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### Rigor and ethics: challenges in qualitative research

Rigor e ética:  
desafios na pesquisa qualitativa

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The article in debate is extremely opportune for two reasons. First of all, although the reflection on the theme is common among qualitative researchers, its debate is unpublished in a scientific Portuguese language publication. Secondly, the text can represent the beginning a movement of reflection and debates concerning qualitative project review, doubtless necessary in Brazilian academic environment. This movement has already been improved in other countries by several authors in journals specialized in qualitative method. Those journals usually publish papers on researchers' experience in their interaction with Ethics Committees and Research Committees of health institutions.

The article's title makes me to consider my own experience with Ethics Committees, and to agree with authors' argument concerning the need of appropriate ethical guidelines to qualitative researches in health. How many of us already spent a long time answering to Ethics Committees' questions concerning our projects, explaining the reason of sample is not defined or which are the study variables? Although I have never refused to explain the requested information, many were the times that I realized I was answering questions that reflected total unawareness about principles, assumptions and qualitative investigation processes.

Qualitative research is not a variation of quantitative research<sup>1</sup>, as seem to suggest some arguments we witnessed in our daily practice as researchers and teachers of research methodology. It is not possible to understand the qualitative research as other form of reaching the same objectives of quantitative research. How is it possible to a quantitative researcher to review strategies of qualitative sampling without understanding qualitative analytical processes and goals?

The complexity of qualitative research needs to be understood and thoroughly disseminated, in order to be properly valued. Qualitative research is still known just as a research modality that collects histories, narratives, and experience descriptions. As representatives of a discipline, we have failed to communicate the methods and the role of qualitative inquiry role to our professional colleagues and to the public in general<sup>2</sup>.

The complexity of qualitative research is reflected in the way as certain ethical themes should be considered and properly analyzed, because this complexity does not allow the application of ethical protocols built for quantitative researches.

The article approaches some key-subjects in the ethical conduct in qualitative research, especially the process of informed consent and the confidentiality, which present peculiar characteristics in qualitative research context. To these ones I also join the subject of secrecy, related to the participants as well as to the findings of the research. The appropriate handling of confidential data is based on three dimensions: (a) the respect to people and their autonomy and freedom to maintain privacy and secrecy; (b) the concept that secrets can be shared as each person choose, and (c) the understanding that the promise of confidentiality acknowledge each person's desire and right to share information<sup>3</sup>.

The appropriate balance among confidentiality, autonomy and reciprocal protection is not a simple issue, and these problems when they arise are not easily solved. These aspects constitute dilemmatic moments in the research conduction that should be considered from the beginning of the research project planning. The project should reflect the transparency of researcher's actions in relation of those issues.

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For instance, in some situations, research participants could want to be identified, as in study that use Oral History or when the person has interest in personalizing the own voice, and its experience message.

The confidentiality is a point that should also be considered in the research process involving more than a participant's interview related to the shared experiences, as families or caregiver and cared for people. All of them can lead researcher to be arrested in ethical debates about research methods<sup>4</sup>. Participants actively engaged in the research process may wish to be known and to exercise their autonomy to reject the traditionally perceived benefits of anonymity and confidentiality<sup>5</sup>.

The focus of concern about ethics in research always is on the participants of the study. However, to determine the possibility of any damage to participants, the ethical care in qualitative research needs interpretive knowledge and truths of the interior experience of a person set of circumstances and time<sup>5</sup>.

Another relevant aspect the article approaches is of ethics in human interdependence context, present in the interaction between researcher and participants. To obtain high quality information in interviews, researcher is dependent of their partners' cooperation in the conversation and when we encouraged people to talk open and honestly about themselves, we can incur in serious ethical obligations to them<sup>6</sup>.

That theme leads us to the informed consent that assures all necessary information for free consent to participate in the research, and it also guarantees the absence of emotional, physical, and financial damage. Qualitative research informed consent, as the article presents, is a process and the points that eventually appear in the data collection and information handling process depends on the circumstances that are identified through dialogue carefully conducted with sensibility and respect. These ones are qualities that cannot be prescribed, controlled or intellectually applied: they should be genuinely felt and lived and infused in the relationship. They emerge in the engagement of researcher's self with the other (participant) in mutually respectful ways. They reflect, maybe always, self-applicable principles that govern and guide the life. They are ethically imperative, even if they are not ethically prescribed; they are learnt in the most fundamental level of the human experience<sup>7</sup>.

The consent is continually built in the relationship between researcher and participant, when decisions and agreements concerning roles

and responsibilities emerge. This process should be conceived as natural part of a relationship in qualitative research, instead a group of formally defined negotiations destined to mark the limits between researcher and participants.

How is it possible to consider all these inherent peculiarities to qualitative research if projects are submitted to rigor and ethics criteria built according to the logic of quantitative research? In fact, Ethics Committees need to join to their review procedures principles that guide qualitative research. As qualitative researcher, we need to use our voice to communicate in a better way qualitative methods and the role of qualitative methodology to the other researchers. At the same time, we need to find ways to make more thoroughly public our experiences in research and the arising ethical dilemmas. Qualitative researcher needs to know more densely about qualitative methodologies and their ethical and methodological dilemmas that will contribute to the control of research rigor.

Projects sent to Ethics Committees can contribute for our professional colleagues' learning, as we demonstrate whom we are, what we do, and what the meaning of our research work. The project should present methodological consistency to become a learning resource and not be merely a formality to obtain approval and authorization for research development. We know the degree of rejection of qualitative studies is high in financial agencies for research and in ethics committees. In the last ones, it is possible to explain doubts and to continue the review process. However, it is not always possible to appeal in case of the rejection for financial agencies. Thus, the researcher is also responsible to change understanding and appreciation of qualitative research in our academic environment.

These problems reinforce the idea that until the complexity of qualitative research is well understood, it will not be appreciated, valued and even supported<sup>2</sup>.

I can say based on my own experience, that to communicate properly what we are, why we are here and what we need is a condition that can contribute to transform researchers' understanding about qualitative research. As qualitative researcher, I had the fortune of coordinating an Ethics Committee, assuming in that occasion the responsibility to explain and to communicate to those members of the committee, the principles and inherent processes to qualitative research. This was a movement that enlarged committee's possibilities, whose members have perfectly un-

derstood the distinction between qualitative and quantitative research.

This public effort is a different kind of dissemination for us. But if we intended to change the knowledge state about qualitative research in Ethics Committees and to general public, this communication should be made consciously and deliberately.

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## Ethical guidelines and qualitative research on health

Diretrizes éticas e pesquisas qualitativas em saúde

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This article aims to debate the excellent study carried out by Guerriero and Dallari<sup>1</sup>, about "the necessity of ethical guidelines adequate for qualitative research on Health" publicized in the previous pages of this magazine,

Above all, I must say I consider this study an extremely worthy piece of work that meets the difficulties experienced by researchers and also by members of Ethics in Research on Human Beings Committees. In this aspect, it is a profound investigation searching for reasons that

justify the construction of ethical parameters for research on human beings adequate to the diversity of paradigms able to guide the research plan and its execution.

This because 196/96<sup>2</sup>, resolution from the Health National Council - Conselho Nacional de Saúde - that sets ethical principles to guide research in the health field in Brazil to amplify the conception of research of the International Council of Medical Science Organizations (ICMSO)<sup>3</sup>.

This conception<sup>3</sup> defines research as a group of activities aiming to develop or contribute to generalizable knowledge.

Generalizable knowledge consists of theories, principles or relations, or in the storage of data collection which they are based on, that can be asserted by recognized scientific methodology of observation and inference<sup>1</sup>.

Based on this definition, however, the national rule in the CNS Resolution 196/96<sup>2</sup> sees that the procedures mentioned to produce generalizable knowledge, counting on *principles or relations or in gathering up data in their foundations asserted by recognized scientific methodology of observation and inference [...], are applicable to procedures of any nature; such as instrumental, environmental, nutritional, educational, sociological, economic, physical, psychic, or biological one not mattering if they are pharmacologic, clinical or surgical with preventive, diagnostic or therapeutic purposes*<sup>1</sup>.

Well, when we amplify the application scope of those ethical rules, the Resolution in question paradoxically plasters the research on human beings to the fields of human, social and health sciences. I say this because noticeably the worldview and therefore the science's which the announcement is based on, did not take into consideration the plurality of possible scientific paradigms, identifying itself with the premises of positivists paradigms focused on the universalization of knowledge (generalizable) confirmed by scientific methods of observation (mensurable) and therefore, able of being standardized<sup>4</sup>.

That the 196/96<sup>2</sup> Resolution has the biomedical area among its first concerns is understandable, but to stretch the same recommendations given to the first area mentioned, under a posi-

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