

Ethics in tension: Dilemmas for clinicians conducting sensitive research

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Abstract

The qualitative researcher, who is also a psychotherapist, is both enabled and potentially limited by the fact that the researcher's therapeutic skills inevitably contribute to the research process. In the context of sensitive research interviews, this may raise unanticipated ethical dilemmas. While both clinical and research dilemmas have separately been thoroughly explored in the literature, the combination of the two has received minimal attention. This paper explores the pitfalls and dangers, as well as the potential benefits, that arise when clinical expertise and knowledge is brought to bear upon the research terrain. Using examples from research interviews conducted in sensitive research areas, four possible areas are identified when the clinician role interacts with the researcher role. These include the researcher-clinician as listener, as intervener, as interpreter and as container. Drawing upon relevant examples, each theme is used to illustrate that ethical dilemmas arise which place the positions of researcher and clinician sometimes in productive compatibility and sometimes in opposition. This requires an awareness of the potential ethical tensions between the positions of researcher and clinician, which both respects the similarities and differences between the two and refuses fixed solutions to dilemmas, thereby inviting a climate of ongoing debate.