the authority to evaluate teacher performance. Furthermore, the process for conducting teacher evaluation was specifically defined. Therefore, an agreement had to be worked out that satisfied all parties concerned while still allowing the evaluator to provide a quality product. A compromise was reached that did satisfy all parties concerned, but the negotiations involved in this project were much more difficult than was designing and conducting the evaluation itself.

A third issue concerns the interpretation of the events as recorded by the evaluator. Dockrell (1988) and Eisner (1991) suggested that participants in a study be given the opportunity to read the material that has been written about them. The purpose of doing this is twofold.

First, participants are given a chance to review the material for misquotes and misinterpretations of the behavior under observation. However, the degree to which the evaluator is willing to make

changes to the material, if it is objected to by a participant, is open to debate. That is, if the evaluator feels that she or he really heard or saw what was reported, then the text should not be altered just to please the informant. Altering accurate information might change the outcome of the study and thus lead the evaluator to inaccurate conclusions. On the other hand, if a mistake has been made in recording the raw data, then it is the responsibility of the evaluator to make the requested changes in order not to draw inaccurate conclusions. However, how does one tell the difference between these two cases? There are no easy answers to this dilemma; it must be addressed by the individual evaluator based on the information and contextual factors on hand.

A second point concerns allowing informants to be the first to read material that may place them in an unfavorable light. It is much better for informants to have at least a warning that unfavorable information about them is about to be released. Lightfoot (1983) suggested that respondents go through several stages when they come face to face with written accounts of their actions. In the first stage there is the terror associated with having been exposed for the world to judge. The second stage is characterized by respondents' alternating between recognizing themselves in the description and denying that the individual being described has any resemblance to them. Finally, after a period of time, respondents are able to look at the description more dispassionately and view it as a means of reflection, self-criticism, and personal growth. Given the process Lightfoot outlines, it seems much better to allow respondents to view material before it becomes public information.

The fourth and final issue to be discussed concerning informed consent deals with "innocent bystanders," individuals in a qualitative evaluation who come into contact with the individuals under study but who are themselves not the focus of the evaluation. These individuals could be the relatives or friends of the clients in the program undergoing the evaluation process. Here the question becomes, how far should informed consent be taken? If you are observing a particular informant, do you also need the consent of the individuals who might interact with your informant? Some of my colleagues have argued that obtaining the consent of these innocent bystanders is unnecessary because they are not the direct objective of the evaluation. Other colleagues have argued that the intrusive nature of qualitative research means that informed consent applies to all contacts. This type of issue points to the importance of the evalua-

tor carefully weighing all the pros and cons of the situation before making a judgment.

CONFIDENTIALITY

The concept of confidentiality assumes that the individuals under study have a right to their privacy and thus the researcher has the responsibility to protect their identity (e.g., Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; McMillian & Schumacher, 1989; Palys, 1992; Shulman, 1990). The information collected in studies on sexual abuse or divorce may be information that respondents are willing to share with the evaluator only on condition that their identity not be revealed to the general public. In fact, in some cases identification of respondents may be very costly to them; it can place them in physical danger (e.g., a husband who physically abuses his wife may want to punish his wife for disclosing) or cost them their jobs (e.g., a teacher who provides negative information about a principal/superintendent). In both of these cases the disclosure of identity can result in harm being done to the informant. If harm is done, then the number one ethical rule of “no harm to the subjects” would be violated.

However, what if the respondent does not want to remain anonymous? For example, the *Ethical Standards of the American Educational Research Association* state, “All those, regardless of status, who have made substantive creative contribution to the generation of an intellectual product are entitled to be listed as authors of that product” (AERA, 1992, sec. 3, B1a). Unlike quantitative methods, where evaluation subjects simply respond to surveys, questionnaires, standardized tests, or other procedures that require only a response, individuals taking part in qualitative investigations contribute a great deal of their time, energy, and personal thoughts to the evaluator. They play an active role in the evaluation process. In fact, in a qualitative design the individuals taking part in the investigation often play an important role in the formation of the evaluation questions and interpretation of the data collected. These individuals are beginning to express the desire to be publicly recognized and given credit for their accomplishments and contributions to the evaluation study.

Shulman (1990) was the first to point out that this desire for recognition has implications for how researchers deal with the ethical requirement of confidentiality. To simply identify all those who ask to be identified avoids dealing with the rights of others. For example,

if a counsellor in a sexual abuse program wishes to be identified, what are the effects of such identification on the institution that employs her or him? Furthermore, what are the possible effects on the rights of that counsellor's colleagues and clients? What if one of the participants wants to be identified but the other participants do not? These are serious questions that cannot be ignored, because the identification of one individual may mean that the anonymity of the institution (school or school district, public service organization, etc.), other counsellors, and clients cannot be guaranteed. The problem arises in attempting to determine how the identification of one informant will affect other informants and to what extent we are obligated to protect those who are on the periphery of our study (e.g., the institution or those who make use of the institution's services).

One possible method of handling these problems is to carry out multilevel negotiations that include all the affected stakeholders. This would ensure that all parties are given an opportunity for their opinions to be heard, and if a compromise cannot be reached, then those who feel threatened can be given the chance to withdraw from the study.

A second issue concerns whether there are circumstances in which an evaluator can ethically break the requirement of confidentiality. Clearly, there are such situations. For example, if a school-age student discloses that she or he has been or is currently being sexually or physically abused, the evaluator is required by law to file a report with the proper child protection agency or the police. However, should the evaluator file a report with the proper professional organization if he or she observes a counsellor who is inept or who is using questionable counselling techniques? Or, in the interest of gathering information on counselling that would be of benefit to the larger community of counsellors, should the evaluator ignore the behavior and protect the identity of the participant? (This dilemma was raised earlier in this paper.) Eisner (1991) pointed out the other side of the coin by asking, what if the evaluator discovers someone who is doing great work that has gone unrecognized? "In other words, is the obligation, if it is an obligation, to commend as important as to give negative criticism?" (Eisner, 1991, p. 219). These are questions for which there are no easy answers, but that require the evaluator's careful attention.

Finally, Patton (1990) warned researchers and evaluators that they do not have the same legal protection that clergy and lawyers have,

and therefore they can be summoned to testify in court. Information about activities such as the use and selling of illegal chemicals may be requested or demanded by local law enforcement agencies. In these situations, the evaluator is required to testify in court regardless of a promise to keep such information confidential.

PARTICIPATION AS A POSITIVE EXPERIENCE

Taking part in an evaluation or research study should be a positive experience for both the evaluator/researcher and the selected participants, but there are many situations where this is not the case. I have been involved in conducting evaluations of educational programs designed to prevent the occurrence of sexual abuse. In the design stages of these evaluation projects, we had to be aware of the likelihood that the process of interviewing male and female student volunteers might touch on not only very personal and sensitive information, but also emotionally painful memories. Therefore, as part of the overall evaluation designs, we had to plan for the possible occurrence of disclosure of sexual abuse. This planning included development of protocols and debriefing sessions to be activated if a disclosure was made to any of our interviewers. We did this in collaboration with all of the stakeholders of the evaluation. (For one of the evaluations the funder, at first, did not believe such protocols and/or debriefing sessions were necessary, and did not agree to the development of collaborative protocols and debriefing sessions until we stated we would not undertake the evaluation without them. The evaluator must be willing to walk away from a potential client unless she or he is satisfied that any ethical problems have been worked out to everyone's satisfaction.) These protocols established a process for handling the reporting of sexual abuse disclosures, and the debriefing sessions allowed the interviewers and informants to make closure.

Further, a process was developed that allowed for termination of any interview session that was becoming too stressful for the informant, regardless of the reason. How much stress was reasonable? This was a question that each of our interviewers had to ask and answer during every interview session. We spent a great deal of time talking about this issue amongst ourselves and with other colleagues, but the bottom line was that each interviewer had to make this judgment for each informant. Interviewers stated that the pre-data collection discussions helped them to make the necessary decisions but did not make the decisions easier.

Discussions were also held with the interviewers on how they would deal with questions they received. That is, what if one of the respondents asked for advice concerning reporting sexual abuse to the police? Or what if a respondent was already in counselling for sexual abuse (between 10 and 20 were) and asked for advice concerning whether their current counsellor was providing them with quality treatment? It is very easy for the respondent to turn the interview around and make the evaluator the interviewee. The problem of how to deal ethically with respondents' questions needs to be worked out carefully before the first interview takes place. Once in the field, it is too late to say, "Time-out, while I go and get advice."

The process of being taken through a directed, reflective process affects the persons being interviewed and leaves them knowing things about themselves that they didn't know—or at least were not aware of—before the interviews. Two hours or more of thoughtfully reflecting on an experience, a program, or one's life can be change-inducing. (Patton, 1990, pp. 353–354)

This "change-inducing" process applies not only to the respondent, but also to the evaluator who is collecting the information and playing the role of empathic listener. In addition to the above procedure developed for the respondents of the study, the design also included debriefing and support for the interviewers. As was recommended by Patton (1990), a process was needed that would enable interviewers to deal with the things they heard. Given the potential for information concerning abuse of the students they were interviewing, the interviewers in the above example needed to have a support network in place to deal with any pain and suffering they heard about. Although neither the programs nor the evaluations were designed to elicit disclosures, they established a opportunity for disclosures to occur. In fact, during one of the evaluation processes, four disclosures were made.

In the example presented above, it is relatively easy to see the need for debriefing sessions; there are other situations where the evaluator may not have predicted a need for such sessions, but for which there is a need. An example that comes to mind is an evaluation I was conducting on a high school program that had absolutely nothing to do with sexual abuse. However, in the course of the interview and observation sessions, a female student disclosed that she had been sexually assaulted by another student. Although this disclosure

was not part of the program, or the evaluation, we had to deal with it. When you develop trusting relationships with individuals, you have to plan for the unexpected.

MULTIPLE STAKEHOLDERS

Earlier it was pointed out that, unlike the pure research scientist who works for him or herself, evaluators must deal with the individual who employs them to conduct the evaluation. However, is the individual who employs the evaluator the only valid stakeholder in the evaluation process? For example, in an evaluation of an educational program designed to assist Grade 1 students having difficulty learning to read and write, there are a number of individuals who might be identified as having a stake in the outcome of the program. In this case there was (a) the funder of the project, who was the provincial department of education; (b) the school divisions who applied for the funding; (c) the university staff members who designed the project and trained the teachers; (d) the teachers who delivered the program to the students; (e) the students who received the program; and (f) the parents of the students in the program. The question of concern is, if the school division employs the evaluator, does the evaluator address only the concerns of the school division? What if the evaluator learns something from the evaluation process that is of interest to the teachers, but the school division decides that the information should not be released to them? Should the evaluator pass on the information anyway? What are the responsibilities of the evaluator in these situations?

Michael Patton (cited in Alkin, 1990, pp. 245–250) in a discussion of evaluation ethics stated that the evaluator's main focus should be the concerns of the individual (the client) who employs that evaluator. In the same discussion, Ernest House disagreed, stating that to focus only on the individual paying the bills yields too narrow a focus and that the evaluator must concern herself or himself with the broader societal issues. In fact, House viewed a focus exclusively on the concerns of the client as immoral. In his opinion the evaluator has a moral obligation to take on the concerns of the less powerful stakeholders. Patton countered that the evaluator can address the concerns of the additional stakeholders by developing a solid working relationship with the client and getting the client to act in a responsible manner. He further argued that the evaluator cannot take responsibility for the client's misuse of evaluation data. The evaluator can only provide guidance and hope that the client acts in

a responsible manner. In Patton's view, it would be improper for the evaluator to place the concerns of other stakeholders ahead of those of the client. The answer to this dilemma? It depends on your point of view. There are no easy answers.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this article was to review some of the more common ethical dilemmas associated with conducting qualitative evaluations. Specifically, the purpose was to review some of the ethical dilemmas related to qualitative methodologies. It should be noted, however, that the ethical dilemmas discussed above are not meant to be inclusive. It is hoped that the identification and discussion presented above will assist in the planning process evaluators go through when designing an evaluation with qualitative components. It is also hoped that this article will stimulate further thought and discussion related to the complex issues of ethical decision-making.

The basic conclusion that can be reached from the material presented is that it is extremely difficult to propose a general set of guidelines or principles that would cover the full range of evaluation methodologies and field situations. Each ethical dilemma will be specific to the informants under study (e.g., program staff, program clients, program administrators) and to the context in which information is collected (e.g., classroom, home, playground, counsellor's office, workplace). In the long run, it is the responsibility of each evaluator to carefully review her or his procedures to ensure that participants/subjects are not harmed either purposefully or accidentally (Eisner, 1991; McMillian & Schumacher, 1989; Palys, 1992; Patton, 1990; Shulman, 1990). Although all evaluators agree that we should be guided by ethical principles, deciding what those principles should be for every situation can be a difficult if not an impossible task. In order to help keep us honest, evaluators can seek the advice of colleagues, ethics committees (at the university, professional organization, school district, etc.), and the potential participants/subjects themselves.

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