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## Moral Flexibility in Qualitative Research

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Research in general and qualitative research, in particular, has historically been rooted in epistemological inquiry. The goal has always been to understand the human condition in all its myriad shades. The only lens through which research has peeked into the human condition has been curiosity and a thirst to understand. This unadulterated and straightforward path toward qualitative inquiry has yielded us a beautiful mosaic of human experiences, thoughts, and ideas. Central to the inquiry has been the goal. However, of late, research ethics which are an essential component of research have forayed into the helm of research itself. Ethical regulations have taken a more central position in the nature, direction, and execution of research than the research itself.

Qualitative inquiry is now secondary to ethical regulations themselves. This relegation of the research question and methods as subservient to ethical regulations have given rise to moralism, a term that has been defined as ‘the vice of overdoing morality’ (Coady, 2005, p,101). While no one contends that ethical regulations are detrimental to research, the overarching emphasis should remain to be a qualitative inquiry. Ethical regulations should aid, not impede research. From a philosophical viewpoint, only conducting research that fits in one’s definition of morality might be too myopic and narrow to either justify the research and/or to add anything to common knowledge altogether. Also, in the contemporary most modern feminist worldview, morality is a fluid concept that may not be as universal as it used to be some decades ago. It also gives rise to the view that only research worth doing is one which falls within the purview of moral relevance and expedience.

While these issues are important, the notion that all research should be moral also gives rise to the notion that all research should be strictly ethical. Not only that, research should uphold the highest level of ethics. The centrality of subjects is moving away from what it is to what it should be. The burden on research to shift from pure epistemic inquiry to moral and more practical questions has shifted the ethos of qualitative research itself. In other words, what is the issue here is the whole rationale for and orientation of qualitative inquiry.

Next is the question of the value orientation of qualitative inquiry. The centrality of qualitative inquiry is grounded in the goal of producing knowledge. This core tenet is now open to question and interpretation. The new core value orientation of research suggests new core values which are very different to the ones that were held as true for a long time. They are more concerned with practical rather than epistemic values. For example, these values are concerned with promoting ‘equality’, ‘inclusion’, and ‘emancipation’. These also include an emphasis on marginalized groups and a morally driven qualitative inquiry. This tends to not only polarize topics of research, other than narrowing them down, but also focuses on a certain segment and

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silencing others. The departure from treating only epistemic values at the center of qualitative inquiry is tantamount to a form of moralism. This has been observed in all social sciences since the proliferation of feminist and post-modern worldviews.

One of the challenges faced by us caused by moralism is that values other than truth should be treated as an integral part of research. To this end moralistically inclined research would gravitate research grants, funds, and publicity towards research questions which are geared more by agenda and what is morally vogue today than finding the truth. Therefore, topics promoting justice, empowerment, or being a voice for those without, and the promotion of pedagogical activities are given more significance irrespective of their epistemic value. While there is nothing wrong with the aforementioned, if only the aforementioned are all there is to qualitative inquiry, not only is it misguided, but also without a rudder, and a value commitment which is not grounded in being concerned with what is true and factual.

While we are grappling with this issue, the moralism laced research would have the researcher also uphold the highest level of ethical standards. This would include the avoidance of harm, protection of privacy, ensuring confidentiality, equity, care, and other values which are not epistemic in nature. Moralism would suggest that one can never be too ethical. This means that despite one's best efforts, there is always a chance to slip at any of the steep slopes of ethical dilemmas. This also holds the belief that qualitative inquiry is such a dangerous endeavor that it can inflict terrible harm and therefore humans should be guarded to the highest degree possible from the potential harm which is experienced during the qualitative inquiry. However, it is hardly the case that participants of qualitative research are put in grave danger. This is not to say that ethical standards are irrelevant. Holding to ethical principles is good, even commendable, but how much ethical can one be? How much ethical is too ethical? And to what extent should ethics guide the research process? These questions beg a serious discussion.

I believe that, as qualitative researchers, we ought to give ourselves a degree of moral flexibility from the prevailing zeitgeist of qualitative research. While it is appreciable that qualitative research is gravitating towards social causes as well, the thrust of qualitative inquiry should remain steadfastly towards its core epistemic value which has always been the pursuit of truth. While moralism sounds chic and utilitarian, moralism is not the panacea, but an anathema. Moral flexibility in the research question, the type of research conducted is some aspects that need to be redressed. The young researcher who is grappling with the technicalities of qualitative research would have a hard time accommodating such stringent and non-epistemic value in his/her research question. Formulating research that not only furthers the cause of social justice in some form or way but also does it whilst adhering itself to the same values as it sprouts out of is asking too much of a budding researcher.

## **References**

Coady, C.A.J. (2005). Preface. *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, 22(2), 101–104.