An Alternative Ethics? Justice and Care as Guiding Principles for Qualitative Research

Most discussions of social research ethics have tended to employ deontological and/or consequentialist forms of argument – concerned with minimizing harm, respecting the autonomy of participants, preserving their privacy, and so on. Moreover, these sorts of principle inform the mode of ethical regulation that, in many Western countries, has now spread from medicine and psychology across social science generally (Israel and Hay 2006; Authors 2012:ch1). There has been some tension between this dominant form of research ethics and the ways in which many qualitative researchers approach their work; and, in recent times, some have set out a very different approach, foregrounding other values. Thus, Lincoln has proposed 'a vision of research that enables and promotes social justice, community, diversity, civic discourse and caring' (Lincoln 1995:277-8); and Mertens et al (2009:88) have advocated a 'transformative' approach in which the central question is: 'How can research contribute to social justice and the furtherance of human rights?'. The advocates of this position, or this set of positions, see it 'as a powerful antidote to the deception-based, utilitarian IRB [Institutional Review Board] system' (Denzin and Giardina 2007:28).

In this article we want to examine this alternative approach to research ethics, focusing particularly on the suggestion that justice and care should be guiding principles for social researchers. Given that 'ethics review' is now a requirement for all social research, it is important to be clear about the principles on which this ought to operate.

The case for the new ethics

Since Denzin and Giardina (2007) have provided the most comprehensive presentation of this alternative approach, and Denzin is among the most influential writers on qualitative methodology today, we will use their account as the primary basis for our assessment.[1] These authors propose 'a methodology of the heart, a performative, indigenous, feminist, communitarian ethic that embraces an ethics of truth grounded in love, care, hope, and forgiveness' (p12). Central to this is a commitment to 'create mutually life-enhancing opportunities for all people' (Darder and Mirón 2006:150, quoted in Denzin and Giardina 2007:12). What is advocated here is a 'participatory mode of knowing'. Thus, Denzin and Giardina write:

> In a feminist, communitarian model, participants have a coequal say in how research should be conducted, what should be studied, which methods should be used, which findings are 'valid' and acceptable, how the findings are to be implemented, and how the consequences of such actions are to be assessed. (p29)

Indigenous scholars are portrayed as in the vanguard of promoting this new ethic, in 'disrupt[ing] traditional ways of knowing [i.e. those characteristic of most social science], while developing "methodologies and approaches to research that privilege indigenous knowledges, voices, and experiences" (Smith, 2005, p. 87)' (p13). This is seen as exemplified by the Kaupapa Maori model in which researchers 'listen and participate … in a process that facilitates the development in people of a sense of themselves as agentic and of having an authoritative voice' (Bishop

[1] For other sources, see Mertens and Ginsberg 2009, and Christians 2011.

1998:207-8; quoted in Denzin and Giardina 2007:14). Here 'the researcher is led by members of the community' (p14), rather than carrying out research 'on' them (see also Cram 2009).[2]

Furthermore, Denzin and Giardina (2007:15) propose that research should be evaluated in terms of 'concrete experience as a criterion of meaning and truth', and according to an approach that 'privileges storytelling, listening, voice, and personal performance narratives'. There is a clear break here from more conventional scientific accounts of assessment criteria. And there is also a change in goal. From this point of view:

> the purpose of research is not the production of new knowledge *per se*. Rather, the purposes are pedagogical, political, moral, and ethical, involving the enhancement of moral agency, the production of moral discernment, a commitment to praxis, justice, an ethic of resistance, and a performative pedagogy that resists oppression (Denzin and Giardina 2007:18).

This approach is sometimes seen as dissolving the sorts of ethical problem surrounding research that are the focus of conventional research ethics:

> […] subjects and researchers develop collaborative, public, pedagogical relationships. The walls between subjects and observers are deliberately broken down. Confidentiality disappears, for there is nothing to hide or protect. Participation is entirely

[2] Similar arguments for participatory forms of inquiry have been developed in the field of Childhood Studies, see for example Kellett 2005 and Pascal and Bertram 2009, and also in research concerned with people who have disabilities, see Oliver 1992; Barnes 2009.

> voluntary, hence there is no need for subjects to sign forms indicating that their consent is "informed". The activities that make up the research are participatory; that is, they are performative, collaborative, and action and praxis based. Hence, participants are not asked to submit to specific procedures or treatment conditions. Instead, acting together, researchers and subjects work to produce change in the world. (Denzin and Giardina 2007:20)

As this makes clear, the new thinking about research ethics draws on more general ideas about the purpose of research and about human social life. Denzin and Giardina (2007:29) locate it within:

> a sacred, existential epistemology [that] places humans in a non-competitive, nonhierarchical relationship to the earth, to nature, and to the larger world. This sacred epistemology stresses the values of empowerment, shared governance, care, solidarity, love, community, covenant, morally involved observers, and civic transformation. This ethical epistemology recovers the moral values that were excluded by the rational Enlightenment science project.

While the approach may be presented as 'a universal human ethic', at the same time it is 'based on locally experienced, culturally prescribed proto-norms (Christians, 1995, p. 129)'. These primal norms are viewed as providing a 'defensible "conception of good rooted in universal human solidarity" (Christians, 1995, p. 129; see also Christians, 1997, 1998)' (Denzin and Giardina 2007:29).

What is envisaged by this alternative ethics is a transformation of

social research that has wide socio-political consequences (see also Mertens et al 2009). Denzin and Giardina (2007:35) write:

> […] this model directs scholars to take up moral projects that decolonize, honor, and reclaim indigenous cultural practices. Such work produces spiritual, social, and psychological healing. Healing, in turn, leads to multiple forms of transformation at the personal and social levels. These transformations shape processes of mobilization and collective action. And these actions help persons realize a radical politics of possibility, of hope, of love, care, and equality for all humanity.

An initial response

At the most abstract level, there seem to be two fundamental commitments that differentiate this alternative research ethics from mainstream social science research and the approach to ethics frequently associated with it. First, as with various forms of 'critical' and activist social inquiry, the goal is taken to be bringing about particular sorts of change in the world rather than 'the production of knowledge *per se*' (Denzin and Giardina 2007:18). Moreover, to the extent that producing knowledge remains the goal, mainstream conceptualizations of this are challenged on the basis that they reflect a Western Enlightenment mode of thought. This is to be replaced by respect for the distinctive modes of knowing of the people being studied, with the knowledge produced becoming 'performative' rather than propositional in character. Here, indigenous groups are treated as a key exemplar, but the point is clearly

intended to extend to other marginalized or oppressed groups as well.[3]

The second major difference from the mainstream approach concerns the ethical ideas that it is proposed should characterise relations between researchers and researched. While there is some overlap here, Denzin and Giardina's (2007) account, and those of others, employ many ethical concepts that are not generally to be found, at least not explicitly, in mainstream accounts. Examples would include: love, forgiveness, solidarity, hope, and resistance. Moreover, even in the case of those concepts that are shared, it is fairly clear that they are being interpreted in distinctive ways. Perhaps the most significant sign of this is that proponents of the alternative ethics often argue that these concepts imply that the people being studied should participate in the central decisions that govern the research. This is a significant departure from the mainstream approach. Presumably the rationale for this second commitment, at least in part, is that research must itself exemplify the form of social relations that it should be aiming to bring about in the wider society, thereby ensuring consistency between ends and means.

In assessing this alternative approach to research ethics, our starting point is a belief that the standard approach is too narrow, and that it is misconceived in key respects (see Authors 2012; Author 2013). So, we agree that considerable rethinking is required. At the same time, we find major problems with what is proposed by Denzin and Giardina, and by those adopting a similar approach.

One problem is that the principles underpinning this alternative

[3] Given this, the problematic, and highly contentious, issue of how 'indigenous' is to be defined, and of how indigenous groups are to be identified, can be left on one side. On this, see Coates 2004:Intro.

ethics are far from clear. There is insufficient explication of the meaning of the many terms used to characterize the approach. Yet these cannot be viewed as self-explanatory. For example, Denzin and Giardina state that the approach is to be 'feminist', but this term tells us little on its own, since there are conflicting versions of feminism (see, for example, Kemp and Squires 1997). Similarly, how are we to interpret such words as 'life-enhancing', 'the enhancement of moral agency', or 'the production of moral discernment'? These, too, are open to divergent interpretations. For example, the concept of 'life-enhancing' attitudes is to be found in the writings of Nietzsche, but his 'transvaluation of all values' (Nietzsche 1895; Leiter and Sinhababu 2007) is sharply at odds with what Denzin and Giardina propose. Similar problems even arise with the more common ethical terms deployed, such as 'care' and 'justice', as we shall see.

A second problem is that little supporting argumentation is provided by advocates of this alternative ethics to justify their proposed redefinition of the goal of social research, and their reconceptualisation of what is ethical in research practice. Thus, in large part, Denzin and Giardina's argument relies upon the use of evaluative terms that are treated as if they were self-validating, such as 'communitarian', 'participatory', 'democratic', etc; as well as on the deployment of various other words that have a presumed negative connotation, such as 'deception-based', 'utilitarian', and 'rational Enlightenment science'. Not only does this effectively discourage any questioning of the grounds for the new ethics, it also suggests that there are just two opposing positions. Yet, any attempt to unpack the meaning of these positive and negative terms would soon show that there is much variation in what they can imply. As we have already hinted by referring to Nietzsche, there is a

complex field of ethical views that stand in opposition to 'Enlightenment science' (Denzin and Giardina 2007:29); and the differences amongst these are probably as fundamental as their collective opposition to the Enlightenment. Given this, a clear account is required of the distinctive features of the position being adopted – in comparison with other anti-Enlightenment stances. Equally, there needs to be engagement with likely criticisms coming from those holding other views. Yet there is little sign of this: despite reference to a 'dialogic ethic of love, hope, and solidarity' (Denzin and Giardina 2007:28), in practice there appears to be little commitment to dialogue displayed in how this alternative account of research ethics is often presented.

A third problem is that there are almost certainly likely to be severe conflicts amongst the large number of principles that make up the new ethics, and there is no indication of how these are to be resolved. For example, how is a commitment to love and forgiveness to be reconciled with 'an ethic of resistance'? One example of a resistance ethic would be the political perspective of Frantz Fanon, with his idea that violence is a 'cleansing force', freeing 'the native from his inferiority complex and from his despair and inaction' (Fanon 1963:94; see also Caute 1970 and Gibson 2003:ch5), but this would surely be at odds with other elements of the alternative ethics proposed by Denzin and Giardina. Similarly, how compatible are feminist positions with most indigenous cultural perspectives? We suggest that there are likely to be conflicts there too: the social relations traditional within at least some indigenous communities are open to challenge on grounds of sex and age discrimination.

Finally, there are questions about the practical feasibility of what is

proposed. There is a strongly utopian strain in the alternative ethics. What seems to be envisaged is the establishment of a communal or solidaristic form of social relation between researcher and researched, this in turn leading to the spread of such relations more widely. This is the basis for the claim that the sort of protections that are emphasized by the mainstream approach to research ethics – notably informed consent and preservation of anonymity – are unnecessary (Denzin and Giardina 2007:20). The type of community envisaged is one in which there are no secrets and no divisions of interest, presumably reflecting a total devotion to the common good. Yet there are at least potential divisions within all communities, and considerable dangers associated with attempts to repress these in the name of solidarity (Hastrup and Elsass 1990). Furthermore, unlike Marxists, who insist that such a community would only be attainable after a revolution, some advocates of the new ethics, including Denzin and Giardina, seem to believe that it is possible to achieve this ideal under present social conditions, and through the process of research. But we are given no reasons for this optimism in the face of past experience.

There are other practical problems too, some of which are highlighted by the following questions: Is it being suggested that this new ethical approach should be adopted whichever group of people is being researched, so that for example it would be appropriate in a study of investment bankers or Right-Wing terrorists? Is there a commitment to the further development of *their* 'authoritative voice' (Denzin and Giardina 2007:14)? Or is the implication that researchers should only study those groups with whom they share a sense of political or ethical solidarity? And, if so, why? Furthermore, advocacy of participatory modes of inquiry is hardly new, and attempts to employ them have run

into recurrent difficulties. One of these has been reluctance to participate on the part of those being researched (Acker et al 1991; Birch and Miller 2012). Another is an understandable need by researchers to curb or modify participation when it threatens to go in directions that they cannot tolerate in ethical or political terms, for example the communication of sexist or racist messages (Hearn and Thomson 2014:158). These are not just minor problems of implementation, they raise fundamental questions about the relationship between the ideal of participation and the other values to which the alternative ethics appears to be committed. However, there is no discussion of these practical issues by Denzin and Giardina, or by most other advocates of this approach to research ethics.[4]

In the remainder of this paper we will explore some of these problems a little further, focusing on two of the principles that seem to be central to the new ethics: justice and care. Both have been given detailed consideration in the philosophical literature, and we will draw upon this in examining them.

Justice as a principle guiding social research

While it has not always been at the forefront in discussions of social research ethics, the principle of justice has nevertheless been present within them for a long time (see Denzin and Giardina 2007:23). Indeed, justice was listed as a central principle in one of the most influential early statements on research ethics: the Belmont Report (1979). And it has retained its position in much subsequent discussion – especially where

[4] See Miller et al 2012 for an example of researchers who, while sharing something of the same orientation as the new ethicists, *have* recognised the dilemmas generated by the ways in which ethical principles can conflict in the implications they have for particular situations.

the explicit or implicit model has been that of medical research (see Kahn et al 1998; Beauchamp and Childress 2012), a model that came to be extended across social science as a result of the spread of ethical regulation. At the same time, King et al (1999:9) have pointed out that justice is 'the least well-understood and most neglected of the ethical principles presented in the *Belmont Report*', a point that we will take up.

The concept of justice is also evident in a longstanding concern on the part of qualitative researchers with maintaining 'reciprocity' in their relations with the people they are studying (Author 2007:217-8). This is the idea that there should be a balance between what each side gains from the research relationship (Wax 1982 and 1986; Harrison et al 2001). It has been argued that in some forms of social research the researcher gains much more than the people studied: researchers are portrayed as extracting data and information for free, in order to generate research products which, even if these do not produce immediate financial return for them, nevertheless potentially provide benefits in terms of reputation and promotion prospects. In effect, the charge is that the relationship between researcher and researched has sometimes been, or perhaps *intrinsically is*, exploitative. This is clearly an issue of justice.[5]

Appeals to the notion of justice are also frequently present in the defences that researchers have offered against charges of exploitation. For example they argue that the people studied often obtain benefits from the research process, at the very least in having someone to listen to their problems. Indeed, it is suggested that many participants enjoy being interviewed, and may find it therapeutic. Plummer (1995:34) notes that in

[5] Interestingly, this sort of argument is to be found in an especially sharp form in the feminist literature, where it is claimed that feminists studying women may be able to establish relationships involving much greater closeness and trust than in other kinds of inquiry, giving rise to disclosure of very private experiences and information (Finch 1984; Stacey 1988; Birch and Miller 2012).

the case of life history interviews: ‘for many the telling of a tale comes as a major way of “discovering who one really is”’. Beyond this, it is pointed out that qualitative researchers, especially ethnographers, frequently provide minor services of various kinds, from reading and writing letters, through to babysitting or supplying low-level medical treatment. Occasionally, they will even offer payment to people to participate in research.

However, the conception of justice that informs the alternative ethics seems to be significantly different from that present in bioethics, and even from qualitative researchers’ concerns about reciprocity. The difference is in line with a trend noted by King et al (1999:9): that in recent years ‘justice has begun to appear as a stronger, more active principle – one that is related to past, present, and future distributions of power’. These authors comment that ‘this evolution reflects the view that research is part of a comprehensive system that unfairly distributes power and its perquisites, and that it is incumbent on researchers to compensate for both the past sins of research and the state of the world’. One implication drawn from this, they suggest, has been that ‘the empowerment of research subjects is an ethical imperative’. It is very much in these terms that Denzin and Giardina (2007:24) argue that ‘justice extends beyond fair selection procedures or the fair distribution of the benefits of research across a population. Justice involves principles of care, love, kindness, fairness, and commitment to shared responsibility, to honesty, truth, balance, and harmony’.

It should be clear from this that the concept of justice is open to different interpretations. In fact, while this concept has long been a focus for philosophical discussion, and its importance has been almost

universally accepted, this has not resulted in substantial agreement about its nature. Barry (1989:133) declares that it 'still has no settled meaning' after 2000 years of discussion. He suggests that it is 'the paradigm case of an essentially contested concept'.[6]

Denzin and Giardina (2007) seem to adopt a very broad conception of justice, which incorporates many of the other principles they mention. While they are not alone in taking a broad view – this can be traced back to Plato – there are serious problems with this approach. In particular, it tends to assume a pre-established harmony between justice and other principles. Yet this seems implausible, since we are frequently faced with dilemmas, of varying degrees of seriousness, generated by conflicts amongst the principles to which we are committed, and these are often recalcitrant in theoretical terms even if they can be dealt with pragmatically (Stocker 1990).[7] There is no reason to believe that such conflicts will disappear, or be easier to deal with, in the future. Moreover, attempts permanently to eliminate them frequently result in some form of totalitarianism, a charge that has of course been directed at Plato (Popper 1945; Taylor 1999).

In light of these problems, more recent philosophical discussions have focused upon narrower senses of 'justice' (Raphael 2001). These concern two main sorts of issue. First, whether some particular distribution of goods (or, correlatively, of costs or disadvantages) is equitable, and how we are to determine what is and is not equitable.[8] Secondly, there is the notion of 'just desert', which is concerned with what is, and is not, an appropriate response, in terms of punishment or

[6] On the idea of 'essentially contested concepts' see Gallie 1956.

[7] Sandel 2009 also adopts a broad conception of justice, treating it as concerned with 'What's the right thing to do?'. However, he recognises the ethical dilemmas that we frequently face in answering that question.

[8] It is important to note that an equitable distribution is not necessarily the same as an equal distribution.

reward, to some offence or to some virtuous action, and how this is to be determined.

For convenience, these two narrower conceptions of justice can be labeled the ‘economic’ and ‘legal’ interpretations of the concept, respectively. Moreover, each of them is itself open to different formulations. For example, the economic interpretation may involve evaluation of a distribution of goods or ills in terms of universalistic equality (as in Bentham’s utilitarianism, where each individual is to count equally in the calculation of what would produce ‘the greatest happiness of the greatest number’), in relation to need (as a famous quotation from Marx has it), or according to contribution (for those who believe in meritocracy). Similarly, the legal approach need not be restricted to a concern with appropriate punishment or the reward of virtue, it can be extended to include recognition of rights, where there are important issues about who has what rights, and under what conditions these can be exercised, waived, forfeited, or overruled (see Jones 1994).

So, even with these narrower interpretations of ‘justice’ there is considerable scope for disagreement about what would and would not be just. This also arises because, in each case, any judgment is necessarily underpinned by assumptions of various kinds. As regards the economic interpretation of justice, these concern what are to count as benefits and costs, and the degree of these in particular instances. In the case of the legal interpretation, there is dependence upon prior judgments about what is offensive and virtuous, and about what would be appropriate responses to varying degrees and kinds of offence or virtue, or alternatively about what do and do not count as legitimate rights and what priorities ought to operate amongst them. Differences in these assumptions frequently produce discrepant views about what is and is not just or equitable in

particular cases.[9]

Aside from these issues, we also need to consider whether and how any broad or narrow notion of justice ought to be applied to the case of research: as regards either its goals or the means it employs. In the first place, what are the grounds for arguing, in the manner of the alternative ethics outlined by Denzin and Giardina, that the goal of research should be to achieve justice in society or at least to reduce the level of injustice? To propose that furthering the establishment of just social relations, or at least challenging unjust ones, should be a central goal of social research is, of course, in line with the position of much 'critical' research, as well as that coming under more specific headings such as feminist or anti-racist inquiry. However, in our view, there are good reasons *not* to treat this as part of the goal of research, even if justice ought to serve as an extrinsic ethical constraint on its pursuit (Authors 2012). One reason is that social researchers are not in a privileged position to determine what would and would not count as justice, in other words to interpret what this essentially contested concept implies for particular cases. To claim otherwise, even under the guise of promoting participatory inquiry, is to abuse the authority of research – to appeal to it in promoting a particular conception of justice (and injustice) that it cannot warrant. Equally important, researchers do not usually have the power to promote justice on any wide scale. If this is one's goal, then carrying out research is unlikely to be the most effective strategy.

It is important here to recognise the distinction between, on the one hand, the motives that researchers may have for engaging in research, and

[9] Concern with justice conceived in terms of rights has been central to discussions of the ethics of research involving children, and the scope for variation in judgments about these rights is evident there: see Author 2014.

for pursuing particular sorts of knowledge – which may well involve the belief or hope that this will promote a more just society – and, on the other hand, formulating the very goal of research as to promote justice, so that the research is designed to achieve this. The first position is entirely legitimate in our view: it makes no claim to expertise based on research in determining what is and is not just. However, the second certainly *does* do this. It also increases the danger of bias, since researchers will often be torn between doing what they judge to be most likely to promote justice and acting in the most effective way so as to produce sound knowledge:

> True findings do not necessarily aid the achievement of justice, and false findings *can* do so. As a result, any attempt to ensure that research serves justice may lead to the findings being distorted, in other words to the research deviating from the pursuit of true findings. Seeking findings that will aid justice is not the same as seeking the truth, there is considerable scope for conflict here (Stoczkowski 2008).

The idea that there is a close affinity between truth and justice is one element of (some versions of) Enlightenment thought that certainly does need to be rejected.

As regards the role of justice in how research is carried out, there are issues here about what weight ought to be given to this value, as compared with other ethical principles, and as against the distinctive responsibility of researchers to try to ensure that the findings they produce are sound. Generally speaking, the significance of justice in this respect, as compared with other values, seems to us to be lower for qualitative research than it is for investigations in the biomedical

sciences, which as we noted are often treated as the paradigm for research ethics. This is because qualitative research does not distribute benefits and costs that are highly significant for most people's lives, in the way that medical trials do. Instead, there will usually be only minor costs and benefits deriving, usually indirectly, from participation in the research.

By contrast, advocates of the alternative ethics heighten the significance of justice as a value. They believe that it requires that the people whose lives are being investigated must participate on (at least) equal terms in making research decisions. There seem to be two arguments here. One is that doing research 'on' people rather than involving them in the decision-making process is viewed as itself unjust, because it involves a differential distribution of rights or power. Secondly, the argument that doing research on certain types of people, without involving them in research decisions, is unjust because it is believed that the wider context – within which the research functions – marginalizes or oppresses those people (Meskell and Pels 2005; Pels 2010). Here, the implication is that a participatory approach is required in order to counterbalance this.

Neither of these arguments is convincing in our view. There is little justification for assuming that all role differentiation and associated differential distribution of power is unjust. No society operates, or could operate, without role differentiation and the power differences this generates – certainly not a large complex society. One key question that must be addressed therefore is: what are and are not legitimate differences in the exercise of power? So the question that advocates of the new ethics must address is why it is unjust for researchers to determine what to study, how to investigate it, etc. Moreover, it is important to

recognize that the obverse of power, in this context as in others, is responsibility: it is the researcher's responsibility to try to ensure that sound knowledge is produced, and also that the research is carried out in an ethically acceptable manner. Participatory inquiry makes these responsibilities even more difficult to meet and muddies the question of responsibility (Author 2004).

As regards the other argument – that participatory inquiry can lead to wider injustices being reduced or overturned – this is open to serious question. Denzin and Giardina provide no evidence that it can have this effect, that it is a more effective strategy than those employed currently and in the past by the various political movements and agencies committed to achieving justice of various sorts: from revolutionary workers' parties campaigning on the streets, through guerilla armies attacking key installations, to the United Nations promoting international agreements. Such evidence is necessary because, at face value, this claim about the transformative power of research is implausible against the background of past experience. Also doubtful is whether participatory inquiry produces sound scientific knowledge. Indeed, we suggest that the alternative ethics involves abandoning social science in favour of a vaguely defined communal mode of inquiry that is close in character to the sort of conscientisation advocated long ago by Freire (1972, 1985). Such activity may well be worthwhile, but it should not be disguised as social scientific research (Author 2008).

In the next section we will look at another of the key principles that is at the core of the proposed alternative to mainstream research ethics: care.

The ethics of care

Like justice, care is also a principle that is sometimes to be found in the mainstream approach to research ethics. In the context of medical research, care of patients is, of course, a central concern. This underpins the principle of beneficence, which is included in the Belmont Report and other statements of research ethics in this field: the requirement that research must produce more beneficial than harmful results for the people involved. By contrast, outside of the health field much less emphasis has generally been placed upon care as an ethical principle – since the people being studied are not usually in ill-health, and are not usually being subjected to an intervention that could cause them pain and harm. Of course, a concern with care may still arise in certain areas: where the research is linked to one of the other 'caring professions' and/or where it deals with groups deemed to be vulnerable. What is distinctive about the alternative ethics is that, by contrast, it insists that care, like justice, should have a high priority across the board. Once again, though, there are questions about why this is believed, and what it entails.

While Denzin and Giardina (2007) do not elaborate on what they mean by 'care', there is a considerable body of feminist work that emphasises this value. This develops a moral perspective that takes as its exemplar women's distinctive experiences of nurturing and mothering.[10] These are seen as involving a relationship that is characterised by asymmetrical dependence rather than mutual independence; and the concept of need, rather than that of right, is taken as central. Furthermore,

[10] The ethics of care has been given somewhat different formulations by different writers, and developed in various ways in response to criticism. See, for example, Gilligan 1982; Noddings 1984; Ruddick 1989; Held 1993; Dancy 1992, Bowden 1997, Jaggar 2000, and Held 2006.

supporters of care ethics often reject the notion of general moral principles and insist that 'relations, not individuals, are ontologically basic' (Noddings 2003:xiii), with these relations conceived of as particularistic rather than universalistic in character. In this way, care is not treated as simply one ethical principle amongst others but more as an attitude or sensibility that shapes, or should shape, all aspects of behaviour towards others.[11]

The central emphasis, then, is on the interdependence of human beings and their responsibilities to each other, rather than on individuals and their rights. Caring is a disposition, one that requires attending to others with emotional sensitivity, with compassion and empathy, in ways that take account of the specific context of action. In addition, the ethics of care views what is involved in caring as a *process* that fosters the intellectual and emotional growth of those participating in it; especially, but not only, those who are most vulnerable (see Meagher and Parton, 2004). So, care ethicists stress that we should make decisions about what would be right or wrong, good or bad, in ways that take account of our own relationship to the people who would be affected by the decision and of their level of vulnerability. They insist not only that, as a matter of fact, we feel different obligations to different people, but also that it is right to treat people differently on this basis, rather than adopting a universalistic orientation. There are at least two aspects to this. One is that some categories of person, such as children, should be viewed as more vulnerable than others, and therefore as more in need of care than

[11]Noddings (1984:5) argues that while, generally speaking, this sensibility is more typical of women than of men, a caring attitude can and should be central for men too. The ethics of care has been particularly influenced by the work of the psychologist Carol Gilligan (1983), who argued that women differ from men in the character of their ethical judgments. There has been some dispute about both the soundness and implications of Gilligan's empirical research findings, see Broughton 1983; Walker 1984.

others. The second is that we have specific relationships with some people that imply an obligation on our part to care, or to care more, for them. Thus, while it can be argued that all adults in a community have some obligation to care for the children in that community, parents have a stronger and fuller obligation of this kind in relation to their own children.

This approach to ethics has been the focus for considerable discussion, and it has been criticised even by many feminists. Some have complained that it tends to legitimize the existing sexual division of labour, serving to reinforce those social relations of oppression which make looking after children the primary responsibility of the mother, and that require the mother to subordinate her interests to those of the child. The charge is, in effect, that the notion of care is at odds with the principle of justice. Indeed, some suggest that feminine values of care are themselves symptoms of subordination and dependency, not unlike the Christian virtues that Nietzsche denounced as a slave morality (Bowden 1997:8).

There have also been criticisms of the ethics of care as a form of essentialism: by grounding ethics in the relationship between mother and child ‘caring comes to be perceived as an innate characteristic of women and therefore a natural determinant of women’s social possibilities and roles’ (Bowden 1997:8). It reinforces common stereotypes of the ‘good woman’ who would ‘sacrifice’ herself for the benefit of those in her care (Card 1990; see also Bartky 1990), thereby setting up a standard in terms of which some women are judged not just as insufficiently caring but effectively as not proper women.

Others have questioned whether the mother-child relationship can provide an adequate model for other types of social relationship, and for thinking about all of the many kinds of issue to which ethical considerations are relevant. In response, Noddings (2002) has argued that we need to understand home practices where real care occurs in order to be able to develop effective policies that address wider matters of social justice (see also Robinson, 1999). And others have sought to develop the ethics of care in ways that apply it to broader, and indeed global, issues (see, for instance, Held 1993 and 2005).

There have been few attempts to apply the ethics of care to research ethics.[12] However, it seems clear that the implications are very much along the lines characteristic of the alternative ethics outlined by Denzin and Giardina (2007). Thus, according to Gunzenhauser (2006:626) an ethic of care would require 'fluid research goals' since the researcher must set aside her/his own concerns, and become 'engrossed' in others' experiences: 'the relation between the researcher and the researched is characterized by particularity, mutual critique, and tentative understanding' (p630). The researcher seeks to respect 'the human dignity of the research participants' and what this amounts to has to be learned from interaction with them in particular contexts.

In these terms, the ethics of care challenges the sorts of relationship that researchers typically build with participants. This is most obvious in the case of those characteristic of experimental and survey research – brief, highly formalised interchanges designed to elicit data from people (see Oakley 1981). The relationships between researcher and researched typical of qualitative research are usually less formal and restricted, and it

[12] But see Gunzenhauser 2006, Ellis 2007, and Miller et al 2012.

might therefore be assumed that these are less open to criticism. However, this is not necessarily the case. These relationships can be criticised from the perspective of the ethics of care as a form of deception: in effect, qualitative researchers build 'friendly' relations with participants *for the purposes of research*, so that the care involved is spurious. In short, researchers feign a caring attitude in order to achieve research goals. A direct parallel here would be the salesperson who uses a friendly and apparently caring manner in order to boost sales. It can be suggested that such attenuated and deceitful forms of social relation, along with the more superficial ones characteristic of other types of research, represent a deformation of caring human relations, and are therefore unethical.

It seems to us that this challenge needs to be viewed in light of some of the criticisms of the ethics of care that we outlined earlier. This approach to ethics certainly points to features of research relationships that have ethical significance, but it relies upon a single model of what would constitute a caring relationship; and an idealised image even of that relationship. Bowden (1997) points to the way in which what counts as a caring relationship varies considerably across contexts. Her conclusion is that 'the ethical possibilities of care emerge as constituively shaped by the practices in which they are embedded; as intricately connected with the possibilities of other ethical concepts, such as responsiveness, self-understanding, reciprocity, trust, respect, openness and vulnerability; as inherently conflicted; and as always open to further discussion and interpretation' (pp16-17). Thus, for example, caring on the part of nurses, even when the patients are children, is properly framed by distinctive limits that make their orientation significantly different from that of a parent. More than this, though, where the people being

researched are adults and are not ill, the case for researchers having an obligation to care for them, in any strong sense, is open to serious question. As in the case of justice, there is a severe danger that a strong commitment to care will be at the expense of the primary responsibility that researchers have to try to ensure that what they produce is sound knowledge. And, contrary to what has sometimes been argued (Reinharz 1992; Gunzenhauser 2006), there is no good reason to believe that caring relationships confer epistemological privilege, so that researchers adopting this orientation are more likely to produce sound knowledge than those who do not. Moreover, here again, we can ask whether the alternative ethics would require the researcher to care for *all* the various types of person that they study, some of whom may belong to an oppressor group.

Equally important, a commitment to care can be in conflict with other ethical considerations, as many feminists recognise (Kuhse 1997:ch6). We can see this if we examine a situation where the rationale for applying an ethic of care to the research process is most obvious – in studies concerned with people who are vulnerable in some respect. Take the case of research involving young children. As might be expected, much of the literature concerning this type of research insists that researchers have an obligation to protect them, not just from harms arising within the research process itself but also from other threats to their well-being (see, for example, Farrell 2005). However, at the same time, there is a wariness among many in this field towards the idea that children need special protection because they are vulnerable. In fact, greater emphasis has increasingly come to be placed upon their rights to autonomy – and the idea that they must be protected is seen as at odds with this, and perhaps even as disguising adult control (see, for example,

Stainton Rogers 2009).

So, care as an ethical principle can be criticised as a covert form of control. After all, the relationship that is taken as the model is not an egalitarian one: even if the mother makes decisions 'in the best interests of the child', these will often be at odds with the latter's desires or expressed preferences. This point links to other discussions of care in the philosophical literature, for instance those in the writings of Heidegger and Foucault. Heidegger identifies an inauthentic form of care in which the other is dominated and dependent (Heidegger 1962:158/122). Meanwhile, much of Foucault's work focused on modern agencies and forms of thought centred on 'care' – psychiatry, and medicine more generally – which he argues amount to normalising and controlling processes (Gutting 2005:86 and *passim*). Both these authors offer more positive, alternative conceptions of care, but these stand at some distance from that promoted by much feminist ethics of care. Thus, Heidegger regards authentic care as 'releasing': it enables others to stand on their own feet (Heidegger 1962:158-9/122; Inwood 1999:35-7). And in his later writings Foucault is concerned with 'self-care', this being aimed at resisting normalising processes in the name of fashioning one's own self.[13]

There are questions, then, about the significance and role of care as an ethical principle, both in general terms and in the specific context of research. There are occupations in which care, in a distinctive sense, plays a central role in relationships with clients. However, the people that social researchers study are not their clients, and it is far from clear that caring should be a central feature of this relationship, as our earlier

[13] For a discussion of the implications of Foucault's work for research ethics, see Authors 2014.

examples of research on bankers and terrorists highlighted. More than this, care is not the unalloyed good that seems to be assumed in the new ethics. Indeed, its salience, its role, and its relationship with other ethical considerations are problematic matters that require examination.

So, while care is an important ethical principle, like justice it is a contested concept, and not one whose relevance to research ethics can be taken for granted. Furthermore, its implications are at odds with some of the other principles to which the alternative ethics seems to be committed, including justice.[14]

Conclusion

This article has examined an alternative approach to research ethics developed by some qualitative researchers in explicit opposition to the 'standard view' – the one that has come to be institutionalized through the spread of ethical regulation. We outlined the arguments that constitute this new approach, noting the wide range of ethical concepts to which it appeals. We argued that there are some serious problems with what is proposed. There is often a lack of clarity about the meaning of the concepts employed, an absence of supporting argument for their significance, and a failure to address the ways in which they carry conflicting implications in particular cases. We illustrated this through detailed examination of two of the principles central to the new ethics: justice and care. While these are clearly important, it is not hard to

[14] See Edwards and Mauthner 2012:21-5. Some have argued that the conflict between these two principles arises only where justice is interpreted in Kantian terms: see Kuhse et al 1996. However, in our view conflicts are likely to arise even where more utilitarian interpretations of justice are employed.

recognize that there may well be situations in which acting justly conflicts with the adoption of a caring attitude. Moreover, it seems evident that there must be limits on any obligation to pursue or realize justice and care within the research process, given that these are not its main goals; as indeed there are with other forms of practice. It seems to us that there are some unanswered questions about the meaning and role of justice and care in the context of the new ethics. And the same seems to be true of many of the other principles to which it appeals.

Perhaps the central practical recommendation of the alternative ethics is for participatory forms of inquiry. This reflects a broad socio-political philosophy which is at odds with that underpinning most social science. The latter involves a liberal acceptance of the division of occupational tasks and responsibilities and the limits associated with these; and a distrust of utopianism in favour of a realism that emphasizes recognition of the constraints on action. Even aside from this, we argued that the commitment to participatory inquiry does not follow automatically from the principles proposed, and that it is sharply at odds with what ought to be the central concern of all social researchers: to produce sound knowledge (Authors 2012). In effect, the alternative ethics abandons this commitment, and thereby contravenes the primary principle of any social research ethics.

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