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Dealing with Un(Expected) Ethical Dilemma: Experience from the Field

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Abstract

Despite the growing interest in qualitative research and discussion of ethics, there has been little focus in the literature on the specific ethical dilemmas faced by researchers. In this paper, we share our fieldwork experiences regarding the ethical dilemmas that we encountered while doing research on a sensitive topic. Specifically, we share some of the ethical dilemmas, that is, concerning confidentiality, anonymity, legitimacy, controversial data, interpretation and off-the-record data, which emerged from the research. Most importantly, this paper shares ideas concerning how researchers might deal with ethical issues while preserving their integrity in the research process. Overall, this paper suggests approaches that qualitative researchers can adopt when doing research on sensitive topics. The paper contributes towards closing an existing gap in the literature, making visible the challenges frequently faced by qualitative researchers, that is, the vulnerability of researchers while preserving research integrity. Finally, this paper concludes with the suggestion that ethical dilemmas are part of the research process in doing qualitative research. However, it is suggested that future research should focus on ethical issues from the perspective of the researchers as well as the respondents.

Keywords

Ethical Dilemma, Research, Sensitive, Qualitative Research, Confidential, Anonymity

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Dealing with Un(Expected) Ethical Dilemma: Experience from the Field

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Despite the growing interest in qualitative research and discussion of ethics, there has been little focus in the literature on the specific ethical dilemmas faced by researchers. In this paper, we share our fieldwork experiences regarding the ethical dilemmas that we encountered while doing research on a sensitive topic. Specifically, we share some of the ethical dilemmas, that is, concerning confidentiality, anonymity, legitimacy, controversial data, interpretation and off-the-record data, which emerged from the research. Most importantly, this paper shares ideas concerning how researchers might deal with ethical issues while preserving their integrity in the research process. Overall, this paper suggests approaches that qualitative researchers can adopt when doing research on sensitive topics. The paper contributes towards closing an existing gap in the literature, making visible the challenges frequently faced by qualitative researchers, that is, the vulnerability of researchers while preserving research integrity. Finally, this paper concludes with the suggestion that ethical dilemmas are part of the research process in doing qualitative research. However, it is suggested that future research should focus on ethical issues from the perspective of the researchers as well as the respondents.

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Introduction

It is the nature of qualitative researchers to build interaction with the respondents. As such, we delve into social lives of the respondents as a main part of the process. This can be ethically challenging as there are issues associated with the welfare of the respondents as human beings that qualitative researchers often encounter. Ritchie (2003) asserts that it is difficult to predict the subject of study as dealing with humans involves emotion. Clearly, when one deals with emotions, there will be many ethical issues that one needs to consider and address.

There are both expected and unexpected issues that are frequently faced by qualitative researchers, particularly when the research topic has sensitive elements. In this paper, we wish to draw explicitly on the ethical dilemmas faced based on the experience of the researchers undertaking study of a sensitive topic. We conducted our research in Malaysia. Twelve respondents were interviewed. Our respondents were among the individuals who had experience dealing with corruption cases, such as a forensic accountant, a criminologist, officials from enforcement agencies, academics, senior government officials and a senior manager from a “Big Four” audit firm. Their experiences and information matter and hence obtaining their participation was crucial.

We believe that sharing our experiences of undertaking the research adds value to existing knowledge as there is limited treatment in the literature of the vulnerability of the researchers in studying a sensitive topic. Specifically, we found little discussion in the literature on dealing with ethical dilemmas from the perspective of researchers, particularly with regard to sensitive areas, indicating the area is understudied. Walsh, Hewson, and Shier (2008) also

noted the lack of attention given to ethical considerations in qualitative research. They pointed that where these are addressed, the focus is on confidentiality and anonymity and respecting and protecting the interests of respondents.

Thus, it is our intention to share some of the ethical dilemmas that we experienced in conducting our research entitled “Fighting Corruption in Malaysia” and explaining how we dealt with each of the dilemmas. This we hope will provide useful information to other qualitative researchers, particularly those that are doing work on sensitive topics.

Situating Ourselves as the Researchers

We have been doing qualitative research for more than 15 years and have had wonderful experiences. Our years of doing qualitative research have helped us enhance our skills and knowledge in conducting the study discussed here, that is, the fight against corruption in Malaysia, which we believe is a sensitive topic. We conducted this corruption study in 2012 and completed in 2014. We believe it is high time for us to share our experiences doing sensitive topics such as this as we observed there are many taboo topics that are understudy. Most important, corruption issues have become a global phenomenon and it is essential for researchers to provide deep understanding of the issue and at the same time aware of the challenges and ethical dilemma that comes with it.

Among the skills that helped develop strength and rigour in doing the research discussed here were understanding how to build rapport, how to interact with respondents and how to deal with sensitive issues. At the outset, we knew that conducting research on a sensitive topic such as ours would be challenging. Nonetheless, motivated by the urge to understand the phenomenon, that is, corruption in Malaysia, we attempted to explore the concept of corruption from the perspective of social reality. Attaining the findings was a challenge for us as there were many ethical dilemmas that we faced throughout the research. In this article, we share our experiences in the field and how we made certain decisions, how we encountered ethical issues and how we resolved them. Some were expected, while others were unexpected. The expected issues, such as assuring confidentiality and anonymity, were easy to deal with as these were anticipated and considered calculated risks. However, dealing with the unexpected ethical issues was most challenging. These included respondents not attending interviews, refusing to be recorded during interviews and dealing with controversial and off-the-record data. We noted that the degree of ethical dilemmas differs when conducting research on a sensitive topic compared with a non-sensitive topic.

Glaser and Strauss (1967, as cited in Hoepfl, 1997) referred to the above challenges as concerning the “theoretical sensitivity” of the researcher. This concept explains the ability of the researcher to make decisions based on the researcher's skill and readiness to attempt a qualitative inquiry. Kakabadse, Kakabadse, and Kouzmin (2002) assert that ethical issues will emerge when one deals with humans. In understanding the causes of ethical dilemmas in research, Kakabadse et al. (2002) identify three categories of ethical dilemma: conflict of values within an individual's value system, conflict of values between two value systems and dilemmas in terms of personal orientation (p. 118).

We faced such challenges; dealing with humans involves ethical concerns that arise due to conflicts of values within and between individuals, organizational issues and personal dilemmas. Frequently, we faced conflicts of values, that is, both personal conflicts and instances of conflict linked to different individuals' value systems. We concur that it is essential for any qualitative researcher to be sensitive ethically to the three aforementioned categories when doing qualitative research. In what follows, we share the ethical challenges that we faced undertaking this sensitive research topic that is, the issue of corruption in Malaysia.

Undertaking Research on Sensitive Topics

As mentioned above, we conducted our study on corruption and the fight against it in Malaysia. We considered the topic to be sensitive as this fits with the descriptions given by several researchers. Lee and Renzetti (1990), for example, addressed the issue of sensitive research topics and the role of researchers in such situations. They identified the characteristics of sensitive topics, which include research intrusion into personal life, topics related to deviant and social control, impinging on the vested interests of a powerful person and dealing with things sacred to those being studied which they do not wish to be profaned. Reflecting on our topic, we identified similarities with the description given by Lee and Renzetti (1990), namely that it involved respondents' personal lives, the topic itself concerns deviant behaviour and it is linked with powerful persons.

Researchers such as Lee and Renzetti (1990) note that researching sensitive topics requires care. Our experience of researching corruption supports this: it requires care not only with regard to the data, but also safeguarding both the respondents and the researchers. With regard to the latter, namely researchers, we found that one aspect of undertaking sensitive research was that it was physically and emotionally strenuous, particularly in terms of the ethical dilemmas confronted, which we address below.

Facing Ethical Dilemmas

The first ethical dilemma we experienced was the withdrawal from the study by people who had already volunteered to participate. The respondents had second thoughts and thus declined to share their experiences. Qualitative researchers such as Dickson-Swift, James, and Liamputtong (2008) have stated that this is normal when one is engaged in a sensitive topic and that respecting the private rights of the respondents is essential. We noted this risk and respected the private rights of the respondents. We agree with Dickson-Swift et al. (2008) that data collection in sensitive research can be a difficult task.

How did we handle this? We employed the snowballing data collection technique and found this useful in facing the issue presented above. The snowballing technique gave us a route to finding the right person to answer our research questions. We referred to Ritchie, Lewis, and Elam's (2003) explanation of how to conduct data collection using the snowballing technique, based on their view that it is suitable for research that requires a small sample and in which the "selection criteria are characteristics which might not be widely disclosed by individuals or which are too sensitive for a screening interview" (p. 94). We realized that our research was of that nature and that we had to respect the rights of the individuals. With the snowballing technique we managed to obtain 12 respondents who volunteered to participate.

The second issue concerned voluntary consent. Many qualitative researchers have discussed this issue and have upheld the principle that voluntary consent to participation is essential. Indeed, van Deventer (2009) emphasized that not only do researchers need to obtain consent, but they should also explain the research process to the respondents and discuss with them any alterations made to the research process. Researchers are expected to obtain informed consent from all those who are directly involved in the research or in the vicinity of the research. This principle relates to the broader issue of respect for the respondents, ensuring that they are not coerced into participation and have access to relevant information prior to giving consent. Usually consent is obtained through written consent forms and the necessary elements of consent are identified by an ethical review committee. These usually include prior information on key elements of the research, such as the purpose, procedures, time period, risks

and benefits and a clause stipulating that participation is voluntary and the respondents have the right to withdraw from the study at any time.

Our own experiences taught us that researchers should not take the participation of respondents lightly, although voluntary consent may have been granted. We suggest that qualitative researchers should gain written consent to participation in order to avoid ethical issues. For example, there were instances during our corruption study when we encountered the retraction of consent from a respondent who had expressed willingness to participate in the initial stage and had given verbal consent. However, soon after the interview, we were asked to delete all recorded conversations with the respondent. We were taken aback by this incident as it was unexpected. Moreover, the respondent's data were very important, and the insights shared were very useful for our corruption research. This was a difficult and very challenging moment for us. There was a conflict in which we were thinking of the data on the one hand and our concern was with our integrity as researchers on the other. Although the respondent had previously given consent, with due respect, we had to abide by his request. In spite of repeated assurances that his information would be kept confidential, he refused, and our final decision was to delete all information given during the interview and not to include him as a respondent. Such unexpected incidents require researchers' judgment and our decision to delete the data and exclude the respondent was based on our integrity as researchers: adhering to the principle of caring for the respondents vs the data, we had to consider the respondent's rights. Ballamingie and Johnson (2011) shared their experience and concluded that "conducting case study research in a decidedly non-marginalized community provided research findings that challenged existing orthodoxies in some of the research literature upon which [they] drew" (p. 718).

The third issue is related to the legitimacy of the data. Many qualitative researchers have discussed the essential use of a medium or tool. Frequently, qualitative researchers use tape recorders, or similar tools, during interviews. According to some, using digital data brings the researcher closer to the data (e.g., Pearce, Arnold, Philips, & Dwan, 2010). We adopt a similar view that using such a medium not only eases the process of gathering data, but also brings the researcher closer to the data. Using audio and visual data is common in qualitative research.

In our case, we employed a recorder to audiotape the interviews. We used the recording device to facilitate the interview, enabling us to focus on the topics discussed, as well as to ease our transcription. Audio is an effective way of ensuring effective transcription and thus increasing reliability of the data. We adopted Patton's (2002) suggestion that a tape recorder is indispensable. Working with the data in their original form is a priority based on considerations of the authenticity, originality and completeness of the data gathered. Qualitative researchers broadly concur that embracing this technology provides accurate, efficient and trustworthy data collection (Markle, West, Richard, & Rich, 2011). As mentioned by Markle et al. (2011), audio recording technology has become the staple for qualitative researchers. Using audio recording give researchers more time to focus on the respondents and transcription becomes practical. Patton (2002) stated the use of technology is added advantage to qualitative researchers as it increases the quality of field observations.

Generally, we had no issue with obtaining consent from the respondents concerning the use of a tape recorder as tool for the purpose of recording and processing (i.e., transcribing) the data, although there were situations in which the respondent refused to be taped and requested only note taking. Naturally, we requested permission from the respondents prior to tape recording the conversations. Taking ethical considerations into account, we tape recorded only when clear permission was given. We regard respect in caring for the data very highly. In our research, we found getting connected to the data to be essential and transcribing the data ourselves gave us closeness to the data. We know that the accuracy of data is essential. We had

little problem with transcribing the data. Almost all respondents had no issue with us using recording tools, mainly because we managed to build rapport and gain their trust prior to the interviews. In addition, the reassurance that their identity would not be exposed was key in being given the privilege to use tools such as a tape recorder. When transcribing the data, it is most important to know the person conducting the transcription is a trustworthy individual. It is crucial to have some written agreement between the person hired and the researchers if the researchers decide to hire a person to transcribe.

In addition, we conducted the transcription ourselves. Our common practice to conduct verbatim transcription on our own and avoid hiring any other individual to perform the task. Although this was costly in terms of time consumption and we were pressed for time, we conformed to this rule. In so doing, we had the assurance that all data were safeguarded as there were no third parties involved in the process of transcribing the data. Another ethical step taken was that soon after the transcription, we deleted the conversations gathered from the respondents and destroyed the tapes.

Fourth is the dilemma of confidentiality. A question that is frequently asked in such research is “How do I know you will not mention my name?” Our respondents expressed their concern over the use of their names and we realized that they were conscious of protecting their identities. There were many occasions on which the respondents refused to be named. In Malaysia, it is the norm for respondents not to wish to reveal their names. One of the reasons is that Malaysians are not comfortable with giving comments openly and disclosing their identity. During our research exploring the corruption phenomenon, we encountered instances that involved confidentiality. During our data collection, most of the respondents were careful about what they said, hence limiting the process of obtaining a rich and thick description in the data. We provided assurances that we would use pseudonyms, but our experience taught us that the perception that carelessness in qualitative research could result in disclosing the identity of the respondents may lead to mistrust. Hence, assurances and confidence that trust will be maintained are essential. We concur with Johnson (2014), who stated that confidentiality is closely linked with informed consent.

The fifth issue concerns the provision of off-the-record information. Off-the-record data relates to information given by respondents, but which they request is not disclosed in the report. On a few occasions, there were times when the respondents shared their stories, which were essential to our data, but mentioned that the data were not to be disclosed anywhere, commonly phrased as “please do not include this in your work, this is off the record.” Very often we faced this “off-the-record” condition. Our conflict was whether to include the information or not. No doubt, the information would have been useful and would have enhanced the findings and there were times that we faced the temptation to include the data. Although the data carried weight, we respected our respondents and decided the ethical consideration towards our respondents were higher; hence we either switched off the tape recorder or eliminated the information from the tape recording when doing the transcription.

Discussion

Facing ethical dilemmas is one of the essential aspects of doing qualitative research. Reflection on our own experience, studying a sensitive topic as mentioned above, clearly denotes its importance. Scholars have argued that facing ethical dilemmas in doing qualitative research is normal and the most important consideration is how to deal with such dilemmas. Some have pointed out that ethical dilemmas appear even before the fieldwork, although it continues during and after the research. Qualitative researchers such as van Deventer (2009) consider that each stage of the research process (design, implementation, analysis, dissemination) has a specific set of ethical issues associated with it.

Also, there are calculated and uncalculated ethical dilemmas. Refusal to participate on the part of the respondents is one of the ethical issues commonly faced even before the fieldwork. Hence researchers should be prepared for this. In our case, rejection occurred at the onset of the research, although some withdrew during the research project. We have shared our experience of how we dealt with the dilemmas encountered. We find that there are ways that researchers can minimize the dilemmas in the pursuit of getting data.

McCosker, Barnard, and Gerber (2001) wrote that researching sensitive topics creates methodological and technical issues: what is most important is how researchers confront these issues. They pointed out that solving ethical dilemmas depends on the context and cultural norms and values. For example, in our case to confront the issue, we obtained consent from the 12 respondents, noting their voluntary consent as part of the research. Even then, we faced some ethical dilemmas when some of the respondents withdrew.

According to Halai (2006), "Researchers are expected to obtain informed consent from all those who are directly involved in research or in the vicinity of research" (p. 5). This principle applies to the broader issue of respect for the respondents, so that they are not coerced into participation and have access to relevant information prior to giving consent. Usually, consent is obtained through written consent forms and the necessary elements of consent are identified by review committees. These generally include prior information on the key elements of research, such as the purpose, procedures, time period, risks and benefits and a clause stipulating that participation is voluntary and the respondents have the right to withdraw. We would suggest that researchers obtain written consent as the lesson we learned was that the risk of withdrawal from participating in research is higher when one obtains verbal voluntary consent.

Previous studies have indicated that voluntary consent from respondents is essential. For example, the studies previously cited (Halai, 2006; van Deventer, 2009) explained that it is crucial to obtain consent from the respondents. Our findings are congruent with those of previous studies. Our study finds that voluntary consent from respondents is essential. However, it is even more essential to know that written consent is preferred. Although Halai (2006) addressed the issue of respondents having the right to withdraw from the study, we find that written consent is evidence that there was agreement between the researched and the researcher prior to the study. Walsh et al. (2008), in their participatory action research project with youth in Calgary, Canada, explained that in participatory research there are many ethical issues that emerge during the process of the research and that research involving youth requires consent not only from the respondents, but also those connected with the youth, e.g., parents or guardians.

In Malaysia, the culture of being committed to research is lower and hence there is the possibility of withdrawal from participation, even more so without written consent. The lesson learned was that verbal consent exposed us to a high risk of withdrawal as there was a high likelihood that the identity of the respondents might be retrieved from the research (deductive disclosure). It is important to know that in Malaysia the risk in terms of getting respondents to participate is even higher than in other contexts. Through our experience of undertaking this sensitive research, we found that Malaysians are concerned about sharing their stories. Although there are many who speak out, there is also scepticism about sharing sensitive stories. The dominant culture of not speaking out and avoiding sensitive issues shaped the respondents' behaviours in shying away from participating. Another aspect we noticed was that there was always the concern that "this is off-the-record," giving rise to the dilemma of whether or not to use the data. We noticed that this was a cultural aspect as it is a norm in Malaysian not to disclose or be too transparent about their feeling particular on issues that are sensitive. Din and Haron (2012) conducted a study on the culture of sharing knowledge using online, that is, through Facebook and they found similar situation where they assert that "Malaysians tend to

share anything that is common or having compatible interest however still [] reserved on issues that touch on personal or sensitive issues” (p. 1049). This is typical, unlike in studies in the Western world, where people talk freely about their feelings and sharing knowledge is common.

Furthermore, it is also important to note that using a particular medium of data collection could create an ethical dilemma as it is very important to obtain permission from the respondent in order to legitimize the data. Legitimacy, from the perspective of our study, involved gaining permission to tape record the conversations during the interviews. Some of the respondents refused to be taped and only allowed note taking. Respecting the wishes of our respondents, on several occasions we did not tape the conversations. We found it a challenge to conduct interviews while taking notes. There were times that we were tempted to ignore the instruction not to use a tape recorder as we foresaw it would be difficult for us to transcribe the data; however, as qualitative researchers, we knew this would be unethical. As mentioned, caring for the respondents and the data meant respecting our respondents and hence we went along with their requests.

Based on the above, as much as we would have liked to gain a rich description through the data, there were conflicts between obtaining rich data and ensuring the privacy and confidentiality of our respondents. We find this to be a risk that research must consider, and precautions must be taken. To reduce the risk, it is important for the researcher to be prepared with possible solutions, that is, written confirmation, assurance of confidentiality, contracts between researchers and respondents and understanding the culture of the location of research. Unlike the quantitative paradigm, in which direct interactions with humans are less common, qualitative researchers are engaged in direct interactions and thus the above ethical dilemmas are unavoidable.

Conclusion

The nature of qualitative research raises some unintended consequences, that is, ethical dilemmas. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to provide insights into the unexpected ethical issues one might face doing qualitative research. Drawing upon our experience, we share several unexpected ethical issues that we consider highly essential and that should be taken seriously.

Due to the use of human beings as participants, we are of the view that ethical considerations should be the top of the list in any qualitative study. Our findings helped us identify several ethical dilemmas. We are of the view that sharing real-time experiences provides a realistic understanding of how qualitative research is applied. Hence, the lessons learned from our experiences could guide other researchers in minimizing any harmful and unexpected consequences for the respondents and the data. We hope this paper provides the reader with the opportunity to review their own research and allow for ethical considerations as part of the research process. We suggest that ensuring and assuring the private rights of respondents are important aspects. Gaining the trust of respondents is essential and thus the study has proposed several ways that one could build trust and gain the respondents' confidence.

For future research, we suggest that researchers should observe ethical considerations from the perspective of the researched. As we have shared our study from the perspective of the researchers, it is just as important to study ethical considerations from the aspect of the researched.

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