



# Ethical Conducts in Qualitative Research Methodology :Participant Observation and Interview Process\*

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## Abstract

**Purpose:** Ethical behaviors become more salient when researchers utilize face-to-face interviews and observation with vulnerable groups or communities, which may be unable to express their emotions during the sessions. The present research aims to investigate ethical behaviors while conducting research have resonance due to the deep nature of observation and interview data collection methods. **Research design, data and methodology:** The present research obtained non-numeric (Textual) data based on prior literature review to investigate Ethical Conducts in Qualitative Research. Non-numeric data differs from numeric data in how the data is collected, analyzed and presented. It is important to formulate written questions and adopt them what the method claims for the researcher to understand the studied phenomenon. **Results:** Our findings show that while conducting qualitative research, researchers must adhere to the following ethical conducts; upholding informed consent, confidentiality and privacy, adhering to beneficence's principle, practicing honesty and integrity. Each ethical conduct is discoursed in detail to realize more information on how it impacts the researcher and research participants. **Conclusions:** The current authors concludes that five ethical conducts are important for realizing extensive and rich information during qualitative research and may be exploited in implementing research policies for researchers utilizing observation and interviews methods of data collection.

**Keywords :** Ethical Conducts, Qualitative Research, Research Ethics

**JEL Classification Codes :** C35, I23, O30

## 1. Introduction

One way to gain knowledge is through carrying out some research. Most researches comprising human beings are focused on advancing human wellbeing, knowledge, culture, and general understanding. Such research is undertaken to lessen human anguish, confirm scientific or social theories, evaluate policy, dissipate ignorance, and comprehend human behavior (Kaiser 2009). Researchers enjoy several privileges and freedoms, important to uphold the autonomy of higher education research society. The privileges include; right to disperse research findings and the right to inquiry. However,

researchers and institutions must identify that such freedom carries along essential responsibilities, encompassing the urge to ensure that the study compromising human partakers meets high ethical and scientific standards (Anderson, 2017). The conduct of researchers is closely under scrutiny due to the probability of mistreatment of the subject under study to realize high quality and more detailed findings. Researchers have clear accountability to certify that they identify and safeguard the rights and wellbeing of the research partakers regardless of the nature of the research. Researchers must abide by the ethical behaviors and duties; of honesty, integrity, accountability, openness, and application of

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professional standards (Ramos, 1989). Researchers must follow ethical behaviors to safeguard and protect the welfare of participants and minimize any possible harm, mental or physical discomfort, social harm, and danger. Ethical behaviors minimize the likelihood of negligence claims.

Research and common sense both entail an attempt to comprehend various facets of the world. Nonetheless, research, but debatably not common sense, comprises a straightforward, organized approach to discovering things, often via the process of testing out presumptions. Historically, researchers were concerned with examining things measurable and quantifiable. Later, researchers in social sciences like sociology, psychology, anthropology, among others, were interested in examining the social world and human conduct. According to the prior study (Kaiser, 2009), researchers found it increasingly challenging to study and analyze human behaviors in measurable terms, thus adopting qualitative research.

"Qualitative research is a lived experience." As time progresses, qualitative research is gaining popularity and accepted as a research paradigm. According to the study (Ciuk & Latusek, 2018), the tendency of the research paradigm to be subjective and contextual contrary to generalizable makes it subject to question concerning its trustworthiness. Qualitative research is concerned with the development of explanations of social phenomena; it focuses on helping us deepen or broaden our comprehension of the world we live in and why things are the way they are. Generally, qualitative research is concerned with the world's sociological aspects, advancement of specific areas, persuading policymakers, ascertaining particular social needs through translation of personal needs, vulnerable and marginalized groups, into collective voices.

As DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree (2006) insisted, qualitative research seeks to respond to questions like; how and why people behave differently, how attitudes and opinions are formed, how events affect people, how different cultures have evolved, and differences among social groups. Although qualitative research entails different methods, observation and interviews are mostly applied. Interviews may be structured, semi-structured, and unstructured. Semi-structured interviews involve a series of open-ended questionnaires concerning the researcher's topic of interest. Unstructured interviews have little or no structured questions, but the researcher intends to discuss various topics.

Although the term ethical generally implies "to be good, do good, and avoid evil," ethical behaviors present a set of moral codes, standards, or rules governing a profession or an individual. Ethical behaviors while conducting research have resonance due to the deep nature of observation and interview data collection methods. Failure to uphold ethical codes of conduct contributes to ethical dilemmas while

conducting research. Qualitative research focuses on sensitive information, personal data and often presented by victims of different events (Heath, Williamson, Williams, & Harcourt, 2018). Ethical behaviors become more salient when researchers utilize direct or face-to-face interviews with vulnerable groups or communities, which may be unable to express their emotions during the interview sessions. Thus, while conducting qualitative research, researchers must adhere to the following ethical conducts; upholding informed consent, confidentiality and privacy, adhering to beneficence's principle, practicing honesty and integrity. Each ethical conduct is discoursed in detail to realize more information on how it impacts the researcher and research participants.

## **2. Data Collection Procedure**

Content analysis involves a data collection process that differs from other methods of research based on the nature of the data collected. The method involves the collection and analysis of non-numeric data. Non-numeric data is data that involve observation rather than measurement. This kind of data cannot be manipulated using standard mathematical operations but is rather analyzed based on the inferences made from its content. The data is analyzed by extracting the meaning and implications of artefacts contained in verbal communications. The present research obtained non-numeric (Textual) data based on prior literature review to investigate Ethical Conducts in Qualitative Research. Non-numeric data differs from numeric data in how the data is collected, analyzed and presented. The process of collecting and analyzing to reach a valid conclusion passes through various stages before presenting (Erlingsson & Brysiewicz, 2017; Sung, 2021).

Verbal and non-verbal inferences made from the artefacts shape the nature of the collected data, which affects the study results. It is important to appropriately formulate written questions and adopt them what the method claims for the researcher to understand the studied phenomenon. In other words, the data collection process gives validity to the qualitative content analysis. Data collection is concerned with the steps that are taken to incorporate best practices in qualitative data collection. The data collection process must utilize all of the questions that are related to the study's aim. Therefore there is no certainty that the data provided by the data collection method captures the true context of the artefact. The whole process may be affected by misinterpretations arising from inaccuracy in the information and the researcher's bias (Lee, 2021; Han, 2020).

### **3. Ethical Conducts in Qualitative Research**

#### **3.1. Maintaining relationships with research participants**

Most ethical issues revolving around qualitative research are directly related to initiating, commencing, and ending those relationships. Generally, the ethical issue emerges while preparing for the study. Thus, the ethical conduct of upholding relationships during researches is vital. Maintaining or establishing mutual relations is an ethical conduct often considered a prerequisite for building trust with the research partakers, which in turn is likely to assist the researcher obtain more honest responses from the research partakers and rich findings. Critics of this ethical research conduct claim that the conduct may lead to the manifestation of "fake relationships" (Kondowe & Booyens, 2014; Duncombe & Jessop, 2002). Qualitative researchers should aim at establishing mutually beneficial relationships, which not only aid the researchers in securing better and extensive data but also supporting the participants in solving local or communal issues. While conducting qualitative researches, researchers should aim at upholding and adhering to ethical conduct to avoid any ethical issues or dilemmas while conducting the research.

#### **3.2. Upholding Informed Consent**

Researchers employing both observation and interview methods of data collection are responsible for warranting the participants that they are informed to the best possible extent concerning the nature of the research or study. Informed consent is the underlying and founding ethical principle of conducting qualitative research. Researchers must abide by this ethical conduct of upholding informed consent. Jefford and Moore (2008) argued that the ethical guideline of informed consent entails that the researcher warrant or ensure research participants join the study willingly or voluntarily with complete information on what it entails to be part of the research (Richards & Schwartz, 2002). The researchers are accountable to ensure the partakers give consent before commencing the research. Consent should be obtained before the partaker enters the study (prospectively). The minimum conditions for consent to be knowledgeable are that the partakers are well informed of what the study entails and what they consent to.

Researchers should follow the conduct of upholding informed consent by presenting the document most appropriately and conveniently for partakers to comprehend. In some situations, the study involves minors or individuals

with challenges that inhibit them from understanding what the document entails. Researchers should present the informed consent most conveniently, verbal or written (Arifin, 2018). The participants should willingly contribute to the study and have the freedom to choose either to participate or not. While upholding the informed consent ethical conduct, the researcher should ensure the documentation of the consent. According to the previous study (Jefford & Moore, 2008), the document should entail participant name, date, study title, participant's signature, among others. Key elements of the study should be included, together with a detailed statement indicates the participant's full comprehension of the research details and the possibility of withdrawing from the research at any point during the research (Aluwihare-Samaranayake, 2012).

Upholding informed consent by researchers is not different in the health sector. In health care, the health care researchers uphold the ethical conduct of informed consent by educating patients on possible risks, alternatives, and benefits of a given procedure or treatment intervention. The informed consent should entail the following; nature of the intervention, benefits and possible risks, reasonable alternatives, benefits and risks of the procedure, and evaluation of the patient's understanding of the elements (Manti & Licari, 2018). It is the obligation of the researcher to ensure that the participants are well informed and join the study voluntarily rather than being coerced.

#### **3.3. Upholding Confidentiality and Privacy**

In qualitative researches, upholding participant's confidentiality while presenting comprehensive, rich, and exhaustive accounts of social life pose distinctive challenges. Researchers should follow the ethical conduct of upholding privacy and confidentiality during research. Confidentiality and anonymity are often confused in researches related to humans, and the distinction between the two is vital in designing protocols for upholding ethical behaviors in research. Kaiser (2009) discussed that confidentiality refers to a situation where the researcher is aware of the participant's identity but undertakes the necessary steps to protect that identity from being identified or discovered by others. The term may also be used to refer to failure to disclose information realized from an interviewee, accidentally or deliberately, in a manner that reveals an individual's identity. Researchers can utilize various strategies to uphold ethical behavior. For instance, they may keep their research records secure by using protected files and passwords, encrypting information while sending data over the internet, and in locked cabinets and safes. The investigators may use codes that are only known to them.

On the other hand, anonymity is a condition in which the participant's identity is unknown to the researcher. Why should qualitative researchers suppose abide by the ethical conduct of upholding privacy and confidentiality? Some research participants give detailed and personal information to help the researcher realize full and extensive details of the study. However, unprecedented disclosure of personal information may lead to adverse consequences (Richards & Schwartz, 2002). Disclosure may lead to illegal use of participants' identity, low self-esteem, hate, or commit suicide. It is the responsibility of the researcher to abide by the ethical conduct and guarantee that privacy, confidentiality, and anonymity will be upheld throughout the research.

Since the disclosure of detailed or personal information occurred during data analysis, reporting, cleaning, or disseminating results, qualitative researchers may use a dominant or alternative approach to uphold the ethical behavior. The researcher collects, analyzes, and reports data without conceding the participant's identities. Issues regarding confidentiality are addressed during data collection, cleaning, disseminating of findings. Kaiser (2009) asserts that, during data collection, confidentiality is upheld through informed consent. During data cleaning, researchers eliminate possible identifiers to create a "clean" set of data. Clean data does not contain any info that identifies participants, such as names.

### **3.4. Upholding Beneficence**

The beneficence is ethical conduct that refers to acting in ways that benefit others while promoting their safety and welfare (Pieper & Thomson, 2016). In qualitative research, researchers should protect participants from harm and respect their autonomy and uphold their wellbeing. The ethical conduct of beneficence falls under the acts of charity, kindness that exceed the strict obligations (Arifin, 2018). Researchers can strictly abide by this ethical behavior by not harming, minimizing harm, and maximizing any possible benefits. In the health care context, researchers are responsible for ensuring that they do not inflict unnecessary harm. Health researches often contain a mixture of study procedures, with some only permitting the response to a scientific question and others offering a reasonable benefit to the participants. According to the past research (Pieper & Thomson, 2016), the unpredictable nature of interviews may present a type of challenge to which a better-informed version of the precautionary principle is not only applicable but required for conducting ethical research, contrary to a more conventional application that disallows modification (Orb, Eisenhauer, & Wynaden, 2001). The unpredictability of a study and its impacts is augmented in conflict-prone and conflict-affected areas.

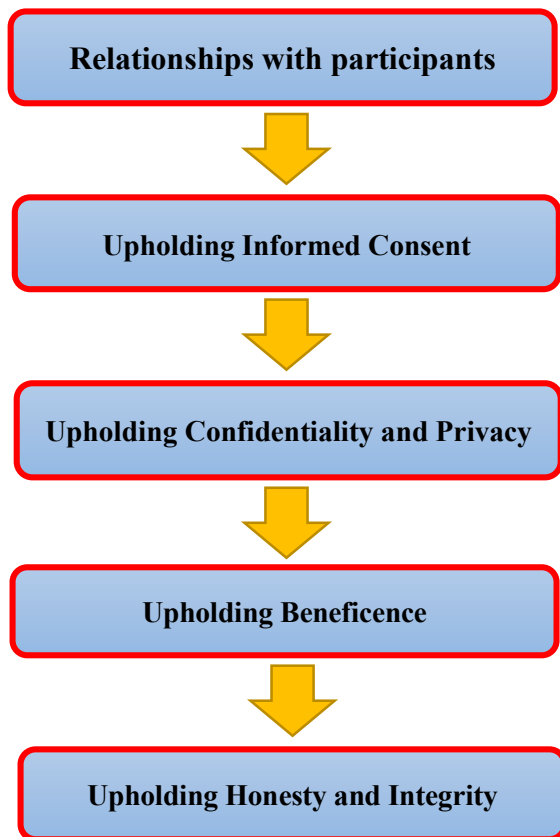
Research participants may be perpetrators or victim's ad researchers may intrude into deeply individual experiences like rape, war, and death that may be incriminating or stigmatizing (Resnik, 2011). Such research may stir emotional reactions, and thus, difficult to assess the form of harm resulting from the research. Researchers should follow the ethical conduct of upholding beneficence by avoiding questions that may trigger any form of psychological or physical harm to the respondents. Upholding beneficence may stir a notion of motivating researchers to conduct researches in societies with vulnerable communities as they are guaranteed freedom from exploitation.

Minimizing harm is an aspect desirable while conducting qualitative research. Researchers can put participants in situations that may make them feel uncomfortable to learn how to react to specific situations, resulting in psychological harm manifested through worry, depression, embarrassment, guilt, and loss of confidence (Ciuk & Latusek, 2018). The capacity of harm can augment depending on how often or long the participants are involved in research. Physical harm may be less frequent. However, if present, the researcher should include it in the informed consent for the participant to make sound decisions before participating in the research. Still, upholding the ethical conduct of no harm while conducting research is significant for participants to know how the researcher intends to handle the information. Information may be collected for legal purposes against the will of the participants. Additionally, the researcher should minimize any economic or social harm that may arise by adhering to ethical conduct.

### **3.5. Upholding Honesty and Integrity**

Upholding honesty and integrity while conducting qualitative research is desirable to conduct. Deception may refer to conducting something contrary to what is known to the participants or giving false research findings. Unlike quantitative research, qualitative research cannot quantify findings, and the researcher may misinterpret the research findings and give false results (Orb, Eisenhauer, & Wynaden, 2001). Researchers may use deception to exploit maximum information from the respondents. Respondents are likely to give false information upon recognizing that the researcher has deceptive motives. Upholding honesty and integrity in presenting the research findings may help indicate whether further research on the same subject is required or possible solutions that may solve the existing challenge. The need and significance to follow this ethical conduct is well supported by historical qualitative researches. Qualitative research denotes the possible risks linked with deception and the potential for the application of deception in undermining the public trust in the field of research.

Other ethical behaviors significant while conducting qualitative research entail respecting or treating individuals as capable of making their pronouncements and recognizing that persons unable to make their own decisions need extra protection (Fleming & Zegwaard, 2018). No matter where the participants fall on the spectrum between the two extremes, qualitative researchers need to make sure that partakers comprehend risks and benefits associated with their participation, any possible inherent risks, and any possible benefits they may experience as a result of their participation.



**Figure 1:** Procedure of Ethical Behavior in Qualitative Research

#### 4. Implication

Having these ethical conducts in mind, qualitative researchers are well informed on the drawbacks and advantages of following each. The above ethical conducts are important for realizing extensive and rich information during qualitative research and may be exploited in implementing

research policies for researchers utilizing observation and interviews methods of data collection. The findings on how failure to adhere to ethical conduct may impact the research may influence research practice in academic and other settings. With the above findings, application and adherence of the conducts may make qualitative researches paradigms easier. Participants are more likely to contribute to any research since they are guaranteed the researcher's strict adherence to ethical conducts, uphold the principle of beneficence, privacy, and informed consent. The findings may be applied in formulating a research procedure for qualitative researches. Not discriminating research participants is an important ethical conduct while conducting qualitative research. Regardless of the subject under study, researchers should avoid discriminating questions.

#### 5. Conclusion

It is vital to remember that researchers represent their corresponding academic and occupational disciplines, which give rise to specific ethical obligations towards their respective fields and participants. Qualitative research helps realize in-depth information concerning various sociological disciplines and prove various theories and advance knowledge. Adhering to a set of ethical behaviors not only help the researcher obtain extensive information. In the contemporary world, ethical dilemmas are common in conducting qualitative research, which may arise due to conflicting research principles. Although there are codes of conducting research, they only act as guidelines since research entails unpredictable dilemmas requiring researchers to make resolutions independently. It is possible to minimize the dilemmas that arise when conducting research only when the researchers abide and adhere to the discussed ethical conduct. While conducting qualitative research, researchers should uphold conducts like practicing integrity and honesty, upholding informed consent, beneficence, confidentiality, and privacy, and developing mutual relationships with researchers.

Adhering to ethical conduct helps both researcher and participants to come to an agreement and realize more information. Upholding informed consent is essential ethical conduct that helps participants willingly engage in the research and be completely informed of what the research entails. In upholding informed consent, the participants are well informed of how the information presented may be utilized and give extensive information to guarantee confidentiality. The ethical conduct of upholding honesty, openness, and integrity is important while conducting ethical research. Deception in qualitative research may lead to



falsifying findings and exploiting participants to give information contrary to what they were informed before the research. Establishing a mutual relationship is desirable ethical conduct that qualitative researchers should follow when conducting any research.

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