The Ethics of Incorporating Testimonials

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Overview

- Review how scholars have defined ethics
- Discuss what constitutes ethics and ethical research
- Review writing strategies that can be used to incorporate participant testimonials in research
Defining Ethics and Ethical Inquiry

- “Ethics” is a diverse and multi-faceted term
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- Ethics is often synonymous with morals or values
- To label something unethical is to imply it is morally-unsound
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- Ethics is often synonymous with morals or values
- To label something unethical is to imply it is morally-unsound
- However, ethics can also be defined procedurally
Defining Ethics and Ethical Inquiry

- Karen Schrier: contemporary education scholar
Defining Ethics and Ethical Inquiry

- Karen Schrier: contemporary education scholar
- Research focuses using participatory- and game-based learning activities to cultivate ethical reasoning skills
- Schrier builds upon the work of others in contemporary ethics scholarship
Like many other contemporary scholars, Schrier makes a distinction between morals and ethics.
Defining Ethics and Ethical Inquiry

- Morals defined as collective value systems
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- Ethics "refer[s] to the active, cognitive, and reflective processes related to applying moral principles to specific contexts or choices" ("Designing Games for Moral Learning and Knowledge-Building" p. 309)
Defining Ethics and Ethical Inquiry

- Morals defined as collective value systems

- Ethics "refer[s] to the active, cognitive, and reflective processes related to applying moral principles to specific contexts or choices" ("Designing Games for Moral Learning and Knowledge-Building" p. 309)

- Ethics denotes how individuals arrive at decisions they consider “good” when faced with difficult or problematic situations
Defining Ethics and Ethical Inquiry

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- Ethical inquiry $\neq$ judging actions based on ideal notions of “right” or “wrong”

- Ethical inquiry = understanding how an individual’s logic is shaped by personal experiences and surrounding circumstances
Defining Ethics and Ethical Inquiry

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- Allows us to understand how circumstances and lived experiences shape an individual’s decision-making processes

- Can help us better identify productive avenues for change and progress
Important clarification: this revised notion of ethics does not condone moral relativism

Ethical inquiry is a vehicle that we can use to initiate systemic change for the sake of progress and inclusivity
Incorporating Testimonials Ethically

- How does this pertain to the incorporation of participant testimonials in research?
To treat testimonials ethically is to highlight the logic underlying another person’s experiences.
Incorporating Testimonials Ethically

- To treat testimonials ethically is to highlight the logic underlying another person’s experiences.
- View testimonials as critical narrations of another person’s thought processes.
- Then, use these narrations as an opportunity to build upon the significance or relevance of your research.
Incorporating Testimonials Ethically

- We want to avoid using testimonials to “prove” that our hypothesis is “correct”
Incorporating Testimonials Ethically

- We want to avoid using testimonials to “prove” that our hypothesis is “correct”

- Using testimonials to prove our hypothesis runs the risk of instrumentalizing participants

- Instrumentalizing = using testimonials as a mere tool to achieve a goal (as opposed to a critical narration of a lived human experience)
Incorporating Testimonials Ethically

- Review general writing strategies that can help you effectively and ethically incorporate testimonials.
- These strategies can help you produce more effective scholarship while also handling testimonials in an ethical manner.
Incorporating Testimonials Ethically

- Explain how testimonials might help you expand or revise your key terms
Incorporating Testimonials Ethically

- Explain how testimonials might help you expand or revise your key terms
- Do testimonials show more nuanced definitions of your key terms?
- Do testimonials show potential consequences or impact of your key terms?
- Do testimonials show how key terms necessarily adapt to real-world circumstances?
Incorporating Testimonials Ethically

- Explain how testimonials highlight the broader circumstances surrounding your research
Incorporating Testimonials Ethically

- Explain how testimonials highlight the broader circumstances surrounding your research.

- Do responses show the impact of outside influences?
- Do responses show the priorities that participants bring with them?
- Do responses show the difficulty of isolating your research from external variables?
Incorporating Testimonials Ethically

- Explain how testimonials might introduce a variable you didn’t originally anticipate
Incorporating Testimonials Ethically

- Explain how testimonials might introduce a variable you didn’t originally anticipate
- Do testimonials show an idea or issue that you didn’t account for while designing questions?
- Do testimonials show an unexpected cause behind a problem you want to solve?
- Do testimonials show unexpected consequences of important issues or trends?
Paying Attention to Sequence

- Regardless of how you analyze testimonials, you should consider sequencing when discussing testimonials
Paying Attention to Sequence

- If you have multiple responses from the same participant, you can group together these responses
Paying Attention to Sequence

- If you have multiple responses from the same participant, you can group together these responses.
- Transition between these responses by explaining the questions being asked.
- Also pay attention to how the participant builds upon prior responses.
If you have multiple responses that revolve around the same theme, you can group together these responses.
Paying Attention to Sequence

- Transition between these responses by explaining how different participants are resonating with the same ideas

- Narrate what we gain when viewing these responses in aggregate (i.e., how do these responses help us outline and identify an important idea)
Yes, we are using testimonials to explore and unpack our thesis
Conclusion

- Yes, we are using testimonials to explore and unpack our thesis
- However, we cannot over-simplify participant testimonials
- Need to be honest in how testimonials necessarily grow or evolve our initial claims
Conclusion

- Please consult the ORS Lab website for webinars and worksheets that discuss different writing strategies

- Resources dedicated to different research methods (qualitative, quantitative, and AI-assisted)

- Consultants available to discuss best practices for different research methodologies