


Reflexivity Beyond Regulations: Teaching Research Ethics and Qualitative Methods in Germany

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Hella von Unger¹

Abstract

Research ethics are an integral part of the research process and are not limited to institutionalized regulatory procedures. While there is no standard formula for ethical reflexivity and practice, the question arises as to how research ethics can be taught as part of a curriculum for qualitative research. The approach taken here is one of learning by doing. Sociology students were trained to pursue a research question and reflect on ethical aspects of their experiences. Their research projects explored the meaning of a trial against a neo-Nazi group in Munich, Germany. In teams, the students conducted qualitative interviews on how members of local communities viewed the trial. The students' questions and learning experiences regarding research ethics are analyzed. Key topics of discussion include informed consent, researcher subjectivity, and the de/merits of ethics codes and guidelines. Recommendations are drawn for teaching research ethics in qualitative methods training in the future.

Keywords

research ethics, sociology, informed consent, objectivity, subjectivity, confidentiality, Germany

A Question Worth Exploring

At the close of the third meeting of the research methods course presented in this article, one of my students casually posed a question as she gathered her papers: “When we now ask people about whether they would let us interview them, we don’t tell them what it’s about, do we?” Her question caught me by surprise. At first, I thought she was joking. After all, the previous sessions had covered scandals and controversies in the history of scientific research, such as the medical experiments during German National Socialism, the Tuskegee trial, and the Milgram experiments in the United States. In these cases of unethical research practice, researchers had recruited participants without obtaining their consent or informing them about the research and its risks. The participants had suffered major damage, and some had even lost their lives because of the research. With this background in mind, the students and I had discussed the importance of the rights that study participants have and the general principle of informed consent. But the student’s question was meant seriously. She was worried that the results of the interview would be distorted if she were to tell the interview partners in advance what it was about. They might prepare for the interview, seek out information on the topic, and then give other (e.g., better informed) responses to the interviewer’s questions. It turned out that other students shared her concern. These reservations in part derived

from the prior training in positivist epistemologies and quantitative methods that the students had undergone in the previous semesters. They deserve detailed exploration, though, for they not only provide insights into the learning processes of students—and thus contribute to the learning processes of teachers—but also point to an important aspect in the debate over research ethics: the general possibility of divergent conceptualization of what constitutes ethical conduct.

I begin by outlining the meaning of research ethics and the open question of how to address ethical aspects as part of qualitative research training in the social sciences. The German debates on qualitative methods and research ethics are briefly summarized to situate the teaching experience discussed in this article in its specific local and discursive context. I present the concept and design of the seminar—a fourth-semester undergraduate sociology class on applied qualitative methods that focused on questions of research ethics. I then describe and discuss some of the main

¹Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich, Germany

Corresponding Author:

Hella von Unger, Professor of Sociology, Institute of Sociology, Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich, Konradstr. 6, D-80801 Munich, Germany.
Email: unger@lmu.de

questions raised by the students in class and in their term papers. Finally, I conclude with implications for teaching aspects of research ethics in qualitative methods.

Research Ethics in Methodological Training

Ethical considerations are intrinsic to empirical research and therefore constitute a keystone of methods training in the social sciences. However, how research ethics are conceptualized and understood—and thus integrated into methods training—varies considerably. I first clarify what I mean by research ethics before addressing the question of how ethical conduct can be “taught” as part of qualitative methods training.

Research ethics in the social sciences are a highly contested topic (Israel & Hay, 2006; van den Hoonaard, 2002). Cannella and Lincoln (2007) criticized the way in which ethical conduct of research in the United States is commonly treated as a “regulatory enterprise” that only creates an “illusion of ethical practice” (p. 315). Other qualitative scholars in the Anglo-American world (e.g., Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom) share this criticism and point to the shortcomings of institutionalized review procedures and their negative implications for academic freedom, methodological diversity, and qualitative inquiry (Christians, 2011; Iphofen, 2011; Perry, 2011; van den Hoonaard, 2002, 2011). Based on critical, feminist, postcolonial, and postmodern theories, alternative conceptualizations of ethics in research are offered—including those where ethical conduct is understood as an ongoing, critical and dialogical engagement with the moral and political questions of conducting research (Cannella & Lincoln, 2011). Arguments are made for collaborative and critical approaches to qualitative research that strive for social justice and align “the ethics of research with a politics of the oppressed, with a politics of resistance, hope and freedom” (Denzin & Giardina, 2007, p. 35). Collaborative, participatory, and emancipatory methodologies can be viewed as more strongly driven by ethical considerations than traditional academic approaches to research, as they are characterized by a stronger commitment to attend to power inequalities, to “do good,” and to benefit and enable the empowerment of participants/co-researchers. On a practical level, though, these approaches, too, entail a range of ethical questions and challenges—In fact, ethical issues may become even more salient (Flicker, Travers, Guta, McDonald, & Meagher, 2007; Olitsky & Weathers, 2005; von Unger & Narimani, 2012).

In Germany, the debate on research ethics is quite different. This is in part due to the fact that social science research has to adhere to data protection legislation but does not generally undergo ethical review.¹ Institutionalized review procedures, which are responsible for most of the controversy

surrounding research ethics in the Anglo-American discourse, have only been established in the medical field and for psychological experimental research but not in the social sciences (Oellers & Wegner, 2009). Professional associations such as the German Sociological Association (DGS) developed codes of ethics (e.g., DGS & Professional Association of German Sociologists [BDS], 2014), but these are not legally enforced. In fact, only recently (and mainly due to requirements posed by international journals and funding agencies such as the European Union) have social science faculties in Germany started to establish local research ethics committees at universities.

Many of the issues raised by qualitative scholars in the Anglo-American debates have also been discussed in Germany but usually under a different name (i.e., not as a matter of “ethics”) and not quite as prominently. With few exceptions (e.g., Hopf, 1991, 2004; Lamnek, 1992, 1994), an explicit discussion of research ethics in qualitative research is only beginning to evolve (von Unger, Narimani, & M’Bayo, 2014). This is not irrelevant for the question of how research ethics can be addressed in a qualitative methods course. Although literature from the Anglo-American discourse is helpful to stimulate discussion and broaden the perspective, it is not a “blueprint” for the discussion in other parts of the world. Instead, the local context that largely determines what constitutes research ethics has to be considered. Given that research ethics are not (yet) discussed and handled as a “regulatory enterprise” in German sociology, there is a window of opportunity to frame the topic as a matter of reflexivity rather than as an issue of regulation.

Working with a broad definition of “research ethics” that applies to various research contexts, the term might be understood as an umbrella term that addresses the social, political, and moral dimensions of empirical research and captures a range of questions concerning the values that govern the research process. These questions range from the “larger” role of social science research in society to decisions about study aims and methodology to the “smaller” day-to-day decisions of how to act vis-à-vis partners and participants in specific research interactions and how to manage research relationships and information flow (von Unger et al., 2014). Issues surrounding research ethics arise in all types of empirical social research. The specific form these issues assume, however, depends on the epistemological stance taken, the methodological approach and the procedures used, as well as the topic of study, the structure of the field of research, and the persons and institutions taking part in the work.

In qualitative research, commonly used methods such as in-depth interviewing and participant observation can create very intimate research relations and the need for interpersonal trust. The high value attached to contextuality, contingency, and openness in the research process underpins a general awareness for research ethics. However, the

direct contact with the participants in their life worlds, the great degree of interactivity and involvement, as well as the unpredictability of the social processes in qualitative research can also entail major ethical challenges. How do we as researchers see our roles and responsibilities? How do we position ourselves in the field including vis-à-vis powerful actors? What is the purpose of our research? If we aim for critical, participatory, and transgressive forms of qualitative research, what are the ethical implications and how do we manage the pressures from mainstream academia? In what way and to whom do we identify ourselves as researchers in the field—what information do we reveal about ourselves and our intent? What if we study a situation in which people are suffering great need—may we help? Are we even obligated to help or should we avoid doing so? What if participants tell us “secrets,” are we to use them in our analysis? How do we avoid harming the participants? What if the participants do not want to be anonymized and want to claim their “voice” in the publications (van den Hoonaard, 2002, p. 14)? Questions such as these may arise in the various phases of the qualitative research process. Answering them requires nuanced processes of interpretation, weighing, and decision making. How can this competence be taught or acquired in a course on qualitative research methods?

An observation made regarding the literature on teaching qualitative methods in the English-speaking world also holds true for the German-speaking realm: There are generally many textbooks on different methodologies, but little guidance on how to teach them (Denzin, 2010, p. 52). While it can be argued that this situation has changed in the Anglo-American discourse with a large number of helpful resources on teaching qualitative methods being available, compiled, and discussed (e.g., Chenail, 2012; Eisenhart & Jurow, 2011; Hsiung, 2008), it still by and large holds true for the German discourse. Qualitative research constitutes a lively (and established) field of inquiry to which many disciplines in the social sciences contribute, yet only few publications explicitly address issues of teaching qualitative research (exceptions include Breuer & Schreier, 2010; Flick & Bauer, 2004). Some state that research ethics should be part of the teaching practice without detailing how (Breuer & Schreier, 2010). In a similar vein, handbooks on qualitative research contain articles on the topic of research ethics (Hopf, 2004; Kiegelmann, 2010). However, there is no guidance on how to use this material for teaching purposes and how it can facilitate the acquisition of practical skills. What is needed are concepts for conveying skills and knowledge about research ethics when teaching different methodologies in the social sciences. Building on existing insights on teaching reflexivity in qualitative research (Hsiung, 2008), how can students learn to practice *ethical* reflexivity? How can they learn the history and principles of research ethics and ways to apply them thoughtfully to

empirical research projects? This article presents my experience with teaching sociology students about aspects of research ethics while training them in qualitative methods.

The Seminar

The course took place at Institute of Sociology, the Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich (LMU), Germany, during the summer semester (April-July) of 2013. The details of the course including the syllabus are presented in detail elsewhere (von Unger, 2014). The undergraduate sociology students attending it had already taken several classes on quantitative social research and statistics and had had an introductory lecture on qualitative methods of empirical social research (which they did not remember very well, though). As a course in applied methods, the seminar was the first opportunity for them to gain hands-on experience with qualitative research.

When conceptualizing this course, I drew on several years of experience with teaching qualitative methods in various institutions and disciplines (including public health, medicine, social work/intercultural conflict management and sociology). In Germany, there is not so much a divide between a “left” and “right” pole of teaching qualitative methods as has been described for the English-speaking world (Denzin, 2010, p. 53; Eisenhart & Jurow, 2011, p. 700). Instead, there are many different “schools” of qualitative research in the interpretative paradigm—each coming with a sophisticated set of theoretical assumptions, methodological terminology, and methodical procedures (for recent reviews of the diverse landscape of German qualitative research and possible future trends, see Keller, 2014; Knoblauch, 2013). Many divides characterize this landscape. For example, some proponents of hermeneutical and narrative methodologies are highly critical of what they consider as less interpretative (and more quantitative-oriented) approaches such as qualitative content analysis or grounded theory and coding procedures in general (Rosenthal, 2011). Yet at the same time, constructivist and postmodern versions of grounded theory are widely discussed (and practiced) in Germany, and many of the original works of U.S.-based grounded theory scholars (e.g., by Anselm Strauss, Juliet Corbin, Kathy Charmaz, and Adele Clarke) are translated into German. Performative, autoethnographic, and participatory approaches on the other hand (which are considered part of the “left pole” in the Anglo-American discourse) are marginalized within the German-speaking world of qualitative research. The German landscape of qualitative research is dominated by classical academic approaches in the hermeneutical and (supposedly “value-free”) Weberian traditions of German sociology. When teaching qualitative methodologies, it is impossible to cover the whole field. Instead, one has to strike a balance between pointing to the existing diversity, using overviews

that identify some common characteristics and concerns (e.g., Flick, von Kardorff, and Steinke, 2004) and focusing on the practical application of a selected methodology.

In previous seminars dedicated to teaching qualitative research skills, I had addressed research ethics by devoting a class meeting to the subject and by pointing out ethical concerns throughout the learning process. I usually included an introductory text, referred to a code of ethics, discussed ethical aspects of the empirical literature, and further addressed aspects of research ethics such as confidentiality and anonymity when discussing the students' research projects and fieldwork experiences. When taking up my current position at the Institute of Sociology at LMU, I had the opportunity to offer the first qualitative methods course concentrating on issues of research ethics.

The semester-long course met for 2 hr a week, and 20 students participated. It had two main objectives: (a) to afford practical experience in applying qualitative methods and (b) to instill principles of research ethics and to help the students acquire skill at reflecting on them and applying them to their own research practice.

To acquire methodological skills and understand their practical relation to the process, the students themselves were to collect data. For this purpose, they had to choose a suitable topic to work on together, formulate an overarching research question for it, and conduct their own interview projects in small groups. Because the students had little or no previous hands-on experience with qualitative research, the topic had to be provocative enough to prompt clear questions about research ethics but not so provocative as to be unduly demanding.

We eventually settled on a matter of local as well as national, social, and political relevance: The trial against one member and four supporters of the National Socialist Underground (NSU), a right-wing extremist group of Neo Nazis, accused of having conducted a series of violent crimes and killings motivated by racist and fascist beliefs.² The trial had just begun in Munich and received ample media attention. It revealed the extent to which German state institutions had ignored and even supported right-wing violence (against immigrants and others) for many years. A critical public debate took place, yet many questions remained open. There was hardly any sociological research or theory addressing the topic. We thus agreed that it would be a fitting topic for qualitative research. The overarching research question at the center of the interview projects inquired about the meaning of the NSU trial from the perspective of members of local communities: "How do people living in Munich view the NSU trial and what do they make of it?" The students worked in small supervised groups to develop their own research design, which consisted of formulating and conducting guided interviews and taking notes on their fieldwork.

The class meetings were generally divided into two parts. The first half was prepared by the students, who introduced

the class readings and led discussion on them. In the second half, I led the hands-on empirical exercises, supervising the students and instructing them on how to do interviews. The students designed individual components of a qualitative study and an interview guideline, recruited the participants, and conducted interviews that they documented in detailed field notes. The students worked on these exercises in small groups, doing an average of two interviews per student.

The limited time available for the course made it necessary to focus on the phase of data collection at the expense of a thorough analysis of the data. The students dispensed with tape-recording and transcribing the interviews, and we were only able to conduct a preliminary analysis of the results on the basis of their field notes. After the course ended, the students wrote a term paper reporting their interview project and its results. Under the heading "Reflections on Research Ethics," they also responded to the question "What did I/we learn in the course and through the practical exercises on ethics in qualitative research?" The students could choose to write the term papers individually or as a group.

Given the specific focus on research ethics as part of the qualitative methods training, the first step aimed to awaken an appreciation for the need to think about research ethics. The idea was to achieve this goal by discussing historical examples of unethical research practices. We thus reviewed and discussed literature on medical research scandals (e.g., human experiments under National Socialism in Germany and the Tuskegee syphilis study in the United States³) and controversial psychological experiments (e.g., the Milgram study⁴). We reviewed relevant literature in the initial class meetings (e.g., Bachrach, 2004; Baumrind, 1964; Jones, 1993; Milgram, 1963, 1964; for the full syllabus, see von Unger, 2014) and discussed the relevance and emergence of principles of research ethics such as "do no harm," informed consent, and voluntary participation. In a second step, we discussed the development of the ethics code in German sociology (DGS & BDS, 2014) and compared it with the corresponding codes of U.S. and British sociological associations (American Sociological Association, 1999; British Sociological Association, 2002). In the third step, we explored the special challenges encountered in qualitative research, with empirical examples being drawn from the literature (Ellis, 2007; Islam, 2000; Tilley & Woodthorpe, 2011). This preparation aimed at helping the students see connections to the practical research experience they had gained in the meantime.

The concept of the course thus contained several learning objectives related to research ethics. The students were expected to

- understand the historical development and relevance of the principles of research ethics, including the right to participants' self-determination, voluntary participation, informed consent, confidentiality, and anonymization;

- comprehend what special questions, opportunities, and challenges of research ethics arise in *qualitative* research;
- reflect critically the extent to which their research project could harm the participants and how such damage can be avoided;
- learn to weigh damage that *the researcher* might incur and to take measures avoiding it (e.g., by working together in pairs when collecting data);
- plan, pursue, and critically reflect on the practical processes of gaining informed consent;
- familiarize themselves with the precepts of data protection, to learn to anonymize data, but also to realize the limits of anonymizing qualitative data and the challenges of anonymization in the age of the Internet (Tilley & Woodthorpe, 2011); and
- think about their own involvement as a researcher in the research process and to manage research relations consciously and responsibly.

Originally, the course was to end with an exploration of participatory approaches to research ethics (Centre for Social Justice and Community Action, 2012; Flicker et al., 2007; Macaulay et al., 1998; von Unger & Narimani, 2012). However, we changed plans because the students wanted to have additional time to discuss their practical experiences and unanswered questions. All in all, the students experienced three parallel learning processes during the course:

1. They worked through questions of research ethics (drawing on readings and their own experience).
2. They acquired methodological skills in designing a qualitative study and in planning, conducting, and documenting qualitative interviews.
3. They familiarized themselves with the topic of the empirical projects by researching the NSU trial.

To enable the students to link their empirical practice and data to sociological theory, and to think critically about larger ethical issues in qualitative sociological research, I invited a colleague to one of the class meetings. Jasmin Siri had studied the NSU trial and was highly critical of the public debate and media reporting (Siri, 2014).⁵ She presented a volume of collected readings, poems, and scientific writings on the NSU violence (Schmincke & Siri, 2013) and read from one of the articles. The essay was written by an activist and former sociology student who strongly criticized the (unethical) ways of teaching, learning, and doing research on immigrants in academia, which from her point of view contributes to the widespread public and scientific ignorance about racist, right-wing violence against immigrants in Germany (Shehadeh, 2013). In class, this opened up a debate about larger ethical issues such as the political ramifications of social science research and the question of

“Who benefits from empirical research?” It was a transgressive moment during which the students realized that their research assignment was more than an assignment. We discussed whether it lies within the responsibility of sociologists to address current social phenomena such as extreme right-wing violence and the NSU and position themselves politically. This is clearly a minority position within sociology. In fact, German sociologists even argue about the extent to which National Socialism is or is not a topic for sociology (Deißler, 2013; Kruse, 2013). From my point of view, this class meeting was a turning point, and the discussion with Jasmin Siri was also mentioned favorably by some of the students in their class evaluations.

Feedback from students on their learning took several forms: comments and discussions during the individual class meetings, discussions during the consultation hour of the lecturer, the students filled out an anonymous questionnaire (as part of the standard evaluation procedures), and we evaluated the course during a concluding discussion in the final class meeting.

Having explained the concept of the undergraduate course on the ethics of applied qualitative methods in sociological research, I now turn to the main questions that the students raised in class and in their term papers.

Informed Consent: Yes or No?

In class, the students discussed what information should be communicated in what form and in what detail during the process of recruiting and gaining informed consent from their interview partners. As mentioned above, some of the students were worried that advance information on the purpose of the study or research question could skew the project’s results. These misgivings startled me partly because they were voiced after class discussion of the early readings had already underlined the personal rights of participants and the relevance of informed consent. The reservations seemed to exist apart from that discussion. The students were indeed able to comprehend the significance of informed consent in medical and psychological research, but they had not made the connection between the readings and their own research projects. Why did the transfer fail to occur? If the studies and scandals from other disciplines were too remote from the students’ own research, then using material thematically closer to social research would be a more effective way to approach the topic. That change, however, would mean forgoing the historical context in which certain ethical principles were developed for research involving human subjects.

I wrote reflexive notes on my teaching experience and at some point questioned my own amazement. Why was I astounded? The concerns raised by the students mirror established attitudes and practices in social research. Obscuring the true aim of a study by not arranging for the

informed consent of participants before data collection is not uncommon in qualitative or quantitative social research. In fact, not too long ago, it used to be the standard way of doing ethnographic fieldwork and participant observation (Goffman, 1989), and it is still common practice in many experimental designs.

In qualitative research in Germany today, waiving informed consent seems justified to researchers especially when they fear that people would not voluntarily and consciously take part in the study. For example, one researcher inquiring into the right-wing extremist scene recently assumed the role of a social worker, wrote detailed notes for several months, and analyzed them without revealing herself to be a field researcher (Köttig, 2004). Researchers anticipate that the prospective subject would not welcome critical observation and would refuse to take part if they were to reveal their intentions. To skirt that eventuality, they partly or wholly conceal what they have in mind.

Although the principles of informed consent and voluntary participation constitute important and widely accepted milestones in the history of research ethics, it is worthwhile to consider the ethical dimension of covert research. In defense of the practice, it might be argued that it can be a necessary strategy for critical research in some cases and even morally essential for studying particular groups, for example, powerful groups in society, restricted settings and secluded, possibly dangerous groups such as fascist groups and organized crime. Yet on the other hand, covert research and deception violates the rights of persons under study and also undermines social trust in research. When weighing the pros and cons of covert research, Christel Hopf (1991) concluded that "it seems problematic to divide the world into parts that are worth protecting and those that are not and, as a social researcher, to engage openly on one occasion and go 'undercover' the next, depending on how things look" (p. 179, my translation). She proposes to stick to the general principle of informed consent and to fight for access to restricted fields of research. If it is not possible to openly conduct research, she suggests that researchers seek other avenues of data collection and analysis such as document analysis or expert interviews (Hopf, 1991, p. 179). We discussed her text in class as an early and skillful example of ethical reflexivity, which illustrates that qualitative scholars find different answers to ethical questions.

A second reason the students gave against obtaining informed consent stemmed from methodological concerns. The assumption was that full-fledged information including details conveyed in the process of properly informing would-be subjects about the research and their participation in it could lead to socially desired behavior and distort the research results. Underlying their concern is a positivist stance holding that researchers should study reality as impartially and objectively as possible without influencing it, assuming that reality is (or can be) clearly divorced from

them. Such an understanding reflects the epistemological and ontological assumptions the students learned during their training in quantitative methodology. These assumptions also inform the sociologist's code of ethics, which reminds researchers to aim for "objectivity" and to generally stick to the principle of informed consent albeit conceding an exception to the rule:

As a rule, participation in social science studies is voluntary and is based on as much information as possible about the objectives and methods of the research project. The principle of informed consent cannot always apply, as when the research results would be unduly distorted by detailed advance information. In such cases [the researcher] must try to use other avenues of informed consent. (DGS & BDS, 2014, para. 2 (3), my translation)

When discussing this paragraph in class, we figured that it might mean that exceptions are made for experiments in which the participants receive vague information, if any, about the study design (as in the Milgram study). "Other avenues of informed consent" thus include incomplete information or retrospective informed consent. Other possible exceptions relate to ethnographic research where the specific research situation differs from other research settings, thus making it impossible to ask every single person for their individual informed consent (van den Hoonaard, 2002). These examples illustrate how closely questions of research ethics are intertwined with methodological aspects.

Beyond the ethics of informed consent, the effect ("distortion") exerted by the very act of informing and interviewing someone and by the subjective way of posing questions and taking field notes seemed problematic to many of the students in the course. Their questions and critical self-reflection offered an opportunity to call attention to differences between qualitative and quantitative methodological procedure and epistemological assumptions. Well aware that there is more than one kind of qualitative research (and of quantitative research for that matter), the students and I explored the main differences in the understanding and status of "objectivity" and "subjectivity." In qualitative research, the subjectivity of the researcher is not regarded as distortion or interference but rather as an inherent part of the research and knowledge-creation process. In fact, if it is documented and analyzed, that is, if it is methodologically and critically well thought through, it actually serves as a "productive epistemic window" (Breuer, Mruck, & Roth, 2002, p. 4). Social constructivists treat data not as a "copy" of social reality but rather as co-constructions jointly produced by the researchers and the subjects in the situations under study. In this context, socially desired statements are not problematic distortions; they are part of the phenomenon the researcher is expected to analyze and understand.

I advised the students to give their interview partners as much information as possible about the research project and

to mention possible risks to the private sphere and the measures in place to protect it (e.g., confidentiality and anonymization). Because I wanted to keep the option of analyzing and publishing the results, I asked the students to tell their participants of these intentions, too. As a general approach, I asked them to view informed consent as a dialogical process involving more—or something entirely different—than a signature (in fact, the students were asked to gather the informed consent orally, that is, without collecting a signature, and document these discussions and outcomes in their field notes).

In the term papers, some of the students reflected on their decisions on the amount of information they shared with their interview partners. For instance, one group was especially keen on finding out the perspective of persons with a migration background, and they decided to tell their interview partners of that interest. In the interviews, they realized that this candidness was beneficial because the interview partners were able to correct the students' preliminary assumptions. The students had expected persons with a migration background to identify with the view of NSU victims, but they learned that not all of their interview partners did.⁶ The explanation of the students' research interest as part of the informed consent gave the participants a chance to discuss, challenge, and revise existing preliminary assumptions.

However, one group in the course aptly remarked that the information encompassed by informed consent can never be complete and detailed. First, the principle of openness precludes the ability to plan those aspects of the research that develop only as that process unfolds. Second (in most non-participatory, academic qualitative research), there is reason to keep the time spent on informed consent brief, for the crux of the interaction is not to describe the study and obtain consent but rather to collect the data for which that consent is to be obtained. Third, the purpose is to communicate the most important points of the work, not to engage in scientific discourse. Individual aspects of the research project and the interest underlying it may consist in what comes across to the participants as merely an arcane critical perspective and/or a series of references to technical discussions they do not fully comprehend (e.g., theoretical concepts or details of the analytical process). Perhaps the researchers have strategic motives for not wishing to disclose certain things (such as a critical perspective) about their project. For example, one group of students raised this issue about the scope of informed consent, because one of their interview questions aimed at probing what might be a "right-wing mentality" or implicit support for racist violence among the interview partners. I handled these different positions and practices of informed consent in a way that stressed reflexivity over adherence to rules and regulations: The students were allowed to decide and do as they seemed fit, as long as they considered the pros and cons, in

particular the rights of the participants and stated why and how they came to their conclusions.

“Do No Harm”—What Harm, to Whom, and How to Avoid It?

The principle of “do no harm” was discussed several times during the course and was addressed in the term papers by the students. It is worth looking closely at what it is understood to mean. What does “harm” mean? What damage can occur—and to whom? The course readings showed how a key form of damage that can arise in the context of social research results from lack of data protection and violation of the private sphere of the interview partners. Confidentiality and procedures for anonymizing the data are therefore important measures to take. However, there are clear limits to the possibility of anonymizing qualitative data. The whole point of qualitative research is to generate and collect rich and detailed descriptions of people's experiences, views, lives, and living contexts, so that these data will always contain information that might be attributable to a person even if the names, addresses, and so forth, have been taken out. The problems of anonymizing qualitative data were also considered in light of participatory approaches and the Internet, which is increasingly providing means to identify places, institutions, and persons, even if their names are anonymized (Tilley & Woodthorpe, 2011).

Discussion of the readings, particularly those on the Milgram experiments (e.g., Baumrind, 1964; Milgram, 1963, 1964), ethnographic and autoethnographic studies (Ellis, 2007; Islam, 2000), and a study on emotionally demanding interview situations and the collection of “sensitive data” from ill and dying persons (Bahn & Weatherill, 2012), also made students aware of the damage that psychological stresses can inflict on participants in a research process. Most of the student research groups believed that talking about the NSU trial was not very stressful for their interview partners. In only one case—because the interview partner's depictions were marked by strong emotionality and empathy for the murder victims and their family (see Note 6)—did a student challenge this assessment in retrospect. The students in another case wanted to inquire about the “suicide” of two of the main NSU perpetrators, so when obtaining informed consent they decided to mention that they would be asking a few “delicate” questions—recognizing that the topic of suicide can arouse painful memories for some persons.

During class, I tried to point out that the ethical principle of avoiding damage must not be mistaken to mean, as asserted in one term paper, that no “unpleasant questions” may be posed during an interview. Such an interpretation of the principle would excessively limit social research. For good reason, the code of ethics adopted by German sociologists holds that subjects are to be advised of risks that

“exceed the level customary in everyday life” (DGS & BDS, 2014). Although assessments of what is “customary in everyday life” (*whose* everyday life anyhow?) can vastly diverge, this is nonetheless a useful reminder. A degree of damage and the possibility of risks cannot be totally ruled out. Some risks are worth taking. Others may be over- or underestimated by the researchers. Is it possible at all to say in advance which questions the interview partners will feel to be unpleasant? Informing and reminding interview partners that they have a right not to answer the interviewer’s questions is probably more purposeful than having researchers engage in overcautious (and possibly patronizing) self-censorship.

The extent to which both the interviewer and interview partner run risks was also addressed in the course. In the class meeting with visiting lecturer Jasmin Siri, for instance, students spoke with her about the contentious responses that the topic of the NSU trial can provoke. The injustice and suffering experienced by the murder victims and their families can unleash aggression or elicit sorrow. These emotions might be directed at the researcher, even if she or he did not mean to arouse them. Furthermore, interviewing strangers in their life worlds is never free of risk. Measures taken to protect the students therefore included teamwork and regular supervision during the course. Specific suggestions made by Bahn and Weatherill (2012) to protect researchers in interview situations were examined as well. Another occasion to discuss the safety of students collecting data arose when a student of migration background planned to interview a person who held extreme right-wing views. As the responsible instructor, I required her to be accompanied for the encounter. A fellow student agreed to go with her, but the interview ultimately fell through. A different group interviewed a fellow male student who the students agreed was “not disinclined to radical right-wing thought.” A young female student conducted the interview in the participant’s apartment. She reported in her term paper that she and her team of students reduced potential hazard by letting “both a shared acquaintance and second acquaintance of the interviewer know of the visit.” Incidentally, the interview partner did not express any extreme right-wing views in the interview, which the students interpreted as an effect of social desirability and possible fear of the participant that the information might leak and result in negative sanctions.

Most of the students interviewed persons from their wider circle of acquaintances (including friends of friends). That choice not only eased recruitment efforts but also reduced the level of hazard the students felt to their own safety. In some cases, however, it compromised their ability to guarantee confidentiality, for they worked in teams and had to talk about the interviews. Because the students helped each other to recruit interview partners, the latter were not anonymous in these discussions within a team.

The students partnering in a team became aware of what had been discussed in each other’s interviews. Afterward, some of the students in the course did not find it easy to deal with this knowledge in their daily social relations with the persons who had been interviewed, a topic that was critically addressed in some of the term papers.

The Code of Ethics—Dry and Toothless?

In the interim feedback rounds as well as in the final class discussion and the anonymous written feedback from the students, the seminar received a very positive rating. However, one aspect of the course was criticized: the detailed treatment of the codes of ethics. One student suggested that the course might be improved by not going into “the ethics code in such detail since covering it is really very dry.” This impression had already emerged during a class meeting on comparing the German sociological code of ethics with the U.S. and British codes: The students leading the session showed a photograph of a crack in dry earth bearing the caption “Above all, our topic was . . . rather dry” (von Unger, 2014, p. 226).

The students suggested using examples to bring the topic to life. They also criticized that adherence to the principles set forth in the code of ethics goes unmonitored and violations of it go unsanctioned in Germany—unlike the case in the United States and the United Kingdom (Oellers & Wegner, 2009). From their perspective, the German code is “toothless.” Another criticism focused on the fact that documentation of the questions and contentious issues addressed by the ethics committee of the BDS and the DGS exists only for the initial years after the code’s introduction (Lamnek, 1994). No information about the committee’s work in subsequent years could be found, a gap that left open the question of whether there had been any activity or whether it had simply not been made public.

Conclusion

On the whole, I regard the design and realization of the course as successful. The students engaged in a critical inquiry, they collected data, learned from it, revised some of their assumptions, and practiced ethical reflexivity. They thus got a good taste of both qualitative research and research ethics. It got them thinking and it spurred their interest: One of the students decided to further pursue the problem of research ethics, confidentiality, and anonymity in social media research and dedicated her BA thesis to an empirical study on the topic. She and another student from class further played an active role in a conference on research ethics in the social sciences that we organized at the LMU in September 2014. A third student chose the topic for an oral exam for his diploma. A fourth student (at MA

level who had voluntarily visited the class) dedicated his oral exam to the topic of the NSU trial and decided to further pursue a PhD on the topic.

On a (self-)critical note, though, I got the impression that the class assignments for 12 class meetings in one semester were highly ambitious. The students simultaneously had to familiarize themselves with the NSU topic, absorb the literature on methods *and* research ethics, plan and conduct their interview projects, and relate these assignments to each other. It would be better to cover the material over two semesters as is generally suggested for qualitative methods training in the literature (e.g., Denzin, 2010). A two-semester course would give students more time for the various learning processes on study design, data collection, and analysis. Such a design would facilitate the acquisition of skills in data analysis, too, which tends to be underemphasized in methodological training. Moreover, the analysis and presentation of quotations and results could encompass additional issues in research ethics and thereby do the material greater justice. The students (and I) indisputably learned a great deal. Nevertheless, some of the interview partners might also want to know “what came of it all.” In the sense of “public sociology” (Burawoy, 2005; Scheffer & Schmidt, 2013), it would surely enhance the reputation of the sociological profession if we were to more frequently offer to make the results of our research generally comprehensible and publicly accessible.

In summary, a number of points about developing student competence in research ethics are worth highlighting. First, students learn most by doing, especially from trial and error. The combination of learning by doing in both areas (methods and ethics) has proven itself to be successful. Second, competence in research ethics cannot be divorced from competence in research methods, methodology, and epistemology. The seminar has shown how new the procedures and assumptions of qualitative research are for most undergraduate students and how much they need to be explained. This observation applies particularly to epistemological assumptions (how reality can be studied and what role the researcher has in that activity), the interactivity of qualitative research, the special involvement of the researchers, and the productive way of dealing with subjectivity. This learning process needs time and experience. With this background in mind, I think it advisable, as stated above, to spread such combined learning (i.e., about methods and ethics) over two semesters or, in the absence of this option, to start by emphasizing practical experience with qualitative data collection and analysis. Ethical discussions often appear in normative guise, that is, they are misunderstood as right/wrong questions. Asking what behavior is acceptable and why sounds at first like the questions “what should or may I do?” and “what should or must not be done?” If questions of research ethics (in particular codes of ethics) are introduced before students have had hands-on

research experience, beginners (who do not want to do anything wrong anyway) might be stymied rather than opened up. That effect surfaced during the course, for example, when some students overcautiously tried to avoid asking any unpleasant questions to avoid damage.

Third is the question of other formats for developing competence in research ethics and ethical reflexivity. Discussion during the seminar and in the term papers showed that methodological practice had helped the students gain essential skills in methods and research ethics. However, the added value of this seminar on research ethics does not seem as great as that of other methods courses I have taught. They concentrated primarily on the development of methodological skills, with research ethics constituting only one module. The research experiences and term papers in those cases, too, showed that the students had learned and heeded the main principles of research ethics. Admittedly, though, these other courses allowed more time for detailed work on methodological issues. The question is therefore whether the module format is perhaps more appropriate, especially at the undergraduate level and for students new to the topic. Research ethics cuts across many other topics, so it might be better accommodated in advanced methodological training than at the undergraduate level. On the other hand, the learning processes in the seminar discussed here were probably also hampered by a too strong focus of the seminar concept on research ethics in medical and psychological research.⁷ As described at the beginning of this article, the students had difficulties making the link from the historical scandals in medicine and psychology to their own qualitative social science research. Next time, I would read empirical examples and texts about ethics in qualitative research more early on instead of starting out with reconstructing the historical development of ethics codes.

Additional formats and concepts for communicating the substance of research ethics might be considered as well. The website of the American Sociological Association, for example, lists an array of teaching and learning materials, including case vignettes of situations and specific problems with accompanying questions, to stimulate thought about research ethics. Even better (because it shows that different assessments, positions, and “solutions” to ethical problems are possible), a book by Australian scholars shows how experienced scholars assess and discuss case-based approaches to ethical practice in different ways (Israel & Hay, 2006, pp. 145-158). Development of similar materials for the German-speaking world and the professionals teaching in it would be very helpful. If we are to use the current window of opportunity in Germany productively and learn from the shortcomings in other academic contexts, we should teach the students that research ethics is not about following a prescribed procedure but to think critically about our roles and responsibilities as researchers—with an

awareness that each ethical question might be answered in more than one way. As one student commented in her term paper, "If one thing became clear to me in the course, then it was that there is no 'clarity.'" She argued that there are no clear and consistently appropriate guidelines for either methods or research ethics in qualitative research. She wrote, "It is advisable to be oriented to standards of research ethics," but "how one acts in the end, what one decides on, the choice is ultimately left to the individual." That statement pretty well hits the mark.

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Notes

1. In Germany, every academic research institution has an office or a person in charge of data protection and every researcher employed at the institution signs a sheet stating that he or she adheres to data protection legislation. However, there are no standardized review procedures in place in the social sciences (Oellers & Wegner, 2009). Large quantitative studies are usually reviewed for data protection issues prior to starting data collection. Qualitative researchers on the other hand hardly ever get in contact with the office of data protection, except if they voluntarily approach the office with an inquiry or a request for review.
2. In the trial, a female member and four male supporters of the neo-Nazi group were accused of having murdered 10 people between 2000 and 2007, including eight persons of Turkish migrant background, one person with Greek migrant background, and a policewoman. The National Socialist Underground (NSU) trial opened at the Munich Higher Regional Court on May 6, 2013. For further information (in German), see <http://www.nsu-watch.info/>
3. The Tuskegee study, a project launched in 1932 in Macon County, Alabama, by the U.S. Public Health Service working through the Tuskegee Institute, constitutes one of the greatest scandals in the history of U.S. biomedical research. The purpose was to study the natural progression of untreated syphilis in a sample of largely African American male sharecroppers when it was already known that the disease can lead to blindness and death. The subjects were not informed of the risks involved and were not treated with penicillin when it became available in the 1940s. The study was not terminated until the scandal hit the press in 1972, by which point more than 100 of the subjects had died of the direct or indirect complications of untreated syphilis (Jones, 1993).
4. This series of experiments by psychologist Stanley Milgram at Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut, studied student obedience to authority figures and willingness to accept or resort to violence. The ethically dubious aspects of the experimental design triggered a broad and controversial debate (see Baumrind, 1964; Milgram, 1963, 1964; Stuve & Timaeus, 1980).
5. Jasmin Siri criticized the media reporting for using the term *Döner murders* (Siri, 2014). "Döner" is a popular, meat-based fast food in Germany usually sold in Turkish and Arab places. Two of the people murdered by the NSU were working at a place selling "Döner." For a long time, the police and the media wrongly suspected that the killings were due to rival drug gangs and mafia shootings thus implying the victims had connections to some kind of dubious immigrant crime structures. Jasmin Siri pointed out that by using the term *Döner murder*, the media semantically turned human beings as victims of the crime into fast food products.
6. When we discussed the issue in class, it became clear that many interview partners expressed a certain level of grievance and empathy with the victims and their families independent of whether or not they had a migration background. However, one interview partner did show especially pronounced empathy for the victims and their families. He was an immigrant greengrocer who had initially declined an interview but eventually changed his mind. Speaking about the trial, he articulated how outraged he was about the way the German authorities had treated the families of the victims. The families had been lied to and deceived as the police (and the media) ignored any evidence hinting at a racist/fascist motivation of the killings and instead pursued the suspicion that the victims had been involved with the mafia or were the victims of random violence and crime.
7. I am grateful to the reviewers for pointing this out.

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Author Biography

Hella von Unger is professor of sociology at Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich, Germany. Her research and teaching focus on qualitative methodologies, research ethics, and participatory approaches in the study of health and illness, migration, and ethnicity.