Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

MELANIE MAUTHNER, MAXINE BIRCH, JULIE JESSOP and TINA MILLER (eds.), Ethics in Qualitative Research. London: Sage Publications, 2002, x + 172 p.

Gone are the days when a sociologist could come up with a great idea for a research study that involves deception and∕or risk of harm for the 'subjects' without having to worry about getting the proposal through a research ethics board. In recent years we have seen discussions of ethics occupy more and more space in methods textbooks and appear regularly on the agendas of scholarly meetings. Moreover, entire books reflecting on ethics in social scientific research are starting to be produced. Indeed, careful attention to ethical issues has become mandatory.

The current collection of articles collaboratively produced by Mauthner and colleagues can be located in the context of this contemporary concern over research ethics. More specifically, the authors are members of the UK-based Women's Workshop on Qualitative∕Household Research. They take an explicitly feminist perspective on ethical dilemmas that can arise at virtually any stage of a qualitative research project using personal experience methods. In the introduction, they note that when researchers submit their proposals to ethical review boards, reviewers typically vet the proposal using a "tick box approach" based on the application of abstract rules, principles or guidelines. The editors argue, however, that "ethical considerations encountered in research are much more wide-ranging than this: they are empirical and theoretical and permeate the qualitative research process" (1). It is not enough and may even be unethical, they argue, to assume prior to the start of a research project that unforeseen ethical issues will not arise as the research progresses. As the first chapter elaborates, it should not be assumed that a project that has passed an institutional ethics review board is by definition ethical. This is particularly so as institutions become more concerned with "avoiding potentially costly litigation than with ethical practice itself" (17).

Each of the book's eight chapters is co-authored and written by members of the aforementioned Women's Workshop. The first chapter reviews theoretical debates about ethics to argue in favour of using a feminist ethics of care to guide ethical decision-making. The second chapter is concerned with the intentions underlying feminist research and defends the importance of fully considering the possible impacts of a research study. Subsequent chapters draw on the authors' own research projects to engage with issues of access, gate-keeping, consent, the different meanings that

"participation" can have, ethical dilemmas that can arise as rapport develops, tensions inherent in occupying the dual role of researcher and professional, dilemmas inherent in attempting to engage in research that is both responsible and accountable to participants and readers, and the ethics of constructing participants as modernist individual subjects.

These are important issues that can arise for any researcher, not just feminist researchers. As noted in the book's introduction, the ethical issues discussed are "relevant for any research which aims to increase knowledge through the use of personal experience methods" (11). Unfortunately, this point is lost in the rest of the book, as authors constantly make reference to feminist research and write as though all readers will themselves be doing feminist research. This feature may limit its appeal, as it sadly remains the case that the word "feminist" is too often perceived negatively. Those willing to look beyond the word, however, will find much food for thought even when contemplating research that is not explicitly feminist.

This is not to say that the authors cover new ground in terms of identifying ethical issues. For example, in chapter 6 Duncombe and Jessop offer a reflective discussion of ethical issues raised by asking people to talk about intimate experiences. As rapport is developed, they argue, there is the danger that interviewees will be persuaded to reveal more than they would ideally have liked, or interviewees may even come to a realization as a result of the interview that carries far-reaching implications. Similar concerns are raised in Stacey's classic article, "Can There Be a Feminist Ethnography?" Indeed, Duncombe and Jessop's chapter begins with a quote from Stacey.

Overall, the book hangs together extremely well. The writing style is consistent throughout and highly accessible. Collectively, the chapters highlight the important point that people do not exist solely for the purpose of answering researcher's questions. I suspect, however, that this message is often forgotten as researchers get caught up in the intellectual excitement of conducting qualitative research. For this reason, the wide range of issues covered in Ethics in Qualitative Research could make this a useful text for sensitizing inexperienced researchers or reminding experienced researchers about potential ethical pitfalls.

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