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The Risk of Harm

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The Risk of Harm

Perhaps the most common, and usually the most important, principle involved in discussions of research ethics concerns harmful consequences that could result from the actions of researchers. Ethics codes and regulatory frameworks often suggest that harm must be avoided; and it is certainly true that researchers would almost always want to avoid their research doing serious harm to anyone. However, the *risk* of harm, *of some kind*, is probably unavoidable, in virtually any activity. Furthermore, what counts as a significant risk of significant harm is a matter of judgment.

As we saw in the Introduction, initial concern about research ethics arose in the context of medicine. Here a central focus has been on the clinical testing of medical interventions, for example of a new drug or surgical technique. These trials often involve the potential for harm. However, most non-experimental social research, especially qualitative work, does not involve interventions of this sort. Of course, the implication is not that the risk of harm does not arise in qualitative research, only that it takes distinctive forms, and involves a different balance of considerations.¹

The harm that may be risked in making research decisions can vary in both degree and kind. Many social scientists argue that the risks are low in their work, certainly as compared with medical research, and also by comparison with the danger accompanying many other activities, such as mass media journalism. But there are some social scientists who challenge this assessment. For example, Warwick (1982) has argued that there is *prima facie* evidence of a great many actual and potential harms caused by social research, and has suggested that we cannot know for certain that it has done little harm because there has been hardly any rigorous investigation of the matter.

The spread of ethical regulation, discussed in the Introduction, has sometimes drawn on this high estimate of the dangers of social inquiry.² Moreover, the growth of regulation reflects a broader public preoccupation with the risk of harm. Some social theorists have argued that this has become a central organising principle in modern, or postmodern, societies; despite the fact that the basis for, and even possibility of, calculating the risks coming from modern technology are undermined by the sheer scale and pace of innovation (Giddens 1991; Beck 1992, 1999). One consequence of this is the emergence, in many quarters, of increasing risk-aversion (Pieterman 2001; Furedi 2002), which leads to a search for procedures to eliminate dangers. Within large-scale societies today, particularly in the context of global interdependence, unavoidable reliance upon anonymous others – not just individuals but also agencies of various kinds – tends to encourage demands for ‘systems’ or ‘procedures’ that will provide protection against the unknown.

This is part of the context within which the rise of ethical regulation, and the centrality of a concern with harm in discussions of research ethics, must be understood. It may therefore be tempting to dismiss the pressure for regulation, and the sort of arguments put forward by Warwick, as constituting a moral panic that both exaggerates the dangers and at the same time makes unreasonable demands for the elimination of all risk.

However, this is too hasty a response: there are issues around the risk of harm in qualitative research that need closer attention.

Harm and Benefit

The problem of harm caused by research has typically been approached from a consequentialist point of view, and has usually involved recognising that research may generate benefits as well as harms, with the idea that these need to be weighed against one another.³ Given this, before examining the issue of harm, we should note some kinds of benefit that can derive from qualitative research.

The most obvious benefit is the value of the knowledge produced, though it is by no means universally accepted that social scientific knowledge is of value, or more specifically that what qualitative work produces is worthwhile. Very often research knowledge is valued for supplying policy- or practice-relevant evidence, and there have been recurrent disputes about what sort of evidence is of value, and what kinds of research method are required to produce it (see Hammersley 2002). We will simply note here that we believe qualitative research can and does produce knowledge that is of use to policymakers, occupational practitioners of various kinds, and others; though, as we made clear in [Chapter 2](#), we do not believe that the knowledge produced by research is *only* of instrumental value.

However, not all knowledge is of equal value. We saw that its value must be judged in terms of relevance to human concerns. Moreover, the value of particular findings can vary in relation to each concern, and we are also likely to rank these concerns differentially according to importance. In short, judgments about the value of what a research project promises to produce, or of what a completed study *has* produced, will frequently vary. Furthermore, the value of some items of knowledge, in some contexts at some times, may even be judged negative. For instance, in her study of lesbian parenthood in Sweden, Ryan-Flood (2010: 194) discovered that some women were pretending to be heterosexual in order to get IVF treatment. She suppressed this finding, until the law changed, for fear that it would alert the authorities to the practice, and prevent lesbians receiving this service.

There are also incidental benefits that may accrue to people from participating in research, or from their contact with researchers. For instance, many participants enjoy being interviewed, and may occasionally find it therapeutic. Thus, Grenz (2010: 55) notes that some of the men she studied, who visited prostitutes, reported that 'talking [to her] helped them gain some clarity about themselves. They found themselves in conflict between living out what they thought of as their desires and the low social value of being a punter, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, their own moral values such as faithfulness' (see also Goodrum and Keys 2007: 254). More generally, Plummer (1995: 34) notes that in the case of life-history interviews: 'for many the telling of a tale comes as a major way of "discovering who one really is"'. Indeed, there may be benefit even when the experience of being interviewed is distressing: when a researcher asks a question that an informant finds upsetting this may nevertheless result in the latter addressing a personal issue that he or she had previously shied away from, and this may (though it need not) be beneficial for the individual

concerned and/or for others.

There are similar potential benefits in the case of participant observation. Here, friendships of one sort or another frequently develop, from which participants may derive at least some of the kinds of benefit that arise from friendship in other contexts; indeed, it is not uncommon for some relationships to continue long after the research has been completed (see Whyte 1993a: appendix; Miller and Humphreys 2004).

A third kind of benefit is that during their contacts with people qualitative researchers often provide minor services of one kind or another. Forsythe (1999: 9) reports that when doing fieldwork both in remote rural areas of Scotland and in an urban German community, 'On request, I taught people to drive, baby-sat, played the organ in church, mucked out barns, corrected people's English, did translations, and so on'. And Okely provides a similar list from her research with Gypsy families: 'at the beginning I made myself available for any odd jobs: reading letters, arranging for the rubbish skip to be emptied and placing liquidiser in the elsan lavatories after the sewage lorry's departure'. At one point she also spent evenings talking long into the night with the wife of a Gypsy family who had suffered a bereavement (Okely 1983: 41). In addition, anthropologists working in relatively poor societies have often given basic medical treatment, and many qualitative researchers provide information or advice. Thus, in his research on Algerian businessmen, Peneff (1985) found himself being asked for evaluations of various products from a French point of view, information perceived as of value in attempts to increase exports to the French market.

Of course, what are identified here as benefits can be a mixed blessing. Levinson's (2010: 201) comment, 'I was drawn into a desire to help those with whom I was working, sometimes with little knowledge as to the potential outcomes', captures a common desire on the part of researchers but also sounds a wise note of caution. The incidental benefits for participants arising from research can sometimes turn into harms, or at least into perceived harms. The basic medical treatment offered by an anthropologist may prove to be inadequate or even come to be viewed as having worsened the illness. Similarly, advice offered can turn out to be misleading, or may be resented by those to whom it is given. And assistance may not have the outcome anticipated. Kelly describes how she helped facilitate a meeting with the Director of Public Health for some of the sex workers in the legal brothel she was studying, to enable them to voice their concerns about the medical treatment they were receiving. She reports:

The meeting did not go as I had hoped: the most articulate and politically informed worker was not present and the workers complained less of the collective problems of service, mistreatment, and administration that they had spoken of to me, and focused more upon an ongoing dispute that some women had been having with Marco, a former male prostitute employed as a janitor, who also ran errands for sex workers. The meeting did not create any great changes for the women and caused the further degeneration of my relationship with [the medical service attached to the brothel]. (Kelly 2004: 11)

There are also services that researchers may provide, or be asked to supply, whose legitimacy is open to question. For example, Coggeshall (2004: 149) reports being asked to smuggle a letter out of prison. Less

incidentally, Mitchell (1993: 44) notes how participants may want the research report written in a way that represents their views and/or promotes their cause.

Our discussion here has relied upon a distinction between benefits or harms caused by the research process itself, on the one hand, and those that are incidental to it, on the other. While this distinction has some importance, in the case of qualitative research there is a large grey area at its core. This is because such research frequently involves researchers participating directly with people over relatively long periods of time, so that there is a blurring between what is and is not part of the research. This blurring is illustrated by the case of sexual relationships between researchers and people in the field.⁴ While these may occur in a tangential way, there are also examples where the connection to the research is very close. One is Goode's (2002) study of the National Association for the Advancement of Fat Americans (NAAFA) in which, rightly or wrongly, he saw having sex with some of the women as more or less essential to the success of the fieldwork. Similarly, in Carrier's (2006) work on male homosexuality in Mexico, his own sexual relations were a key factor. There are difficult judgments to be made, then, about what is a personal matter and what is relevant to the role of the researcher, as regards both potential harm and benefits.

In summary, while it is true that research must be judged according to its likely benefits as well as any harm it might cause, what constitutes a benefit, how beneficial it is, and to whom, are often uncertain and contestable matters. As we shall see, much the same is true of harms.

What Is Harm?

The word 'harm' may seem immediately obvious in meaning, referring to outcomes whose character is easily identifiable. This is not the case. As Feinberg (1984: 32) comments: 'In its bare formulation, without further explanation, the [term] harm [...] is a mere convenient abbreviation for a complicated statement that includes, among other things, moral judgments and value weightings of a variety of kinds.' There are factual assumptions involved too. Warwick (1982: 103) argues:

Much of the disagreement about the harms of social research stems not from inconclusive data but from quite disparate assumptions about the fragility or durability of a typical person, the goods that are sought and the harms that are feared by members of society, and the conditions promoting or retarding collective welfare.

It is necessary, then, to examine carefully what is involved in judgments about harm.

Feinberg (1984: 33) defines 'harm' as 'the thwarting, setting back, or defeating of an interest'; and he defines 'interests' as 'those things in which one has a stake', these being 'components of a person's well-being', in the sense that he or she 'flourishes or languishes as [these components] flourish or languish' (p. 34). So, one person harms another by 'setting back, or thwarting', one or more of those things that affect the latter's well-being. As part of this we must recognise that people's interests often conflict, so that an action may benefit

some people while harming others. At this point, even more difficult issues arise to do with equity or justice.

Feinberg's definition gives us a reasonably clear, if rather abstract, sense of what 'harm' means. In identifying harms we are engaging in evaluation: judging some actual or potential outcome to be bad for someone. So we must ask: what set of values, one or more, defines the 'interests' damaged in any particular case, and thereby underpins the evaluation of harm? Sometimes, judgments of harm are so straightforward that we are likely to overlook the particular value principles involved, or even the very fact that our judgment is value-dependent. For example, a clinical trial of a drug in which the majority of participants die or suffer serious consequences for their health seems a fairly obvious case of harm. Most of us, most of the time, value life and health very highly, our own and that of other people, without thinking about it. But harm does not relate solely to these values, others can be relevant as well.

We can identify potential threats of harm arising from research as falling into the following categories:

- 1 Pain, physical injury, and permanent disability.
- 2 Psychological damage, for instance emotional distress, erosion of self-confidence, stress-related illness, and so on.
- 3 Material damage of some kind, for example loss of one's freedom through imprisonment, dismissal from one's job, reduction in income or wealth, damage to property, and so on.
- 4 Damage to reputation or status, or to relations with significant others, for example through the disclosure of information that was previously unknown to some relevant audience.
- 5 Damage to a project in which people are engaged, to some group or organisation to which they belong, perhaps even to some institution or occupation in which they participate.

The fact that serious harm, of the kinds just listed, *could* be produced by qualitative research does not imply that it is common or is usually very likely. Indeed, it seems to us that in most qualitative work the danger of significant harm of any of these types is low, and that its occurrence has been rare. But this judgment assumes, among other things, that it is possible to assess the seriousness of harms with a reasonable degree of reliability. And this is also required if we are to make defensible decisions, when doing research, about whether risking some potential harm is justifiable, or about whether the behaviour of other researchers in carrying out particular investigations has involved unacceptable levels of likely harm.

Assessing Degrees of Harm

One issue that arises here concerns the appropriate benchmark in judging harm. Earlier, we noted how social scientists often compare what they see as the low risk of significant harm involved in their work with the much greater danger for patients involved in clinical trials. By contrast with this, Warwick (1982) implicitly compares the effects of social research with a base-line of no harm. Not surprisingly, these two comparisons produce very different results. But which is the most appropriate?

It seems to us that both can be of value, but that neither should be treated as conclusive. Even if social

science involves a lower risk of serious harm than clinical research in medicine, it could still carry significant dangers. At the same time, given the differences in level of risk it highlights, this comparison has the virtue of reminding us about the *range* of variation in potential harm that can be involved in research, and in other activities, thereby helping us to gain a sense of proportion – an essential requirement.

Warwick's strategy serves the opposite function: warning us not to be complacent about harm. At the same time, his approach is unsatisfactory on its own because it employs an unrealistic ideal as a benchmark: no risk of harm at all. It seems to us that, instead, we should judge the risks of harm from qualitative research against the sorts of dangers normally operating in the lives of the people being studied. To modify an example that Warwick himself uses: in the case of research on military recruits, concern about the effects of a researcher asking potentially embarrassing questions pales into insignificance by comparison with the other risks of various types of harm to which the recruits are, and will be, subjected. The threat of harm, of various kinds, along with the possibility of benefits, is a universal and recurrent feature of everyday life. Thus, just as we must judge levels of harmful radiation against background levels, so too with ethical dangers we must assess these comparatively in relation to context, not against a utopian ideal. This is because such an ideal would render research, and indeed most other kinds of action, impossible.

Our point here is not that qualitative researchers should feel free to do anything that does not carry a worse threat of danger than those normally operating on people in the context concerned, so that for example in studying a prison they would be justified in trying to coerce inmates into answering questions, given that coercion of many kinds is routine in prisons (Coggeshall 2004). Instead, our argument is that some reasonable judgment has to be made about what is a significant risk of serious harm from research *in the context being investigated*. Comparison with other contexts, and with the ideal of no harm, can be valuable, but they must *not* be used in ways that abstract potential harms from the situations in which they are likely to occur.

It should be clear from our discussion of the nature of harm that there is no means by which its level in particular cases can be objectively measured, in a manner analogous to the measurement of length or temperature. This is particularly obvious where we are comparing different types of harm, but even when we are assessing the level of a single sort of harm it seems unlikely, generally speaking, that there will be a means of measuring it accurately by any standard procedure. To take one example, loss of income *can* sometimes be measured, but this is normally used as a proxy for other things – such as decline in standard of living – which depend upon additional factors – such as need, preference, the cost of goods, and so on – that are less easily measurable. With other types of harm the problems of measurement are even more salient.

However, the fact that measurement is impossible does not mean that we cannot make reasonable assessments of harm and its risk: it is not true that without rigorous measurement we are faced with mere opinions that are all as false or uncertain as one another. Drawing this sort of conclusion is a common error, to be found not just on the part of those who insist that measurement must be possible if we are to know anything with certainty, but also among those who declare that all such judgments are incommensurable or undecidable (see, for instance, Caputo 1993).

In relation to each *type* of harm, we can usually distinguish different *degrees* of severity. It is possible, for instance, to judge *how big* a blow to self-confidence has occurred, *how large* a drop in standard of living has taken place. Generally speaking, a pinprick is less serious than being gouged to the bone, and failure to get promotion is usually less significant than losing one's job. In all these examples, an implicit scale can be assumed even though it is not one that can be rigorously operationalised so as to allow for measurement, nor one where people's judgments will always agree.

Even where we are assessing the relative seriousness of *different kinds* of harm, we can often make reasonable judgments that would be quite widely shared. In the course of his discussion of 'the moral limits of the criminal law', Feinberg (1984: 45–51) provides us with an indication of one basis on which coming to reasonable practical judgments about the seriousness of different harms is possible. He refers to various experiences that temporarily 'distress, offend, or irritate us', which 'come to us, are suffered for a time, and then go, leaving us as a whole and undamaged as we were before' (p. 45). His examples include 'unpleasant sensations (evil smells, grating noises), transitory disappointments and disillusionments, wounded pride, hurt feelings, aroused anger, shocked sensibility, alarm, disgust, frustration, impatient restlessness, acute boredom, irritation, embarrassment, feelings of guilt and shame, physical pain at a readily tolerable level, bodily discomfort, and many more'.

According to Feinberg, for these to count as harms, they would need to have longer-lasting consequences. In fact, we would be inclined to define his examples as harms, but Feinberg's discussion illustrates how it is possible to draw distinctions among harms as regards their severity, in this case between those that are of very brief duration and little consequence, and therefore (Feinberg infers) generally of low significance, and those that are more long-lasting, and so usually more significant, perhaps because they are harmful in themselves, in the sense of generating further harm. Thus, most people would probably regard even a severe sense of embarrassment as less significant than someone losing her home; and with good reason. There will, of course, be many cases where we are more uncertain about what conclusion to draw, and where there would be major disagreements. However, it is important to note that, by contrast with any attempt at scientific measurement of harm, we are not required to produce a general formula, only to make judgments about the seriousness of *particular* harms occurring, or anticipated as possibilities, on *particular* occasions. While there will be cases that seem undecidable, much of the time we will be able to reach reasonably reliable judgments about how serious actual or projected harms are (when judged against the local context), while recognising that there may be disagreement and that this needs to be taken into account.⁵

Harm in Qualitative Research

There are features of qualitative research which make it especially difficult to *predict* the occurrence of harm with any precision. One of these is that such research tends to have an open-ended character. Generally speaking, it starts from a broadly defined interest in some topic and/or in a particular type of person or place, rather than with well-defined hypotheses to be tested. As a result, in the early stages at least, data collection

is not highly focused but has an exploratory character. Furthermore, in the case of participant observation studies, and sometimes even in those that are based entirely on interviews, the researcher is working in contexts over which he or she has very limited control. Also, these contexts may themselves be ones in which various kinds of danger of harm operate for those involved – physical, material, or reputational. And, as regards the publication of findings, researchers do not have control over how others may use, and misuse, them. While here, as elsewhere, precautions are possible, there are limits both to the effectiveness of these and to how far it would be desirable to apply them, given potentially deleterious effects, not least on the research.

It is also important to recognise that harm can be seen as resulting from inaction, as well as from action. Moore (2010: 39) provides an example:

I have never been able to talk openly and accurately about my work on Marakwet, especially with my feminist colleagues, because the moral trauma of female circumcision has opened up an almost unbridgeable gap between us. One question I have been asked repeatedly but still find that I cannot answer honestly is ‘how can you justify observing and participating in these rites since this implies to others that you are condoning them?’ I rather weakly reply that I cannot imagine understanding anything without seeing it, engaging with it.

This example also illustrates some of the complexities involved in the idea of research causing harm. First, whether female circumcision is harmful is not a matter of complete consensus but involves some intercultural dispute (Shweder 2005). Second, assuming that it *is* harm, the question of whether Moore can be held responsible for causing, or even reinforcing, it is open to doubt. However, it seems likely that the objections of Moore's feminist critics, and her own unease, stem not so much from consequentialist considerations regarding harm but rather from her failure publicly to deplore this practice. Criticism and unease might stem from a sense that it was her *duty* to declare her opposition to the practice and to refuse to observe it, perhaps even to campaign against it. Alternatively, or additionally, they may arise from the idea that she had a sisterly duty of care in relation to the young women concerned.

In the case of participant observation, harm can also arise from established roles that researchers take on in the field. Thus, O'Brian (2010: 127) studied door attendants ('bouncers'), and in the course of this took on the role herself. She reports that, on one occasion, she carried out a search that resulted 'in an 18 year old woman being taken into police custody for possession of a Class A drug'. Commenting on this, she reports: 'I felt as though I had crossed the line and that I was no longer simply researching the field. Playing an active member role meant that on this occasion I was instrumental in criminalising an easy target.' She adds: 'In the name of academic research I was occupying a cultural environment underpinned by moral codes that conflicted with my own and consequently being provoked to think and behave in ways [to which] I was not accustomed' (O'Brian 2010: 117–18).

The risk of harm can also arise from a researcher's commitment to reciprocity – with repaying participants for any time and effort they have given in answering questions, and so on. McKeganey (2001: 1237) emphasises

that:

If we are paying a drug user for agreeing to an interview or for filling in a questionnaire we ought not to entertain the notion that the money is being used to buy a ticket to the ballet or for a hearty meal. In most cases the money will be spent on the drugs to which the individual is addicted. As a result there is always the possibility, however slim, that the individual may suffer a fatal overdose as a result of the drugs they have bought with the money provided to them by the researcher. It would be a hard individual who did not feel that they had contributed in a small way to the drug user's death.⁶

Payment is not, of course, the only kind of action on the part of researchers motivated by a commitment to reciprocity: another is the feeding back of data and/or analysis to participants. And this too may not always be beneficial. In her investigation of primary science teacher expertise, Traianou (2007: 215–16) decided to share her initial data analysis with the classroom teacher who was the focus of her study, and with whom she had built up a close relationship. To her surprise, the teacher wrote back complaining that there were 'many mistakes in the analysis that misrepresented what went on' in her lessons, and clearly hurt by the process. Furthermore, the teacher made clear that she was not prepared to continue participating in Traianou's research because 'a classroom teacher is in a very vulnerable position'. It took some time for the teacher to be reassured about the implications of the analysis, and for this breach in relations to be overcome.

The focus in most discussions of harm in social research is on the effects of particular methodological decisions, whether specific and momentary – such as what follow-up question to ask in an interview – or more deliberative and strategic – such as which method of data collection to adopt or what findings to publish. For example, Dodd (2009: 477–8) notes how questions about sexual orientation or gender identity can pose a risk to participants under some circumstances; and, in terms of methods, she suggests that focus groups can pose substantial risks in this respect. Along the same lines, Geros (2008) reports on the difficulties of carrying out research in Syria, in an authoritarian political culture where a great deal of circumspection is required in talking about anything that might be judged 'political', since it could lead to imprisonment and torture.

While there can be no entirely reliable basis for anticipating the risk of harm, some types of study are generally seen as involving heightened risks for participants. Thus, research topics can be more or less 'sensitive' (Renzetti and Lee 1993); particular sorts of data are viewed as involving danger; and some kinds of participant are often believed to be more vulnerable and therefore seen as needing protection.⁷ In the next section, in order to explore some of these variations, we will examine the use of a form of evidence that is often thought to be particularly problematic in these terms, visual data, and in relation to a category of participant that is generally regarded as especially vulnerable, children.

The Use of Visual Research Methods with Children

Definitions of 'visual methods' vary, but central to this category are taking photographs, filming, and making video recordings; and these are research strategies that raise some distinctive ethical issues (Prosser 2000;

Pink 2007a: [Ch. 2](#), 2007b Clark et al. 2010). Photography and filming have long been used by anthropologists, going back at least to Bateson and Mead's (1942) book *Balinese Character: A Photographic Analysis*.⁸ But, recently, as a result of cheap, high-quality digital technology, these methods have emerged as popular among qualitative researchers more generally, not least those doing research on children and young people (Thomson 2008). At the same time in society more generally, increased concern and caution has come to surround the use of images of children.

Researchers may use photographs or video-recordings for various purposes, most notably to document children's living or work conditions, and the activities in which they engage. Furthermore, there has been a growing trend for researchers to give children and young people still or video cameras, asking them to produce images of relevant aspects of their environment or lives (for instance, Allan 2007; Heath and Cleaver 2004; Renold et al. 2008). They are also sometimes asked to produce video diaries (see, for example, Holliday 2004b; Gibson et al. 2007; Noyes 2008).

Various ethical concerns arise about the production of images for research purposes. Some relate to the process of data collection itself; for example photography or video-recording may seriously disrupt the situation being studied, distracting participants from their normal concerns, and perhaps thereby opening them up to risk of harm. Additional dangers may arise where participants are invited to produce visual images: doing this may expose them to danger from people who object to being photographed or video-recorded; and/or the photographs or video-recordings could be used to do harm to others, for example through exposing them to embarrassment or ridicule. Children, perhaps even more than adults, operate within local social systems that involve significant inequalities in power and status, involving the potential for bullying of various kinds.

Perhaps even more significant ethical concerns relate to the publication of images. The fear is that these could be misused or will have negative consequences for those pictured, especially children. After all, those pictured are likely to be immediately recognisable to people who already know them, and perhaps will also become identifiable by others. Various strategies are used by researchers to minimise this danger. Flewitt (2005) mentions fuzzifying faces so as to protect identities, and the possibility of producing sketches of video stills and photographs that minimise identifiability. However, these techniques have themselves been challenged on ethical grounds, for instance as 'an example of the "Othering" of young children in research' (Nutbrown 2010: 3). As this author comments: 'that's what the media does with photographs of people accused of crime' (p. 4).

The response of many researchers who use visual data to these risks of harm is to take what precautions against them seem reasonable in the circumstances, and very often also to obtain informed consent from participants, as far as this is possible. Of course, in the case of children, even teenagers, there is an issue about from whom informed consent can and should be obtained. Much recent writing about research on children has stressed their competence, and how this is often underestimated, as well as their right to make decisions about matters that are directly relevant to them (Alderson and Morrow 2011). At the same time,

there remain questions about the danger of harm, and adults' role in the protection of children from this. As we shall see in [Chapter 4](#), informed consent is a complex and uncertain process, and a crucial element of it concerns the ability to understand the threat of particular kinds of harm. There are clear potential tensions here between a commitment to minimising the risk of harm and respecting the autonomy of children.⁹ Seeking to obtain informed consent may also obstruct the effective pursuit of research in some contexts.

The Issue of Responsibility

It is necessary to emphasise that the occurrence of harm within the context of a piece of qualitative research does not necessarily imply that the researcher is to blame. Assigning responsibility is a separate matter from judging harm. However, it too is an uncertain business, since most outcomes are the product of multiple factors. Furthermore, when assessing responsibility we take account of various additional considerations, such as whether the actor could have reasonably foreseen the outcome, whether or not he or she had any alternative option that was not worse in some important respect, and so on.

We can illustrate what is involved through a hypothetical example:

A researcher is carrying out an investigation within a large organisation. As part of the access negotiations he has agreed that, after six months, he will report his initial findings to members of that organisation. In line with this, at the appropriate time he produces a brief document that is made available across the organisation. In writing this, he indicates some possible *general* conclusions, rather than simply reporting particular events; and is careful to protect confidentiality, not disclosing from whom he obtained specific information, and seeking to preserve the anonymity of the people mentioned in illustrations. In the body of the report, some actions and events are reported that could have led to a major problem for the organisation, though in fact this was avoided at the last minute. The day after the report is made available two of the people who were central to his main example are dismissed. They blame the researcher for this, as do some of their friends. The following day, he receives a message from the general manager. She praises his report for its 'great usefulness in allowing an effective appraisal of key parts of our organisation'.

Harm has probably occurred here, at least in the short term for the particular individuals who have lost their jobs; though, of course, it might be argued that their dismissal was beneficial for the organisation as a whole, or for other employees, notably any who gained promotion as a result. The issue we will focus on here, though, is whether the researcher is responsible for whatever harm (or benefit) occurred. This is the view of some of the participants, but are they right? After all, it is not unknown for scapegoats to be sought when untoward and troublesome events arise.

In deciding on responsibility here there are a number of issues. First, we must decide whether what the researcher did was implicated in the causal process that led to the sackings. A requirement for most causal inference is that the effect comes after the cause: had the people been sacked *before* the report was made

available, then this event could not have been blamed on it, unless it were suspected that there had been a leak about what the report was going to say. We also tend to assume that if an event follows *closely in time* after an action it is more likely to have been caused by it than if there had been a long delay, though the latter does not rule out a possible causal link. While 'follows closely' is a matter of degree, and open to interpretation, in this case the fact that the sackings took place the next day fits the existence of a causal connection. Of course, we should note that an action occurring closely before an event may still not actually have been the cause: the outcome might have occurred anyway because of some other parallel causal process. For instance, the actions of the two people would have been known to others, and by coincidence information about these may have reached the ears of the general manager at the same time that the report was made available. So, we must ask: did the report supply information that the manager did not previously have, did it confirm strong suspicions that she already held, or did it simply provide a means by which the decision to sack them could be justified? In all of these cases the provision of the report plays a causal role, but a varying one, with the result that its significance, and the researcher's responsibility, may be judged differently.

So, secondly, there is the question of what specific role, if any, the researcher's actions played in bringing about the dismissal of the two people. A basic requirement in establishing a causal relationship is that the candidate cause is of a kind that might reasonably be expected to have produced the outcome. In this case, the researcher provided information that related to the two people who were sacked, and what was reported about them was of a kind that could perhaps be interpreted as a damaging error on their part, and therefore be seen as grounds for dismissal. So there is a credible causal pathway in this case. Furthermore, even though the information the researcher supplied was anonymised, there is the possibility that the people could have been identified by the general manager, and/or others, from the report. At the very least, we can say that if the report had not discussed the activities of the two people concerned, or if it had not been made available within the organisation, its causal role would be much less plausible.

In making such judgments we rely upon what are called counterfactual inferences: judgments about *what would have happened if the suspected cause had not been present*. In other words, would the two people have been dismissed if the research had not been taking place, if the researcher had not produced the report, and/or if he had not made it available to people in the organisation? We can never know the answers to these questions with absolute certainty, of course, but we must make some assessment of likelihood if we are to come to a conclusion.

As already noted, there is never a single factor involved in the production of an outcome, so that we need to assess the role of the researcher's producing his report *against other factors*. One of these is the management style of the general manager, which appears to have favoured decisive and severe action on the basis of quite limited information. Under a different regime, the report might have prompted less serious punishment, or even praise for those who saved the day. Equally important, it might be argued that the two people who were sacked bear some responsibility for this, through the way in which they created or dealt with the organisational problem.

Finally, even if we were to conclude that the researcher's report had been a major factor in bringing about the sackings, this would not, in itself, be sufficient to ascribe responsibility to the researcher for a wrongful harm. For this to follow several other conditions must be met. First, the researcher must have been able to avoid the action that caused the harm. Second, he must have been able reasonably to foresee the outcome. Third, any precautions he took to reduce the risk of the outcome to an acceptable level, such as anonymisation, must have been patently inadequate at the time. Finally, there must be no overriding reason why he should have carried out the action even though he recognised that it could well produce the harm.

As regards the first of these conditions, there is an issue about what it was that the researcher did that caused the outcome: was it producing a report, or was it the particular nature of the report, for example providing illustrations, or perhaps a failure to anonymise effectively? Depending upon which of these is the crucial factor, we might give different answers to the question of whether or not he was responsible. It may be that, having agreed to produce a report, the researcher was virtually bound to do so. In these terms, it might be said that he had no alternative and therefore any harm resulting was not his fault. Of course, it could be asked whether it was wise for him to agree to this requirement in the first place, but we should note that entry to the organisation might not have been possible without this. What this highlights is that any assessment relates to an agent in a particular situation at a particular time, with particular constraints being assumed, including commitments entered into that it would be costly or even unethical to violate. The conclusion we reach may vary depending upon what we treat as having been open to change and what we assume to have been fixed. One of the dangers in looking back on events that happened in the past is that we treat features of the situation as having been more easily open to change than they actually were at the time.

The second issue – of whether the outcome could have been foreseen – relates directly to the question of risk: how likely is it that a reasonable person, in the position of the researcher in this time and place, would have anticipated the harmful outcome? Here, too, there is great danger that we are misled by hindsight, overestimating the degree to which the perceived risk could have been anticipated – after all, we now know that the outcome did actually occur, whereas the researcher, when writing his report, did not know that it would do so. At the same time, in the particular case we are discussing, it might reasonably have been suspected that some of the content of the report would have led to questions about who was involved in the incidents reported, and to action against them if their identity could be discovered.

This leads us directly on to the question of what legitimate confidence the researcher could have in the effectiveness of the steps he took to maintain confidentiality through preserving anonymity. Here again there are dangers from hindsight, but it also needs to be recognised that it is tempting to overestimate the likely effectiveness of anonymisation, especially in the case of a report that is made directly available to the people being studied. In this context, it is frequently possible for others to identify people from descriptions of their actions, because these descriptions themselves narrow down the range of people within the organisation who could be being portrayed.

We have already mentioned one point relevant to the final question, about whether there might have been good reason to carry out the action even though it was recognised that it involved some risk of serious

harm. This was that, having agreed to provide a report, the researcher had an obligation to do so even if this involved a danger of causing harm. Here we have a situation approximating to a 'dirty hands' dilemma. However, it is less clear that he had no alternative but to produce a report of a kind that carried the danger concerned.

In looking at how responsibility should be assigned here, we have been engaged in retrospective assessment of an action and outcome that happened in the past. Usually, though, researchers are faced with making prospective judgments about whether particular courses of action are likely to cause harm of particular kinds, and how likely this is. Here all of the considerations discussed apply, in one way or another, but this task is more complex because it is necessary to assess the likelihood of various potential outcomes that are contingent upon ongoing situations, and about which the researcher usually has only very limited information. In the case of our hypothetical example, the researcher had to decide whether or not to produce a report, as promised, and if so *how* to write it, on the basis of an assessment of the chances that the parties described in examples would be identifiable, and of the risk that this would lead to harmful consequences for them. He also had to decide whether *some* risk of this outcome would be acceptable; and, if so, below what threshold.¹⁰

What should be clear from this discussion is that assessing whether a particular research decision has produced harm, could have done, or is likely to do so, can be a difficult process that involves balancing various considerations, factual and evaluative, against one another. While there is no simple means of calculation that could be used to make the decision in a way that would short-cut this process, and thereby lead to certainty or consensus, nevertheless such decisions are ones that we all have to make in everyday life on some occasions; and we know that there are better and worse ways of doing this. Fortunately, most of the time the consequences involved are not life-threatening, and do not even involve serious harm, though there can be rare occasions when this is a possibility, and the resulting decisions can be agonising. This is also true of qualitative research.

Harm to Whom?

Up to now, we have been concerned with the risk of harm to the people being studied. However, these are not the only ones who can be affected by research. Others include: organisations from which funds were obtained; institutions within which researchers work; colleagues in those institutions; journals or publishers; broader groups or categories of person with whom the researcher has not had direct contact but who might be affected by publication of the findings; and even researchers themselves.

In media reports of research findings, it is not uncommon for the research to be ascribed to the funding body or the employing organisation, rather than (or in addition to) the researchers themselves. Journals and publishers can be implicated in the same fashion. In this way, and others, these bodies can suffer harm as a result of research projects for which they are seen as responsible. In particular, some aspect of how the research was carried out may bring them into public disrepute, or open them up to legal challenge. In practice, this is rare, but an example is the way in which the American Anthropological Association was implicated in

the El Dorado controversy, not least because of how it handled the case (Fluehr-Lobban 2003a: 87; Borofsky 2005; see the Introduction). Of course, we should note that such organisations may also *gain* from their association with particular research projects and researchers.

In addition, there are people who have had no direct contact with the researcher who may be harmed by her or his research, notably through the publication of specific findings. Ditton's (1977: iv) study of bread salesmen, which included an account of how they worked various 'fiddles', not only threatened to reduce the income of the people he studied but also those working in other bakeries as well.¹¹ Tourigny (1993: 14–17) mentions the equally ambiguous case of research on doctors providing euthanasia to patients with terminal illnesses, where publication of findings could result in their being prosecuted and their work brought to a halt. The feared effect may also operate in a more indirect way, thus Sikes expresses concern that 'findings of research like mine could be used to endorse the agendas of those who may be considered to be engaging in academic debate to justify paedophilic desires and practices [...]' (Sikes 2010: 148), thereby potentially harming children.

Finally, engaging in research can cause harm to researchers themselves (see Lee 1995; Lyng 1998; Lee-Treweek and Linkogle 2000). This may arise as a result of risks that they have consciously taken, or of decisions that they did not recognise as carrying any threat. As in other cases, what is involved can vary considerably in severity. Warwick (1982: 118) suggests that: 'researchers may suffer harm ranging from torture or death to mild doubts or regret about their professional activities'. Certainly, in some contexts qualitative researchers may be exposed to the risk of physical harm, whether that of assault (Kelly 2004; Jacobs 2006) or the risk of disease (Lankshear 2000). Warwick also mentions two other relevant types of harm: legal jeopardy, the danger of prosecution and even imprisonment; and the psychological effects arising from engaging in deception and manipulation, both in terms of feelings of guilt and self-doubt but also effects on personal behaviour outside research contexts (see also Homan in Homan and Bulmer 1982: 117). There can be other kinds of emotional cost associated with qualitative research too (Corsino 1987; Muir 2004). For instance, discussing her anthropological study of children in a rural primary school in England, Laerke (2008: 144) reports:

This particular fieldwork, to paraphrase Ruth Behar, broke my heart (Behar 1996). And while writing has been an exorcism, of sorts, of a fieldwork-identity that literally made me sick, a reconstituted and properly dislodged 'me' has yet to materialize. Ten years on, I am still somehow in the grip of it. Rather than putting an alleviating 'full-stop' to my troubles, writing about Little Midby has produced a gradual sedimentation of two feelings: anger and sadness.

Much qualitative research is done by lone researchers, but it is also sometimes carried out in teams, and here the issue of harm to researchers takes on a further dimension: the leader of a team, or the team as a collectivity, may be seen as having some responsibility for protecting individual members, particularly those who are younger and less experienced, or vulnerable in some other way (Bloor et al. 2010). Equally, of course, it may be colleagues in the research team who are responsible for causing researchers harm, for

example by divulging information that damages their reputation or even exposes them to physical danger.

We should also note that particular studies can do harm to whole research communities, for example by bringing them into disrepute, and/or by blocking access for future studies in particular settings. This was the major complaint brought against Lofland and Lejune (1960) over their covert research on Alcoholics Anonymous (see Introduction).

Assessments of harm to people other than those who are the focus of inquiry involve the same sorts of complexity and difficult judgments as those we examined earlier. And, once again, it must not be assumed that these forms of harm are very common. How great the risks are will vary considerably according to the circumstances and trajectories of particular research projects.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have examined one of the major principles that has informed a great deal of discussion about research ethics. We argued that there is always *some* potential for harm from qualitative research, and what is required is that researchers make reasonable assessments of the likelihood and severity of particular kinds of harm. We noted that there is a complementary concern with benefits, but that balancing the risk of harm against likely benefits requires some means of assessing the relative seriousness of different harms (and the value of different benefits). We outlined how this is possible despite the absence of any means of measurement. We emphasised that it is essential that the seriousness of actual or potential harms be judged *in context*, while yet recognising that comparison with other situations, and with ideals, can be illuminating.

In the second half of the chapter we explored various ways in which harm might arise in qualitative research, and examined the particular case of visual research in relation to children. We went on to consider the assignment of responsibility for harms, noting that this is a complex and uncertain process. In part what is involved is making a causal assessment of how likely it is that a particular action will result in a particular type of outcome in the circumstances, but there are also issues to do with responsibility and wrongfulness.

Finally, we looked at the issue of *who* might be harmed, noting that harm can arise for others besides those people who are part of the focus of a study. These include funding bodies and other institutions associated with the research, broader categories of people to whom the findings of the research relate, and even researchers themselves.

¹In medicine, clinical research generally involves an intervention that has the potential to cure or improve the condition of someone already suffering from an illness, even though it will always involve costs and dangers: see Foster (2001: [Ch. 1](#)) for an excellent discussion of the dilemmas that arise in the context of medical research. By contrast, experimental work in social science does not usually involve interventions that offer any direct intended benefit to the subjects of the research, while the harm, if any, that the interventions risk causing is probably less than that of most clinical interventions. In non-experimental research there is no intervention in either of the above senses, even though the researcher will engage in actions that may affect

the people being studied in various ways. An exception to this is the case of action research, but this is not within our focus here: see [Chapter 2](#), note 6.

²Though in the UK the ESRC introduced its regulatory framework while simultaneously declaring that ‘almost without exception, social science research in the UK has been carried out to high ethical standards’ (ESRC 2005: 1).

³See, for example, Warwick's (1982) attempt (albeit in our view rather biased) to balance the benefits and costs of Humphreys' research.

⁴There is a small literature dealing with this issue; see for example Kulick and Willson (1995), Markowitz and Ashkenazi (1999).

⁵It is perhaps important to note that while the perspective of a person claiming to have suffered harm is important, in assessing whether harm has occurred and how serious it is, her or his claims cannot be accepted at face value. One reason for this is that claims about harm may be motivated by interests, leading to exaggeration or downplaying of the level of harm; and another is that such claims may be unreasonable as well as reasonable.

⁶On the ethics of paying participants more generally, see Head (2009).

⁷Categories of vulnerable participants include, most notably, the very young, people suffering from serious illness, those who have intellectual impairments (whether temporary, for example as a result of the effects of alcohol or drugs, or more long-lasting, such as a learning disability or mental illness), and those in marginal positions within society. However, other people can be vulnerable in particular respects under certain conditions, as indicated by Oeye et al. (2007) in the case of psychotherapists and McWilliam and Jones (2005) as with the Traianou example, in that of teachers. On ‘researching the vulnerable’, see Liamputtong (2007).

⁸For a history of the use of photographs in anthropology and social science more generally, see Chaplin 1994: [Ch. 5](#).

⁹On the complexities of negotiating informed consent in relation to children, see David et al. (2001) and Heath et al. (2007).

¹⁰Needless to say, researchers' retrospective evaluations of the risks involved in their research may not correspond entirely to their earlier prospective evaluations. See, for instance, Humphreys (1975: 230). It may also be necessary to prepare resources to provide to participants should the risk of serious harm arise, either from the research or from other sources. Thus, researchers working with children or young people, who fear the divulgence of abuse, often distribute information about helplines, counselling agencies, and so on. In a different context, Keys offered post-abortion counselling contact information to some of the women she interviewed (Goodrum and Keys 2007: 254).

¹¹Once again, of course, this example highlights the ambiguities surrounding what counts as harm.

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