

### **Books on Research Ethics**

The increasing importance of research ethics has led to a surge in the activities of research ethics boards in universities. So we became interested in the idea of publishing a set of reviews devoted to books on this area. We scanned our sources for what was available and identified three books that we believed might be of interest to the journal's readers. As always, publishers were most cooperative, and we were fortunate to have the books reviewed by individuals who have considerable experience in ethics and research:

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**Fieldwork, Participation and Practice: Ethics and Dilemmas in Qualitative Research,** by Marlene de Laine, 2000. Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA. 231 pp. ISBN 0-7619-5487-2.

I was very excited to have the opportunity to read this book. The ethics of qualitative field research is an area of scholarship that is worthy of greater discussion. Unfortunately, I was disappointed by *Fieldwork, Participation and Practice*. In the Introduction, de Laine sets out the aims of the text as promoting an understanding of the harmful possibilities of fieldwork, and fostering ways to deal with ethical and practical dilemmas. While de Laine does an adequate job of meeting the first of these aims, the reader will likely feel let down (as I was) regarding the second. At very least, *Fieldwork* could benefit from a preface that sets out the intended audience and purpose of the book.

De Laine's central argument is that ethical dilemmas in field research are both unavoidable and unanticipated. There may be some truth to these assertions, but many ethical scholars would take exception with them (as do I) and de Laine does not adequately defend them. Moreover, my primary criticism of this book is that it lacks a coherent framework or ethical

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system to guide the reader or to hold the text together. Indeed, it is very difficult to extract the essential points of this text. The reader is provided with much opinion and, admittedly, stimulating ideas, but is left with little, if any, guidance.

Applied ethics, whether in field research or any other endeavour, should not necessarily contain anything that is ethically peculiar or unique. They should be nothing more than a particularized version of a universal ethical system or code, where the particulars are a function of the nature of the activities unique to that application. Applied ethics do not indicate that different ethical principles apply to the particular activities. Rather, they indicate that those undertaking such activities have a distinct expertise or face difficult situations that require higher-than-normal levels of ethical responsibility. Applied ethics, therefore, should be the application of general ethical principles to specific activities. These principles should be derived from a defensible ethical system.

Qualitative field research is certainly an activity that presents difficult situations for which the ethically appropriate course of action is not necessarily obvious. And it is here, in relation to the first aim of the book—to promote an understanding of the harmful possibilities of fieldwork—where *Fieldwork, Participation and Practice* delivers. Many actual and possible dilemmas are described that will be of great help for new and experienced researchers. Betrayal as unethical seems to be the central harmful possibility highlighted in this book, and is certainly an important ethical problem that is particularly salient in qualitative field research. Unfortunately, de Laine focuses primarily on threats to the validity of fieldwork research and to the well-being of the researcher. While these are very important topics, they are not ethical topics. Ethics are about protecting others from harm.

De Laine argues that “traditional,” “objective” ethical systems avoid many of the issues that the qualitative fieldwork researcher is faced with, and that feminist ethics do a better job of acknowledging them. Fair enough; there is certainly merit to this criticism, but *Fieldwork, Participation and Practice* does not sufficiently articulate a system of feminist ethics that would provide the reader with the means to resolve the dilemmas presented. De Laine even goes so far as to state that “Feminist ethics [are] not well codified” (p. 111) and “Codes are not enough because you must make a decision” (p. 144). I cannot agree with this position; the feminist ethical system is well developed and does provide much useful guidance. Indeed, de Laine rejects most accepted ethical principles, referring, for example, to the “abstract ethical principle of informed consent” (p. 89). Informed consent is abstract? The reader is given no justification for such remarks. De Laine appears to be challenging existing ethical systems without presenting an alternative, while at the same time attempting to foster ways of dealing with ethical dilemmas. *Fieldwork, Participation and Practice* shows that this cannot be done.

De Laine’s second argument is that personal characteristics such as empathy and sympathy, as well as intuitive judgments, are sufficient for resolving ethical dilemmas. Instead of ethical principles, de Laine urges the researcher to “draw on their own intuition and feelings which ask, ‘Would I like this done to me?’” (p. 136), “Not say things in print you would not say to the people themselves” (p. 191), “If it does not feel right there is a problem and if in doubt, leave out” (p. 198), and, “Does this feel right?” (p. 190). While these are noble sentiments, no justification is given for them. And, of course, such advice is open to the counter-argument; what if you are a cruel person and it feels right to harm another?

Intuitive judgments, by definition, are spontaneous and emotional without any clear conscious decision-making. Intuitive ethical judgment is based upon a lifetime of learning about being moral, of which training and experience in ethics and standards may constitute only a very small part. In ideal circumstances, it predisposes researchers to act in ethically appropriate ways and leads to sound ethical choices. In ambiguous or confusing

situations, however, intuitive judgment may not lead to desirable choices because it is highly individual and subject to personal bias. Ultimately, intuitive ethical judgments cannot serve as justification for our actions. It is only through repeated experience with the application of a defensible ethical system (which feminist ethics certainly is) that we are able to develop and articulate personal ethical decisions that are both intuitive and defensible.

*Fieldwork, Participation and Practice* addresses a much-needed area in ethics scholarship and the author should be applauded for doing so. Unfortunately, it falls short of meeting at least one of its two intended aims. Perhaps de Laine should decide if the book is a guide to credible, safe, or ethical qualitative research, or if it is a critique of existing ethical systems, and focus the text accordingly. As it stands, *Fieldwork, Participation and Practice* is appropriate as a supplementary text in a graduate course on qualitative research, and should be of interest to researchers well versed in qualitative theory and philosophy.

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**Situated Ethics in Educational Research**, edited by Helen Simons and Robin Usher, 2000. Routledge/Falmer Press, London. x + 208 pp. ISBN 0-415-20667-7.

*Situated Ethics in Educational Research* is an excellent, timely, and very useful book about rethinking our understanding of ethics, applied ethical issues, researchers' ethical roles, responsibilities, dilemmas, and discursive practices. With an impressive multidisciplinary collection of papers, it accomplishes its aims: (a) to challenge universal ethical principles and rigid codes, (b) to explore how ethical issues are conceptualized, differently and discursively handled and mediated by researchers in different fields, and (c) to understand how ethics is constructed and situated in complex sociopolitical contexts. The authors in this volume target Cartesian dualisms of mind–body, cognition–emotion, and individual–social that have structured our thinking about ethics and influenced ethical decision making for so long. The authors draw on feminist and postmodern theories to expose the assumptions entrenched in these binary oppositions. In this way, the oppositions are replaced with a view of ethics as situated and immune to universalization. This is ironic at a time when we see a proliferation of Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) and Research Ethics Boards (REBs) that aim to standardize ethical policies and procedures and to develop ethical codes or standards among occupational groups.

This book belongs to an emerging genre of texts that argue for alternative explanations of complex phenomenon (e.g., situated cognition, situated literacy practices, communities of practice) and against essentialist, foundational theories of mainstream educational research. The editors explicitly acknowledge that they have a particular philosophical and political stance that is shared, in varying degrees, by all the contributors. However, it is

2003 in *Sociology of Health & Illness*. *Fieldwork, participation and practice: Ethics and dilemmas in qualitative research*. Published in *Sociology of Health & Illness* in 2003. Web of Science (Free Access). View full bibliographic record View citing articles. A postgraduate qualitative research methods course, such as MY421, as pre- or co-requisite. Familiarity with notions of research design in the social sciences, to the level of MY400 or equivalent. Course content. Doing ethnography enables us to examine how social order is produced as people go about their everyday interactions. Multiple sources of naturally-occurring data are used to understand how communities, organisations and institutions work, informally as well as formally. Fieldwork, participation and practice: Ethics and dilemmas in qualitative research. Sage Publications Ltd. DeWalt, K. M., ; DeWalt, B. R. (2002). *Participant observation: A guide for fieldworkers*. Qualitative research relies on data obtained by the researcher from first-hand observation, interviews, questionnaires, focus groups, participant-observation, recordings made in natural settings, documents, and artifacts. The data are generally nonnumerical. Qualitative methods include ethnography, grounded theory, discourse analysis, and interpretative phenomenological analysis. Qualitative research methods have been used in sociology, anthropology, political science, psychology, social work, and Ethics in practice needs consideration alongside procedural ethics. These partnerships allow for discussion and resolution of dilemmas, in a manner that allows different points of view to be heard, and compromises to be negotiated (Emmanuel et al., 2004). Increasingly, public engagement and participation in research is being called for at all stages of the research process, from design, through fieldwork planning, and implementation, to monitoring and analysis and distribution of results in guidelines on good fieldwork practice (South African Department of Health, 2007; UNAIDS/WHO, 2007; HPTN, 2009; UK National Institute for Health Research, 2014).