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## **Ethics in Qualitative Research: A View of the Participants' and Researchers' World from a Critical Standpoint**

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### **Abstract**

This paper illustrates how certain ethical challenges in qualitative research necessitate sustained attention of two interconnected worlds: the world of the researcher and the world of the participant. A critical view of some of the ethical challenges in the participants' and researchers' world reveals that how we examine both these worlds' effects how we design our research. In addition, it reflects the need for researchers to develop an ethical research vocabulary at the inception of their research life through multiple modes. The modes may include dialogue in the spoken and written and visual to affect their aims to adhere to the principles of respect, beneficence, nonmaleficence, and justice in a way that is mutually beneficial to the participant and the researcher. Further, the deliberations in this paper reveal that a critical conscious research ethics are embedded in the unfolding research ethics process involving the participants and the researchers, and both the participant and researcher add equal weight to the transparency of the ethical process and add value to building methodological and ethical rigor to the research.

**Keywords:** critical social theory, critical consciousness, ethics, researcher, participant, qualitative research

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## **Introduction**

In this paper, I examine some of the ethical challenges experienced by researchers and participants in qualitative research. These challenges represent two diverse but intertwined epistemological perspectives, which combined demonstrate that (a) negotiated critical consciousness research ethics depend on unfolding the research ethics process involving the participants and the researchers, and (b) both the participant and researcher equally contribute to the transparency of the ethical process and adding value to building methodological and ethical rigor to the research. Taking a critical social theory stance, I begin by briefly examining the concept of critical consciousness then examining some of the ethical challenges faced by participants and researchers within the research context in a discursive form and via reflexive questions. I believe this form of reflexive questioning can act as a stimulus for developing a critical consciousness mind frame. The purpose of this paper is to present a comprehensive review of the literature on some of the ethical issues and perspectives in qualitative research and propose a critical consciousness stance for addressing these challenges.

## **Qualitative Research and Ethics**

Prior to venturing into the essence of the paper, I briefly visit meanings behind qualitative research and ethics. Qualitative research has its roots in the human sciences, including such fields as sociology, anthropology, social work, and education (Buchanan, 2000). In qualitative research a critical outlook (which engages a thinker in skillful analysis, assessing, and reconstructing), for instance, supports commitments to (a) capture the voices of participants and represent them and their experiences in as true a form as possible (Mauthner & Birch, 2002), (b) study persons in their natural environment, (c) study persons by directly interacting with them, (d) understand the participant's social world through the participants' voices (Buchanan, 2000) and lenses, and (e) using the participants' words to tell stories.

A classic definition of ethics is that ethics pertains to doing good and avoiding harm (Beauchamp & Childress, 1989). In this context ethics has largely been associated with the role of ethical principles and guidelines advancing the pursuit of knowledge (CIHR, NSERC, SSHRC: Tri-Council Policy Statement, 2009). However, because critical theories are concerned with the influence of history on social reality (Punch, 1994) a critical perspective of ethics is concerned with who gets to decide what is good and what is bad (perhaps with less concern about the product of that discussion than the process). In addition, adequate research ethics is associated with obtaining ethics approval from Research Ethics Boards (REBs) and evaluating the researchers' adherence to principles of autonomy, confidentiality, respect, beneficence, nonmaleficence, and justice (Mauthner & Birch, 2002). Guidelines and principles are set with a view to protect participants and researchers, minimize harm, increase the sum of good, assure trust, ensure research integrity, satisfy organizational and professional demands, and cope with new and challenging problems from concern to conduct (Denzin & Giardina, 2007). For example, history is rife with dark events related to violations of human rights, such as the study involving more than 400 African American people with syphilis who were left deliberately untreated to study the illness (Shamoo & Resnik, 2009). Ethical problems in qualitative research (issues that may rise when a researcher gains access to a community and the effect the researcher may have on the participants) tend to be subtler than problems in quantitative research (Orb, Eisenhauer & Wynaden, 2001).

While the presence of REBs and professional codes give the appearance of a common basis to resolve ethical dilemmas, the guidelines that arise from these may be in part insufficient causing the ground to become unstable under the feet of qualitative researchers. This is because the static, formalized guidelines may render invisible the inherent nature of tensions, fluidity, and uncertainty of ethical issues arising from qualitative research (Denzin & Giardina, 2007; Lincoln & Cannella, 2007). Further, the current ethical guidelines do not take full account of the emotional risks as experienced by the researcher during the process of the research. Moreover, the complexities of researching private lives and experiences, and divulging accounts in the public arena<sup>1</sup> raises innumerable ethical issues that cannot be solved purely by the application of a theoretical set of rules, principles, or guidelines. Qualitative research requires ethical guidelines that incorporate the various nuances of participating (as a participant or researcher) in research from a praxis and a critical consciousness perspective.

### **A Critical Consciousness within the Context of Ethical Research**

Consciousness has been variously defined as alert or awake, aware of one's surroundings and of oneself, aware of something, deliberate or intentional, a conscious attempt, or the part of the mind that is aware, of a person's self, surroundings, and thought and that to a certain extent determines choices or actions (Collins English Dictionary, 2003). This definition incorporates the view that consciousness is linked with a *subjective experience, awareness*, the ability to experience, and the understanding of the concept "self". Influenced by Habermas (1975) I interpret critical consciousness to represent thinking (through assessing, analysis, and reconstructing) and being aware from multiple angles from *outside in* and *inside out* in the process of creating transparency to all thoughts, actions, and ways of being, taking into consideration different socio-cultural, economic, and political contexts. Max Van Manen (1997) complements this view by articulating that anything that we are aware of at a given moment forms part of our consciousness, making conscious experience at once the most familiar and most mysterious aspect of our lives. However, he says that one cannot reflect on a lived experience while living through that experience, and he cites the experiences of reflecting on one's anger while being angry. He says that if one attempts to reflect on one's anger while being angry, then the anger will have already changed, dissipated, and taken on new meaning. His view suggests that true introspection is not possible but retrospection is possible. This indicates that in the process of understanding critical consciousness it is important to have some views on the terms reflection, retrospection, and critical reflection. Steir (1991) implies that it is retrospection, reflection, then critical reflection, which involves bending back on oneself on these lived experiences that may present avenues for persons to feel empowered and live beyond or through their lived experiences. This is not to downplay however, the emotional trauma or stress that may be caused to the person at re-living their experience or to undermine the stress and tensions another may experience vicariously.

Habermas (1975) holds that people create and re-create social reality and they can consciously act to change their social and economic circumstances. Although it may be possible for people to consciously change their circumstances, people's *abilities* to change their circumstances are constrained by various forms of social, cultural, economic, and political domination. In this context researchers hold special obligations toward oppressed populations, and have a responsibility for social critique, illuminating the restrictive and alienating conditions of the status quo (Punch, 1994). Punch suggests that critical researchers are required to focus on conflicts, contradictions, and oppositions, including imbalances of power in contemporary society, and seek to eliminate the causes of alienation and domination. This thought lends the view that participating in qualitative research activities should enable participants to expect something more significant than bourgeois respect, courtesy, and honesty. They have a right to the social power, empowerment, and emancipation that comes from the rising knowledge (Tisdale, 2008)

and having their stories told. In addition, while during an exchange with participants it may not be possible for a researcher to achieve a complete balanced power relation. It may be possible for the researcher to achieve and be comfortable with a constant shift in power balance and dynamics with participants in the process of accessing their stories. Alongside the empowerment of participants I believe a parallel empowerment should come to the researcher to motivate that researcher to continue on a critically conscious ethical research trajectory.

Friere (1993) indicates that in the process of emanating representations from a participant's experiences, researchers must engage in a goal of critical consciousness. Critical consciousness is a process where one is reflective, self-aware, and is also involved in critically questioning one's consciousness to open one's mind, which Garcia, Kosutic, McDowell & Anderson (2009) suggests prevents shortsightedness. According to Friere, the goal of critical consciousness in research would be for the researchers and participants to both reflect and participate in meaning-making and emancipation. He suggests that the thinking subject does not exist in isolation but, rather, in relationship to others in the world. He implies that a negotiated<sup>2</sup> critical consciousness will provide the researcher with the capacity to enable the participants to transform from their position of vulnerability or oppression and find their own voice bringing their cultural and socio-political construction of self and experience to the foreground. In this way, critical consciousness is a process that is both cognitive and affective involving a reflective awareness of the differences in power and privilege and the inequities that are embedded in social relationships. Further, a critical consciousness prompts researchers to present research as more than a translation of content - as a projection of a critical comprehension of reality (Friere, 1993). A critical consciousness will facilitate the researcher (a) to develop a lens devoid of obsolescence and myopia; and (b) an opportunity to have a better transformative emancipatory and egalitarian (Hooks, 2000) understanding of the participant's world, including problems of representation and power orientations (intended and unintended). In other words, I conceive the evolution of a shared transparent and democratic world between the researcher and participant. The researcher may then report from that world with minimal harm (the duty to do no harm or maleficence) and an increased sum of good (the duty to good or beneficence).

With this view, I believe that developing a critical consciousness will involve questioning and reflecting on how participants and researchers can work together to ensure that the participants' voices and experiences are represented with due considerations to respect for persons, justice, nonmaleficence, and beneficence.<sup>3</sup> It may involve questioning whether the prior identified principles are enacted via informed consent, the assessment of risks and benefits for the participants and in turn for the researcher, and fair and equitable selection of participants.

Other questions that the researcher may reflect on may include: do only participants face the social reality of ethical challenges or do researchers also face them? If participants and researchers face ethical challenges, what are they and how are they addressed, or how should they be addressed? How do participants and researchers deal with issues of oppression and unbalanced power? How do researchers avoid traps and risks inherent in research, such as the cost of the emotional involvement? How are the consequences of participants reliving their negative experiences during the course of interviews or observing accounts or visual images of their personal experiences in the public arena dealt with? Is there someone accountable for the suffering that may be experienced by participants at reliving their negative experiences? How are researchers brought up on a diet of research ethics to ensure that they operate within a healthy research ethics frame? These questions, I believe, facilitate driving a critical consciousness and directing an ongoing stream of praxis in the process of understanding the participant's and researcher's world in the context of a negotiated research ethics. Perhaps when drawing up proposals, a section of the proposal must pay attention to answering the above type of questions

to improve the egalitarian nature and transparency of the ethical process of the research. In addition, perhaps inclusion of a section reflecting on questions such as the above mentioned would facilitate the decision-making of REBs.

### **Participant's World**

Critical consciousness demands attention to the nuances of participant recruitment, representations of participant's voices, and involvement of vulnerable populations. (Denzin & Giardina, 2007; Long & Johnson, 2007).

#### *Nuances related to participant recruitment and decisions to participate*

Nuances surrounding participant recruitment and decisions to participate may involve issues related to socio-cultural and political context, trust, knowing and being known (Eide & Allen, 2005), and reimbursement of participants' time and expenses (Head, 2009). When approaching participants, traditional procedures emphasize the importance of access to official and unofficial gatekeepers. This is because it is often only through these gatekeepers that researchers gain access to potential participants. Potential ethical conflicts may exist however in how researchers gain access to a group of persons and the effects the researcher may have on the participants (Orb et al., 2001). For example, paying or not paying can have important effects in terms of agreements reached with gatekeepers and encouraging or discouraging potential participants to take part in the research (Head, 2009). A recent example of deception is the study where army volunteers were given USD 2000 for all of them to be bitten by malaria mosquitoes (Doughton, 2008). Deception has also been used in obtaining participation for qualitative research studies in forensic units (Clarke, 1996). Another growing area of confusion and uncertainty is participant observation, public versus private ownership, confidentiality and anonymity in research carried out using Net-based devices and Web-based cameras (Kanuka & Anderson, 2007).

In contrast to these examples, benefits and positive consequences of investing in developing trust between participants and researcher are illustrated in other projects. For example, through a photo voice project in a lower income, African American, urban community Carlson, Engebretson, and Chamberlain (2006) were able to generate a social process of critical consciousness. They were able to develop this by inviting participants in the study to take photographs of things in the community of which they were proud, things they wanted to change and tell a story of why these were important. Thus, the socio-cultural context in which the research is planned, and the trust participants may have in the researcher has an effect on the success with which the researcher is able to recruit participants.

On a different note, qualitative studies are often conducted in settings involving participation of people in the researcher's everyday environment (Orentlicher, 2005). Any research conducted in such an environment may raise questions related to risks to the participant, particularly the consequences of refusal to participate. Participants may feel pressured to participate out of a sense of duty or because they believe in the good of the researcher (Holloway & Wheeler, 1999) or any other secondary motivation that reflects the power differential in the participant-researcher relationship. Additionally, researchers themselves may worry about coercion if people associated with their everyday environments are recruited. Conversely, the researcher may paternalistically assume that participation will benefit a person negating the potential harms arising from exploitation and exposure to inappropriate questions and participants divulging more information than they initially envisaged (Richards & Schwartz, 2002). Researchers are obliged to embed methods that ensure the participants are not coerced and not feel that the treatment they receive is influenced by their decision to participate or not. The researchers must put the person first before

the research without feeling constrained by the pressure to carry out the research in a way that prevents them from putting the participant first and considering the effect of the research on the participant. Moreover, researchers must define guidelines as to how follow-up care will be provided to participants in the event of undue emotional stress caused to the participant during the course of the study (Richards & Schwartz, 2002).

Accessibility may also depend on the researcher's knowledge of the study context and the gatekeepers. Further, a researcher may reflect on how to negotiate access to participants to collect data because the quality of the social interaction between the researcher and the participant may facilitate or inhibit access to information (Orb et al., 2001). Denzin (1989) suggests that presenting vitality and rigor in interpretive sufficiency involves "taking seriously the multiple interpretations of people's lives and experiences grounded in cultural complexity" (pp. 77, 81). Cultural complexity affords power distance, and the amount of diversity of statuses, roles, wealth, and power within a society increases with its complexity, although there is latitude with how these differentiations are perceived and managed (Allen & Liu, 2004). For example, if I am trying to capture the experiences of a whole range of social groups, do I use a sample for my convenience or do I make attempts to examine the needs of a multi-layered society through a sample of participants from different layers? How do I identify the different layers in an unknown society that reflects shades of layers? Is the diversity of a population hidden in research reports although genuine efforts are made to recruit participants? Is this because of the values, customs, and unwillingness of persons to use services through which they may be recruited? Or does a participant's trust or mistrust of the researcher, their cultural lens, previous encounters with research, or nature of influence received intervene in the participant's decision to participate or not participate? These questions I believe are important to address when thinking about and planning recruitment for a study.

Williamson (2007) suggests that researchers must ensure participants are fully aware of what they are getting into so that they can give an informed consent<sup>4</sup> prior to participating. For example, I imagine that researchers are obligated to balance the value of knowledge to be acquired against any anticipated distress or other adverse experience for participants. Particularly if the participants of the research are children or young persons who have been exposed to abuse or the research includes persons from other vulnerable groups. A standard method for informing participants is the use of an informed consent sheet. An informed consent sheet has contents related to the purpose and duration of the study, nature of involvement, and how the confidentiality of the participants and of their contributions (Miller & Boulton, 2007; Williamson, 2007) will be ensured. This suggests that to facilitate participants' full understanding, the study information sheet must be written in a manner to meet the reading levels of the participants (Franck & Winter, 2004). However, if a person is not in a position to read, does it mean that the person still has the capacity to make the decision, but his/her capacity to make the decision is impaired? Or is it that he is impaired but he still has the capacity to make the decision therefore his opportunity to make the decision must not be eliminated? Perhaps this is an important tension—that many of our research participants are part of vulnerable groups, that the possibility of ethical violations are high among these groups, yet these are the very groups that may need our research the most.

### *Involvement of vulnerable populations*

The Nuremberg Code drafted in 1947 indicates that the voluntary consent of the human subject is absolutely necessary (Ghooi, 2011). Similarly, the CIHR, NSERC, SSHRC: Tri-Council Policy Statement, (2009) advocates that the ethics of research involving human subjects must include the selection and achievement of morally acceptable ends and the morally acceptable means to those

ends. This suggests that ethics in research must not only consider the protection of human subjects but also consider what constitutes socially responsible research (Schwandt, 2007). A critical ethical concern is the protection of vulnerable persons (persons that are unable to protect themselves). Vulnerable persons can include those who (a) lack or have an abundance of autonomy or resources, (b) cannot speak for themselves or are institutionalized, (c) engage in illegal activities or those (d) who may be harmed by the information revealed about them as a result of the research or those (e) who may incur emotional harm through viewing distressing information related to themselves as a result of the research (Shamoo & Resnik, 2009). Children and adolescents are considered to be a vulnerable group. Ethical practices with these groups must address issues of risk and maturity, privacy and autonomy and parental permission, including when parental permission can be waived and the assent of an institution such as a school where the research is to be conducted must be obtained (Shamoo & Resnik, 2009). Other vulnerable populations include people with psychiatric illnesses, the elderly, those who are impaired visually or cognitively, persons in families at risk of spousal abuse or neglect, or persons that are substance or alcohol over users, forensic patients (Miller & Boulton, 2007), the poor, and certain races. Participants and/or guardians (family or otherwise) of vulnerable persons must be made to understand the responsibility of participating in the research prior to giving consent. I believe this is important because of the ethical issues that can arise between the investigators' own ethics, identifying problems that cannot be solved, and balancing demands made by the participants and benefits available to the participants during the research process. Parallel to this, it is vital that the researchers take into account the participant's and/or guardian's competence to give consent as well as participant's vulnerability to coercion, openness to lack of confidentiality, and the conflict of interest between the research ethics and the researchers own ethics (Beauchamp & Childress, 1989; Shamoo & Resnik, 2009).

#### *Representation of the person, participant's voice, and experiences*

How are participants' voices and experiences captured? Christians (2007) suggests that one of the tenets of qualitative research is enabling the humane transformation of multiple interpretations of the spheres of people's lives and community experiences. He cites Friere who speaks about the need to re-invent power rather than take, transform, or translate power. For example, in the process of avoiding the creation of oppressive power blocs and monopolies I infer that the pressure on researchers is to create avenues for persons participating in the research to achieve empowerment. This leads to the question then, how do we represent ethically the reality of person's experiences in a manner to avoid leaving that person feeling disempowered, oppressed, and vulnerable to emotional stress? Perhaps the answer lies in the need for developing a shared critical consciousness between participant and researcher through an emancipatory strategy such as dialogue, reflexive questioning, and listening. Perhaps, the dialogue can take the form of being mutually reciprocal, intimate and vulnerable, and involve a power distribution as in Alcoholics Anonymous (Christians, 2007).

In contrast, Rorty (1979) cites Kuhn's critics who propagate the dogma that it is possible to truly ethically represent when there is a relationship to reality. Rorty suggests that this outlook portrays objectivity as a view that is reached un-repelled by "irrelevant considerations" and "representing things as they really are" (p.334), which propagates the questions; (a) can things be really represented the way they are or, (b) are things *perceived* as being really represented rather than being actually represented, or are representations based on perceptions? He perceives that for purposes that are non-philosophical, no problems will arise with this view of objectivity. However, he suggests troubles will arise with this view if moves are made to justify answers by constructing epistemological and metaphysical questions related to what one can be objective about, the discovery of the unknown, discovery about contact with reality, truth as a means of

communication or association, and the level of accuracy of representation. Instead, Rorty (1979) advocates looking for meanings and steering away from the view of objectivity as representing “things” as they really are by engaging in continuous reflection, questioning, dialogue, and praxis. This view indicates that Rorty wants us to drop our quest for objectivity, and to embrace a contingent understanding of phenomenon and human problems, and engage in research to find solutions to these problems. Yet, given our own way of being in the world, and given our humanness, and the nature of qualitative research, which is to portray people’s lived experiences, is it possible to be emotionally detached and be truly objective in representing people (Aluwihare-Samaranayake, 2010)? Or when representing people perhaps it is acknowledged that what is articulated and presented as objective is the amalgamation of the participant’s voice, or in other words, the interpretation of the participant’s contribution to the experience, and the researcher’s interpretation of the participant’s experience and its validation by the participant.

Similar to Rorty (1979), Lerum (2001) implies that expert objectivity can serve to cloak colonialist, exploitative relationships between experts and participants. She notes that some critics have requested the end to the pursuit of objectivity in favor of interpretive approaches.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, although it seems contradictory to what Lerum supposes here initially, that objectivity is something bad, she further postulates that, although critiques of objectivity are inspiring, there is an urgent need to reintegrate the concept of objectivity into critical analysis. Because she says objectivity facilitates the creation of politically effective knowledge. Lerum (2001) argues, and I concur, that the pursuit of objectivity per se is not the biggest roadblock to producing critical knowledge. Rather, problems of objectivity are rooted in the larger issue of emotional detachment, which is implicit in the standard scientific method, but problematic, as adherence to one particular methodology may stupefy the development of critical knowledge. Further, our inherent state of sentient humanness and the nature of our way of being in the world hinder the required ability to objectively view phenomena from a standpoint of emotional detachment.

Lerum (2001) posits that critical analysis occurring from an objective and subjective lens and taking place on individual, institutional, and cultural or structural levels improves the ability to contextualize the informant and verify the power relations within that context. As a result of this contextualization and verification, the informant can be grounded inside a reflective social map that can then be soundly critiqued, as it allows for political justification. Because critical knowledge recognizes unbalanced power and takes sides, Lerum (2001) suggests that there is a symbiotic relationship between subjective data and critical knowledge, postulating “without being rooted in highly subjective and emotionally engaged experiences, objective knowledge has no hope of being critical” (p. 480). Thus, she argues for the need for objective knowledge to be rooted in subjective experiences, to facilitate public acknowledgement, reflection by authors, and critical analysis and validation.

The whole truth cannot be gleaned by relying purely on subjective data. This is not to say that this is a problem, because from a critical standpoint certain truths are more valid than others. It is with this thought in mind that I advocate that representation of people’s voices necessitates the need for a shared dialogue and a critical consciousness approach to research ethics in qualitative research. I believe this will facilitate representing people’s experiences and voices in an inter-subjective manner. Munhall (2004) refers to inter-subjectivity as being authentically present, and requires “one to situate knowingly in one’s own life and interact with full unknowingness about the other’s life” (p.240). However, Pierson (1999) suggests that this process is fraught with issues related to the polarization of inter-subjectivity within either a traditional scientific position of reductionism and generalization, or a human science perspective that draws on the personal, uniqueness of human experiences. Nevertheless, in support of the argument for a critical



consciousness, in representation and ethical research, I posit that the ability of seeing and representing the phenomena is not outside cognition or consciousness (Husserl, 1999). Further, the inter-subjective interaction can be considered as moral, because social dialogue or discourse requires a "considerateness" of each for the other. Thus, misrepresentation can be avoided if researchers are cognizant of their theoretical approach to the research and consider ways in which their personal and professional characteristics may affect the interpretations of the data (Richards & Schwartz, 2002) and representations of participants' voices. This is not to negate however that the perspectives on ethics that I am putting forward here have less relevance for researchers holding a different theoretical/philosophical approach.

### **Researcher's World**

Ethical challenges related to the researcher's world include managing risks and the process of dealing with the emotional content of research, self-disclosure and management of risks for researchers, and issues with the peer review process or the Research Ethics Boards (REB) (Denzin & Giardina, 2007; Williamson, 2007).

#### *Managing risks and the process of dealing with the emotional content of research*

In qualitative research the evolving nature of the relationship between the researcher and the participant is partially shaped by the researcher's personal characteristics such as race, class, age, and gender (Ladson-Billings, 2003; Li, 2008). Van Manen (1997) suggests that ethical pitfalls are inherent in qualitative research; however, I believe unexpected mistakes occurring in qualitative research are less addressed. For example, ethical unsoundness or physical and emotional risks to the researcher can arise in qualitative research if the researcher (a) faces aggression from the participant, (b) undertakes fieldwork at premises unfamiliar to the researcher, or (c) divulges too much personal information during the process of the research (Dickson-Swift, Kippen, & Liamputtong, 2010; Williamson, 2007). Ethical or moral distress can also occur when the researcher relives his or her own personal experience through the voice of the participant's similar experience. It has been identified that researchers, research assistants, and transcriptionists involved in research related to violence or any form of emotional trauma have experienced physical and emotional symptoms (Etherington, 2007).

Perhaps the researcher may discover that no allowances have been made for insurance or indemnity cover in the event they feel the stresses associated with being involved in the research and desire to withdraw from the study because the study has become unsafe for them to continue (Williamson, 2007). Or in contrast, perhaps at a later date the researcher realizes that he or she does not have publication rights or the intellectual property rights have not been clearly defined or agreed upon, and the roles and responsibilities of all those involved in the study have not been clearly identified. In addition, what if the researcher finds that he or she does not have the power to deal with complaints or the risks arising out of the research? Worse still, fraudulent data is discovered which can cause harm to the participants, and the researcher and his or her team are held accountable for the consequences without the support of an REB? These thoughts I believe again raise questions as to what extent the researcher has expended time and effort to reflect on managing the risks and process of dealing with the physical and emotional content of research.

This raises the questions as to whether it is (a) possible for the researcher to withdraw from the study if the study becomes unsound for them to continue, and whether (b) this issue (the issue of the risk of withdrawal) needs to be addressed with REBs in the proposal submission for consideration stage. For example, within a proposal, in addition to including a section that provides details on how the participants will be protected from harm, a section should be added to

address how the researcher and others involved in the research will be protected from harm. This section can include areas related to how the researcher will manage the concern of self-disclosure, exiting the research if the research becomes unsound, how the researcher will deal with the blurring of boundaries, and strategies the researcher will adopt to avoid potential risks and pitfalls of the planned research (Dickson-Swift et al., 2010).

Denzin and Giardina (2007) stress the need for researchers to acknowledge that they can withdraw from a study if the study becomes ethically compromised. Dickson-Swift, James, Kippen, & Liamputtong (2008) suggest that these risks to researchers can be minimized if knowledge about risks in research is disseminated, and systematically structured research ethics education is accessible and required. In addition, Denzin and Giardina pose that policies must be in place to deal with potential risks associated with research. Similar avenues for participants to debrief on the participation in the research process via accessing support services may be equally valuable; it is imperative that a mechanism for researchers, research assistants, and transcriptionists to debrief and receive the physical and emotional support that they require also exists.

#### *Research Ethics Boards (REB) and Peer Reviews of Qualitative Research*

The CIHR, NSERC, SSHRC: Tri-Council Policy Statement (2009) suggests that the REB should adopt a proportionate approach based on the general principle that the more invasive the research, the greater should be the care in assessing the research. The concept of invasiveness is related to notions of establishing rapport, in-depth interviewing, sensitive research, and vulnerable participants/subjects. Further, REBs are required to consider issues related to rigor, privacy, risk, regulation, suppressing creativity, and benefit of the potential research.

There are dangers in an ethical universalism that ignores the complex nature of qualitative social research (Miller & Boulton, 2007). For example, REBs are tasked with the responsibility of ensuring respect for research participants, that participants enter research voluntarily and with sufficient information of the research procedures and possible consequences. Incorporated with this are the tenets that individuals are treated as autonomous agents and persons that are immature and incapacitated are entitled to protection (Christians, 2007). REBs are given the responsibility to ensure that researchers consider the well-being of their subjects, and if risks are involved, to minimize harm. They are also expected to ensure that the proposed research has taken into consideration the notion of fair distribution of the benefits and burden of research. For example, they must ensure that the research avoids the overuse of research subjects because of their availability or malleability (Christians, 2007).

From another angle, Denzin (2003) articulates the view that the individuals or communities that allow the researchers into their lives and lived experiences join qualitative researchers in painting their pictures in a reciprocal manner. He further advances the view that this may require the participants in the research to have an equal say in how the research is conducted, what is studied and what is valid, and how findings are reported and how the consequences of the published findings are assessed. In this instance, are issues of informed consent and deception non-issues? Perhaps on the one hand, if researchers strongly advocate and are mindful of people's rights, REBs, informed consent, and deception are non-issues, but the need to obtain informed consent exists to protect the individual from harm and deception (particularly given the history of past research atrocities and deceptions). However, in another vein, would an individual focused, biomedical oriented REB based on principles and procedures have the effect of protecting institutional power structures and perpetuating inequities while precluding research aimed at changing community environments (Malone, Yerger, McGruder, & Froelicher, 2006)? Perhaps

there is a need for greater dialogue about the distinctions between individual behaviors and institutional practices, the practical nature of risk calculations, and the potential for institutional conflicts of interest in risk-averse academic environments.

Are academics socially positioned in ways that may blind them to the power dynamics embedded in the ethical decision making required of qualitative research? Perhaps this depends on the researchers' own academic and research orientations and lenses through which they view the world. Which leads to questioning whether people's class and intellectual culture influence moral analysis more than many academics assume or want to acknowledge? Or have institutional mechanisms grown so pathological that they encourage well-meaning people to make mistakes in judgments by creating space for procedures rather than explaining, practicing, and justifying moral judgments (Schwandt, 2007)? Perhaps justifying moral judgments are viewed as being harder than explaining that one followed the rules even if applying the rules, principles, or guidelines carries less weight than applying common sense (Schwandt, 2007). Which leads to the question, how many persons serving on REBs reflect on how their class and intellectual culture influence their decision-making about the viability of proposed research? Researchers who serve on REBs have multiple demands on their time, and perhaps studies that fit neatly into the biomedical ethics model are welcome because they do not require additional deliberations. Without doubt, there are many perspectives on these questions. Perhaps our answers to these questions may heighten enthusiasm to raise critical ethical consciousness in all those engaged in the qualitative research ethics process, expanding our ethical dialogues. These dialogues can happen between persons from different philosophical, biomedical, and sociological backgrounds, and the public. Raising critical ethical consciousness involves expanded ethical dialogues beyond procedural, principle-based approaches because no single voice captures the whole or captures what is important in ethical decision-making. Perhaps addressing issues in REBs is located in learning and re-learning about critical ethical consciousness via learning to critically question and re-question how researchers think, how researchers or academics involved in REBs think, and the entire research process. Perhaps this needs to occur while also ensuring that proposals submitted are transparent and as much as possible have attempted to answer all possible questions from different angles. This is not to negate the importance of having a form of consensus and standardization of expectations of researchers across the board. Although standardized procedures must not be turned into mechanisms to "contain" complex social worlds and research encounters in neat boxes (Miller & Boulton, 2007).

### **Learning Critical Consciousness for Ethical Research**

How do we learn ethical critical consciousness for ethical research? Developing critical consciousness for ethical research is an ongoing process that lends itself to multiple modes such as dialogue, the written, and visual with a mix of persons from different cultural, educational, and philosophical backgrounds (Denzin & Giardina, 2007; Keith-Spiegel, Whitley, Ware-Balogh, Perkins, & Wittig, 2002; Kumagai & Lypson, 2009). Raising critical consciousness in research ethics does not have to unsettle, stun, and immobilize researchers and decision-makers. Rather, it prompts us to find ways to foster critical questions and reflect about how and what we are doing, what is happening, what we are, see, and hear.

Shifting briefly to the emotional wellbeing of researchers and REB members and educating researchers to be critically aware, is it justifiable to show learners a film or photograph portraying a seriously distressing experience (Keith-Spiegel, et al., 2002)? Does the educational benefit of a potentially distressing experience depicting the atrocities of war (such as rape and abuse) outweigh the distress itself? If not, perhaps the film or photograph should not be shown in a class, although it could be put on a recommended viewing list and optional viewing accompanied by an

appropriate content warning. Conversely, if the educational value of a film or photograph that upsets a learner outweighs the possible distress, perhaps there is an obligation to minimize the distress by warning the learner about the nature of the film or photograph by discussing the film or photograph with the class, explaining the purpose of showing it to the class and exploring the meaning (Keith-Spiegel, et al., 2002). Further, perhaps there is benefit in encouraging the learner to talk privately with the instructor about the film or photograph and discuss reactions to the film or photograph following the film or photograph presentation. Perhaps there is a need to inform learners of potential risk or adverse reactions that they may have to the material and inform them of available support services.

Alternately, if the aim of the film or photograph is to help learners to be critically conscious, a film or photograph that stimulates multiple thoughts would be more appropriate (Martin, Garica, & Leipert, 2010). For example see Figure 1, which depicts a picture of a little girl in the face of abject poverty (Aluwihare-Samaranayake, 2009). Perhaps discussions can arise about the ethics of using her picture to visually represent happiness in the face of poverty or can be used to ask the question “whose concern is it”? The picture presents a little girl on the railway track (doorstep) of her home, happy and oblivious to the poverty, squalor, and danger of her living environment. I believe this picture and perhaps similar pictures presents an opportunity for raising critical consciousness without causing personal and great emotional distress for the viewer of the picture because this picture presents an opportunity for dialogue on many different issues. This is not to invalidate the emotions that may arise in the observer to want to change the little girl’s life for the better (as perceived by the observer). Some of the issues are that the child belongs to a vulnerable population (she is a child); the little girl’s home is near the railway tracks and is possibly unsafe; the picture depicts poverty; unknown to her parents or guardian she is on the train track, yet for the little girl she is happy and it is her home. On the one hand, one may question that it is difficult to see the relevance of this picture to this paper. However, it is included here to elucidate the idea that stories captured from photo’s, participatory photojournalism and visual story telling can help persons develop a critical consciousness because it allows questions to be raised, thinking and analysis from different angles about different issues. For example, a strategy for teaching and learning critical consciousness can involve the participation of learners in taking photographs and telling stories about the photographs. Another strategy could involve a visit to an art gallery to study paintings to see what can be seen beyond what immediately meets the gaze. However, as mentioned previously, I suggest that *seeing out* from inside and *seeing in* from outside requires a multi-pronged approach that includes skillful thinking, assessing, analyzing, and re-constructing taking into consideration different socio-cultural, political, and economic contexts.

**Figure 1. Smile and Be Happy**



I propose that there is no single way to learn to be critically conscious. Perhaps learning critical consciousness requires a marriage of a multitude of philosophical orientations, and a continuously flowing and permeable multiple resource mechanism that also includes a willingness and openness to participate in listening, questioning, reflexivity, and dialogue. Perhaps within learned structures, academics, researchers, and participants (including the public) all need to invest in learning to develop an empowering and continuously reflexive and questioning ethical mentality that will help build a critically conscious ethical researcher. Further, I do not wish to propose that a critical perspective (or critical consciousness approach) will facilitate guiding all forms of qualitative research, particularly analysis, given that methods such as phenomenology look primarily to pre-reflective understandings. Although emancipative changes may occur for the participant in a phenomenological study as personal experience is articulated (e.g., a richer, deeper understanding of one's own experience of power may be achieved), that is not the intent of such research. In other words, although phenomenological research cannot be framed as emancipatory, given its philosophical underpinnings, it does give voice to human experience, and perhaps this is emancipatory in itself. Nonetheless, through qualitative research methods researchers may acutely feel the close relationship built between themselves and the researched, and the power of the research to both help and harm. Further, qualitative research may also lead the researcher to feel burdened by ethical responsibilities. This can lead to implications in various objectionable situations such as in the case of Russel Ogden (a Canadian graduate student) who successfully argued for researcher-participant privilege when his research records on assisted suicide involving persons with AIDS were subpoenaed by a coroner (Palys, n.d; Palys, 1997). The risk involved to the researcher and/or the participant can vary from being trivial to profound, physical to psychological, individual or social (CIHR, NSERC, SSHRC: Interagency Advisory Panel on Research Ethics, 2009). Further, the intangible nature of social, psychological, legal and dignitary risk as well as the inability to specify genuine benefits actually raises the ethical stakes in qualitative research (Schwandt, 2007). Moreover, although a researcher may strive to do no harm but do good with the best of intentions, a researcher may be blindsided by his or her carelessness (Tisdale, 2008) and myopia.

### **Conclusion**

Qualitative research is used as a means to explore and capture persons' subjective experiences, meanings, and voices and can result in ethical challenges for participants and the researchers. Consciousness has been linked with subjective experiences, and reflective awareness of the differences in power and privilege and the inequities that are embedded in social relationships. Further, critical consciousness is presented as a mechanism that can project a critical comprehension of reality.

Deconstructing ethical challenges in the participants' world, I believe that the participants' experiences are socio-culturally and politically embedded and nuances relating to recruitment and decisions to participate may involve issues related to socio-cultural and political context in which the study is carried out, trust, knowing and being known by gatekeepers and or researchers, and payment or non-payment of participants. Further, the possibility exists that ethics in research must not only consider the protection of human subjects but also consider what constitutes socially responsible and acceptable research. Moreover, one can conclude that when interpreting spheres of people's lives and community experiences, it is crucial to adhere through dialogue and critical consciousness and through an inter-subjective lens to the principles of respect, beneficence, nonmaleficence and justice to ensure that the research is enabling for the participant and facilitates humane transformation to achieve empowerment.

In contrast to the challenges faced by participants, it appears possible that the nature of the relationship between the researcher and the participant can result in ethical unsoundness or physical and emotional risks to the researcher. Steps are required in the planning phase to address mechanisms that must be taken to help researchers overcome ethical or moral distress. Further, I believe that there is an inherent need for greater dialogue about the distinctions between individual behaviors and institutional practices, the practical natures of risk calculations, and the potential for institutional conflicts of interest in risk-averse academic environments.

Decoding the politics of the issues raised in this paper, it is possible that there is an intrinsic need for researchers to develop an ethical research vocabulary at the inception of their research life and be involved in a continuous learning process through a marriage of multiple philosophical orientations and multiple modes, written, verbal and dialogue, listening, and visual about ethics in research to develop a critical ethical consciousness. This is more so because the nature of qualitative research includes dealing with persons' subjective experiences, meanings, and voices, and these are embedded in socio-cultural and political contexts.

In conclusion, I find that in delving into the different challenges in the participants' and researchers' worlds through a critical social theory lens I have only been able to superficially touch upon the issues. Therefore, on reflection, I believe that there is much more to be explored that is beyond the scope of this paper. Further, I posit that a more critical discourse with a critical consciousness lens is required to address the ethical challenges in qualitative research faced by participants and researchers. In this paper many questions have been raised and I believe more "applied" study needs to be done, beyond the theoretical and propose that research needs to be carried out on the critical research experience. Finally, I posit that we need to ensure that we approach the entire research process in a critically conscious ethical manner, one that will promote respect, beneficence, nonmaleficence, and justice both for the participant and the researcher.

### **Notes**

1. I refer to accounts published in the written or visual form.
2. Negotiated because Friere suggests that the discourse is both cognitive and affective and may lead to an engaged discourse that is collaborative and oriented to problem solving and a re-humanizing of human relationships (Friere, 1993).
3. Respect involves honoring and caring for a person and treating that person with dignity. Beneficence on the other hand, means to do good and cannot be quantified nor can meaning be attached to acceptable risks or clearly define what benefits may serve the larger cause. Justice extends beyond fair distribution of the benefits of research across a population and involves principles of care, love, kindness, fairness and commitment to shared responsibility; to honesty, truth, balance, and harmony (Denzin & Giardina, 2007).
4. Parahoo (2006) describes informed consent as the "process of agreeing to take part in a study based on access to all relevant and easily digestible information about what participation means, in particular, in terms of harms and benefits" (p. 469).
5. I refer to employing principles of "different voices" and researcher reflexivity, and the use of personal narratives and reading of data as symbolic text rather than raw evidence in considering interpretive approaches (Lerum, 2001).

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