

# qualitative research

Walter Lorenz

# General principles of scientific research – why engage in research?

Because it relates directly to **professional accountability**

- To develop a logical, evidence-based chain of reasoning
- Methodological considerations help to focus on a precise research question
- Precise observational or experimental designs and instruments provide reliable and generalisable findings (“what can be learned for other cases?”)?
- data and analysis need to be adequate to support the findings (against speculation)
- explication of procedures and results must be **transparent**, including the specification of the population to which the findings can be generalised
- adherence to professional norms underlines general standards (“peer review”)
- Wide dissemination of findings to contribute to scientific knowledge and its relevance for society (see Covid Crisis!)
- Giving access to data for re-analysis, replication and the opportunity to build on findings (findings are never “private”, belong into the public domain)

Ensuring ethical standards in social science research  
(methods relate to different **value positions**)

- **Positivism**: methods in the social sciences must be **disinterested (the “neutral observer”)**. Protocols for research should be methodologically prescriptive (follow scientific rules) but not morally or politically prescriptive and should be directed against bad science but not prescribe a particular way of applying the findings (*“knowledge should be neutral”*)
- **Anti-positivism (Max Weber)**: “personal, cultural, moral or political values cannot be eliminated; ... What social scientists choose to investigate ... they choose on the basis of the values they expect their research to advance” (**value relevance**). BUT social science should be value-free in the presentation phase. **Findings** ought not express any judgements of a moral or political character (**value-free**) but should declare the interest and value context in which they are rooted (*for instance openly declaring “this is **feminist research**”*)

# Basic positions towards all social research

## Neutrality:

„Society“ is like an object that can be studied from different perspectives to be understood more comprehensively but should not be affected by the research process itself. „Others“ (practitioners, politicians) can use the knowledge generated and are responsible for changes, not the scientists

## Commitment:

# Basic positions towards all social research

## Neutrality:

„Society“ is like an object that can be studied from different perspectives to be understood more comprehensively but should not be affected by the research process itself. „Others“ (practitioners, politicians) can use the knowledge generated and are responsible for changes, not the scientists

## Commitment:

„Society“ is not an object because the researcher is of necessity part of it; in wanting to understand aspects of society better the area that is being studied is necessarily affected and researchers have a responsibility therefore to conduct research in the interest of (and to the benefit of) the members of society studied

# Ethical principles

to be respected in all research (and practice)

- *Respect for **autonomy of informants***: respecting an individual's right to make decisions and enabling them to make reasoned **informed choices** (for instance whether they want to be interviewed).
- *Beneficence*: seeking to achieve the best balance between risk and benefit when asking people to engage in research to ensure the greatest benefits for the individual.
- *Non-maleficence*: research should always avoid causing harm.
- *Justice*: addressing issues fairly for all individuals in the same or similar situation (Beauchamp & Childress, 2001).

# Code of ethics in research

- **Informed consent** (principle of individual autonomy, consent = respect for human freedom) must be given voluntarily and on the basis of full and open information (and can be taken back) – give your own (hypothetical) examples:
- Design must be **free of active deception** (few experimental exceptions: “placebo”)
- **Privacy and confidentiality to be assured** in collection, storage and dissemination of data (to avoid harm or embarrassment)
- **Accuracy** (avoidance of fabrications, fraud, contrivance, omissions)

# “Utilitarian” orientation in the evaluation of research data

Making ‘judgements’: Ethical positions are maintained through concentration on **hard evidence** (for instance: the objectively measurable increase of human happiness as an outcome of a research is a valid “judgement” when presented as comparison of data obtained over different time frames) – BUT

Expressions in the discussion of findings like *admiration* and *contempt, liberation, conviction, dishonesty, self-indulgence* do not correspond to anything in reality.



# “Communicative ethics” in social science

- Societies consist of institutions, practices and structures that constantly have to be legitimated through communicative conventions (what is being communicated needs to correspond to the way it is being communicated). Only through taking such moral dimensions into consideration can we make sense of “human agency” (culture, politics, economics etc. exist only because they “make sense” to people, they do not exist ‘objectively’).
- **Jürgen Habermas**: “Discourse” (“knowledge”) in the public sphere (academic research is in the public domain) must be oriented towards mutual understanding and allow participants the communicative freedom to take positions on claims of final validity.
- Therefore: there is now a preference for “**participative research methods**” in social change projects: seeing informants as **partners**, not as objects from which we “extract” knowledge: *co-creation of knowing*

# Researcher-initiated projects

		Low client involvement	High client involvement
Direct researcher involvement	low	<b>Demography</b> (working with statistics and available records)	
	high		

# Researcher-initiated projects

		Low client involvement	High client involvement
Direct researcher involvement	low	<b>Demography</b> (working with statistics and available records)	
	high	<b>Ethnography and participant observation</b> (observations from close by but remain objective-detached)	

# Researcher-initiated projects

		Low client involvement	High client involvement
<b>Direct researcher involvement</b>	low	<b>Demography</b> (working with statistics and available records)	<b>Experiments and surveys</b> (active involvement of subjects in creating variables )
	high	<b>Ethnography and participant observation</b> (observations from close by but remain objective-detached)	

# Researcher-initiated projects

		Low client involvement	High client involvement
<b>Direct researcher involvement</b>	low	<b>Demography</b> (working with statistics and available records)	<b>Experiments and surveys</b> (active involvement of subjects in creating variables )
	high	<b>Ethnography and participant observation</b> (observations from close by but remain objective-detached)	<b>Action research</b> (researcher discusses findings continuously with subjects to co-construct knowledge)

# Subject / client-initiated projects (research contracts)

		Low subject involvement	High subject involvement
Direct researcher involvement	low	<b>Internship</b> (confined to data gathering)	<b>Educational intervention</b> (facilitating a learning initiative through inquiry)
	high	<b>Contract research / expert consulting</b> (aimed at giving a <b>recommendation</b> – risky: can have “unintended consequences”)	<b>Process consulting</b> (intervention / diagnosis in a dialectical cycle: researcher feeds back observations to be evaluated by client)