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Ethics of Heuristic Research

*Unless someone like you cares a whole awful lot,
nothing is going to get better. It's not.*

~ Dr. Seuss

Questions for Reflection

1. What is the value of ethics in heuristic inquiry?
2. How might you address a research-related ethical dilemma?
3. What measures can you take to protect your well-being during a heuristic study, and what makes self-care important?

Heuristic inquiry is the exploratory study of the essential nature of a personal human phenomenon that is potentially universal. In that respect, it is rife with personal human experience. Therein lies its beauty. Therein, too, lies its challenge! Every heuristic study emerges from the primary researcher's autobiographical experience with the topic of inquiry. Unlike in other research traditions, a high level of personal interest, familiarity, and involvement on the part of the researcher is not only desirable but expected. You care, and that is an inherently good thing, as your caring has the potential to transform you and any other person who comes into contact with your study. On the other hand, you are human, and your personal experience may impact both the process and outcome of your study—positively, negatively, or anywhere on that continuum. How do you balance the personal nature of the research

content and process with the need to maintain high ethical standards that protect you, your co-researchers, the integrity of your study, as well as any person who gains access to it? In this chapter, we define ethics briefly (especially as it relates to heuristic research), we discuss ethical issues that may arise while planning or conducting—or in the aftermath of—a heuristic study, and we outline ethical courses of action. In addition, we look at some of the potential hazards of conducting research of a deeply personal nature and the importance of maintaining researcher well-being using a self-care regimen. Let's begin by defining ethics from a heuristic perspective.

Understanding Ethics

Ethics is a vast philosophical dimension of human experience that has been applied to countless disciplines ranging across medicine, mental health, social science, education, business, political science, research, and beyond. Oancea (2014) defined ethics thus:

The study of what are good, right, or virtuous courses of action; applied ethics focuses this study on particular and complex issues and contexts. Research ethics is a branch of applied ethics focused on the specific contexts of planning, conducting, communicating, and following up research. (p. 36)

As heuristic researchers, we are most concerned with the research-related branch of applied ethics, as we explore complex socially and culturally situated human experiences of deep value to all persons involved, and potentially to others. Thus, in heuristic inquiry, ethics is applicable to a variety of issues surrounding a study, including but not limited to becoming aware of a topic, proposing the study and gaining approval for it, designing the study and executing it, managing relationships during the research process, communicating the findings, and beyond. So how do we even begin to identify what is good, right, or virtuous as we work to manage all the moving pieces of a study, as well as the complex interpersonal and intrapersonal relationship dynamics involved? Because heuristic inquiry is so personally oriented—and because it is not a matter of *if* ethical issues emerge but *when* they do—it is important to have some type of plan for working with emergent challenges. While it is unrealistic to attempt to predict every potential ethical dilemma, it is certainly helpful to anticipate possible ethical issues (Creswell, 2009; Hesse-Biber & Leavey, 2006; Oancea, 2014). It is especially helpful to have tools that facilitate deliberation and decision making, both of which have ethical implications and consequences.

Core Ethical Principles and Codes

The rights, dignity, worth, and well-being of research partners should be every researcher's primary consideration. Coupled with that is the researcher's

social responsibility to benefit society, maintain professional standards and integrity, respect national and international laws and regulations, and affirm demographic differences (Dench, Iphofen, & Huws, 2004). So why should we researchers be concerned with these issues? Well, research has an illustrious history of not caring for the well-being of human subjects and research partners. Consider the unethical experiments conducted by German doctors on Jews during World War II, Stanley Milgram's obedience study, the Tuskegee Syphilis Study, the Willowbrook study, the tearoom sex study, and the Stanford Prison Experiment. We humans are quite capable of conducting ourselves unethically in the name of science and knowledge!

A number of disciplines have published standards of ethical conduct that may apply to practice or research (Krathwohl, 2009). These standards are fairly uniform across disciplines, with some variations among disciplines. In a manner of speaking, one can say that codes of ethics offer information that is fairly intuitive to most human beings. Given that heuristic inquiry was pioneered by a humanistic psychotherapist to help him explore his deeply personal experience of loneliness, let's take a look, as an example, at the core ethical principles of the American Counseling Association (ACA), the largest international organization for counseling practitioners. The following core ethical principles are included in the *ACA Code of Ethics* (2014), along with a comprehensive code of conduct for everything related to professional counseling, with guidelines for topics such as confidentiality and privacy, professional responsibility, relationships with other professionals, research and publication, and how to resolve ethical issues.

- *Autonomy*: The right to self-determination and self-direction
- *Nonmaleficence*: Nonharm, or the avoidance of actions that may cause harm
- *Beneficence*: Working for the good or benefit of individuals and of society
- *Justice*: Equitable treatment that fosters fairness and equality
- *Fidelity*: Honoring promises and commitments, including responsibilities of trust in professional relationships
- *Veracity*: Truthful interaction and communication

While these ethical principles are particular to ACA, they are fairly standard across a number of other disciplines and professions. The codes of ethical conduct for a number of other disciplines that may be of relevance to heuristic research are easily accessible online, including the following:

- Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct of the American Psychological Association, approved in 2016, available at www.apa.org

- Code of Ethics of the American Anthropological Association, approved in 2009, available at www.aaanet.org
- Code of Ethics of the Canadian Nurses Association, approved in 2017, available at www.cna-aiic.ca
- Ethical Framework for Good Practice in Counselling and Psychotherapy of the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy, approved in 2012, available at www.bacp.co.uk
- Code of Ethics of the National Education Association, approved in 1975, available at www.nea.org
- Code of Ethics of the American Sociological Association, approved in 1997, available at www.asanet.org
- Code of Ethics of the Australian Community Workers Association, approved in 2017, available at www.acwa.org.au

In addition, some organizations have designed specific codes for conducting ethical research. Here are some examples:

- Ethical Guidelines and Regulations of the National Institutes of Health, approved in 1979, available at <https://humansubjects.nih.gov>
- Ethical Principles for Medical Research Involving Human Subjects of the World Medical Association Declaration of Helsinki, approved in 2013, available at www.wma.net
- Code of Human Research Ethics of the British Psychological Society, approved in 2010, available at www.bps.org.uk
- An EU Code of Ethics for Socio-Economic Research, approved in 2004, available at www.respectproject.org

Ethical principles and guidelines help us make sense of ethical dilemmas using frameworks and guides that facilitate fair and equitable processes of discernment. I highly recommend you keep a couple of ethical codes handy throughout your heuristic journey. With that, please note that as some codes of ethical conduct are not socially situated (Hewitt, 2007), you may need to take further measures to lend them social relevance. For example, consider consulting with peers.

Facets of a Heuristic Study That May Prompt Ethical Concerns

As mentioned earlier, while we may do everything possible to design what seems like ethically sound heuristic research, we cannot predict every ethical dilemma. Identifying facets of heuristic research that may rouse ethical

concerns is helpful as it brings focused attention to specific issues you can target early on and throughout the course of your study.

Informed Consent

Informed consent is grounded in the ethical principles of autonomy and beneficence (Marzano, 2012; Oeye, Bjelland, & Skorpen, 2007). While autonomy may not be highly valued within certain collectivist cultures, potential co-researchers who have participated in other studies expect to be informed of the details of the study in which they have been invited to participate, and rightfully so. It is ultimately their choice to participate or not, to continue participating or not, and to determine the parameters of their participation, such as what to share and what to withhold. On the other hand, not all co-researchers in your sample pool will have had the experience of participating in research studies. You are responsible for communicating clearly, to all potential co-researchers, any information affiliated with the study and with their participation, and for continuing to do so throughout the course of the study. Lack of clear communication may be perceived as omission of information, which does not accurately represent the relational and participatory nature of heuristic research.

Consent implies that those giving it have both the right and the capacity to understand what they are consenting to do so that they will be able to make informed decisions. It also means that individuals are not placed under duress to consent or participate, in alignment with the emancipatory and participatory nature of heuristic research. With that, it is fairly common knowledge that failure to consent to any aspect of a study precludes participation, not as punishment or as a display of power but for the safety and protection of all persons involved.

Each time I teach Ethical, Legal, and Professional Issues in Counseling to graduate counselors-in-training, the question emerges of whether or not informed consent is true consent if the person being asked to provide it will not be accommodated should he withhold consent. For example, a student might ask, "If I tell a potential client I will break confidentiality if she reveals an intent to harm herself and she refuses to consent to that, I have the right to deny her counseling services, but then she won't get the therapy she needs. And if I coerce her to consent, I'm violating her autonomy." My response to that is that individuals *almost invariably* have a choice, with the understanding that every choice or decision comes with consequences that should be fully explored. For example, when I provided counseling services to mandated clients, they were required to consent to receive those services but were also mandated to be in counseling to meet legal requirements overseen by their probation/parole officers. When going through the informed consent process with these clients, I made the following clear: (a) While they were required to consent to be in counseling, they reserved the right to share what they wished during counseling, and (b) they retained the right not to consent and face the legal consequences. On the surface, it may seem these mandated clients

had no choice except to consent, even if they did not wish to attend counseling. However, they did have the choice of neither consenting nor attending, although with the consequence of being reported for violating the terms of their parole/probation. Situations such as this may have led to what van den Hoonaard (2008) termed the *pet factor*, meaning clients viewed me as taking sides with law enforcement. Co-researchers in similar “captive” or vulnerable situations may view you that way, too—which in and of itself raises a whole set of ethical concerns. In the case of my mandated clients, a couple of them chose not to attend their counseling sessions and to face, instead, what they termed the *revolving door* of entering and being released from prison repeatedly. It may not seem like an ideal choice, but it was nevertheless a choice. While this is a seemingly hyperbolic example, keep in mind that you may face similar situations in a heuristic study, depending on your topic of inquiry and your co-researcher sample.

In the case of a heuristic study, you must provide comprehensive information to co-researchers about the study—throughout the study—with the understanding that they may participate only if they consent. Below are some aspects of informed consent to which you may wish to pay extra attention in a heuristic study. When addressing these issues, keep in mind your role as the primary researcher and the importance of maintaining your leadership responsibilities.

Confidentiality. De-identification is critical in most types of research. Confidentiality and privacy are hallmarks of ethical research. But what do you do if one of your research partners reveals, during the study, that he is contemplating taking his life and has come up with a suicide plan? Or what if your co-researcher tells you she physically abused her elderly and disabled mother repeatedly while her mother was in her care? Or what if, after consenting to using a pseudonym, your co-researcher decides he would like to be identified using his real name? While conducting my dissertation study (Sultan, 2015), I faced an ethical dilemma when one of my co-researchers expressed a desire to forgo confidentiality. Why was this an ethical dilemma? Because the study included questions about clients and specifically about the impact of therapist embodiment on clients, which meant detailed discussion of client cases. The study was also a heuristic inquiry, characterized by an existential, humanistic, emancipatory, and participatory spirit. The dilemma emerged as I attempted to balance confidentiality with support for human agency. This is how I initially processed potential decisions and their consequences:

- By accepting my research partner’s choice to forgo the pseudonym, I would be supporting agency and promoting self-direction (Giordano, O’Reilly, Taylor, & Dogra, 2007), which aligns with the nature of heuristic research on multiple levels. On the other hand, accepting might jeopardize the confidentiality of my co-researcher’s clients; three of the research questions were client-related.

- By denying my research partner's choice, I would minimize confidentiality breaches of my co-researcher's identity and, thereby, of any clients that co-researcher discussed. On the other hand, by denying this co-researcher's choice, I would be making the assumption of knowing what was best for both co-researcher and clients, which is pompous and patronizing, and I would be marginalizing that co-researcher's voice (van den Hoonaard, 2008), which is disempowering.

The big questions with which I found myself struggling were, *Who is responsible for whom and for what? Am I responsible for protecting the confidentiality of co-researchers and their psychotherapy clients, of co-researchers only, of clients only, or of myself only? Who is responsible for the process and outcome of the study? In the case of this study, am I only a researcher, or am I also a licensed mental health practitioner, or both? Which code of ethics governs me? Do I get to make a choice, or am I responsible for upholding multiple codes of ethics? Who is held accountable if confidentiality of any parties named or referenced (e.g., psychotherapy clients) is breached? What should I do?* These and other questions emerged as I found myself mired in a perplexing ethical dilemma with far-reaching influence and consequences. My process of deliberation involved consideration of a number of factors, including the topic of inquiry, my co-researchers and their roles and responsibilities, and the purpose of my study (Guenther, 2009). In your ongoing informed consent process, be clear about how you plan to address emergent confidentiality-related issues. It may also be helpful to assess shifts in preferences around confidentiality during different stages of the study (Kaiser, 2012).

Compensation. Will your research partners be compensated for their efforts? Some forms of compensation (money, gift cards) may be viewed questionably by research review boards (Cook, 2012) as they imply bribery or coercion, especially if your co-researchers are in need of such compensation. Conversely, non-compensation may be viewed as self-serving versus promoting a mutual good. In the interest of upholding heuristic inquiry's social constructivist spirit, consider various definitions of *compensation* (perhaps in concert with co-researchers). Bring some awareness to what is informing your decisions about compensation of research partners. If you decide in favor of compensation, engage in some reflexive processing. Here are some example questions: *Who is funding the study? What is the role of the funder, and what are the parameters of that role? Does the funder have the right to make judgments about the study? If so, how does this impact research partners? How does it potentially influence the course of the study?*

Benefits. What unique value will your co-researchers get out of their participation in the study? For example, a potential benefit of participating in a heuristic study is existential movement toward self-actualization and integration

through individual and communal reflection and meaning-making. But what if a co-researcher does not value the concept of self-actualization or finds it inconsequential? Explain your perspective of benefits clearly so your research partners are aware of any discrepancies with their own worldview. What you perceive as a benefit may not be similarly perceived by one or more research partners.

Risks. What potential harm or danger are your research partners facing through their participation? For example, one risk I mentioned in the informed consent form for my dissertation study (Sultan, 2015) was the potential triggering of intense affect (Adler & Adler, 2002) and traumatic memories (Fogel, 2009) due to discussion of embodied experience or past events. This was an evidence-based communication (based on knowledge from previous research and clinical experience) to potential co-researchers (all of whom were experienced psychotherapists), coupled with my personal belief that many therapists are led to the mental health professions via their personal wounding. As with the explanation of benefits, discuss definitions and perceptions of risk.

Participation and Withdrawal. Be very clear about policies regarding co-researcher participation (i.e., voluntary vs. involuntary). Likewise, openly articulate the process of withdrawal. In keeping with heuristic inquiry's humanistic and participatory nature, it is less likely you will have involuntary co-researchers. Allow research partners to withdraw from the study at any time, with no penalty—no questions asked. Prohibiting voluntary participation and withdrawal compromises the integrity of heuristic inquiry, especially in its focus on agency and empowerment.

Beyond these standard concerns—and with an eye on the ethics of care—*informed consent* is also about having a genuine concern for the well-being of your research partners, not only in their role as members of your research team but beyond the study (Marzano, 2012). This raises the issue of whether informed consent is valid forever or is open for negotiation, placing on us the responsibility of maintaining ongoing interest in the well-being of research partners and sharing ownership of their responses and reactions to matters related to informed consent.

Research Methodology and Design

It is fairly common for ethical dilemmas to arise during the course of any type of formal study. Because we are in the realm of exploratory research, issues may emerge around specific aspects of the research method and/or research design, including the topic, research questions, data collection—organization—analysis, evaluation, or writing/publication. Specifically, heuristic inquiry applies both scientific and person-centered methods in alignment with its existential, humanistic nature, which may generate questions about fidelity to science

versus art, as well as about overall consistency and trustworthiness. As for research design, suppose you are in the midst of the data collection—organization—analysis process when you realize one of your research questions has the potential to expose not only the identities of co-researchers but also those of other individuals whose accounts are being shared by co-researchers, unbeknownst to those individuals? Or suppose while going through the member checking process, a co-researcher refuses to validate the thematic findings of the overall study (Sandelowski, 2008)? While it is our desire as researchers to maintain balance and equity, we heuristic researchers are also humans exploring extremely human and personal topics. Thus, should you have the vaguest suspicion of an ethical concern, do not avoid the issue. Bring awareness and reflexivity to the table, and allow yourself, your research partners (and any others involved), and your study the benefit of addressing the dilemma comprehensively.

Relational Boundaries With Co-Researchers

Heuristic inquiry is a fundamentally relational and personally motivated research methodology and is, therefore, inclined toward empathy, intersubjectivity, inclusion, and reflexivity. Additionally, we've established that heuristic researchers do not separate their subjective experience from the process of research; as social constructivists, our biases, attitudes, and values (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011) are inextricably linked to the process and outcome of research. On the other hand, as the primary researcher, you are responsible for maintaining formal interaction with each and every research partner. I say *formal*, as communication about certain topics (e.g., informed consent) is formalized within the heuristic design and must be executed in a well-boundaried—though relational—manner. This places us in somewhat of a quandary as we navigate I—Thou relationships with co-researchers and attempt to balance reflexive subjectivity with scientific inquiry, all while trying to keep the process as nonintrusive as possible and relevant enough to prompt some level of transformation. Again, who you are as a person and how you are socioculturally situated directly impacts each and every interaction, deliberation, and decision you make, and the same holds true for each of your co-researchers. So how do you reconcile?

In the face of an ethical dilemma and the potentially mounting tension that emerges within the research team, I remind myself that heuristic inquiry is as much an educational and personal growth process as it is a cocreated process of inquiry. This very much flows with Lincoln and colleagues' (2011) perspective on qualitative research processes being awareness-enhancing and action-oriented as researchers work to gain knowledge in response to co-researchers' needs while engaging the idea of transformation as a long-term collaborative and reflexive process. Simply stated, each of us is involved in the heuristic study in question to learn more about a specific phenomenon we each personally experienced.

You may have strong reactions to certain information your co-researchers share. Human narratives can stir up emotions, thoughts, bodily responses, and other reactions to which you may or may not be alert. Engaging reflexivity and remaining attuned to how you respond to interactions (especially with research partners) and how you process those responses based on your personal values and assumptions is foundational to ethical research. As I mentioned in Chapter 6, countertransference and transference are present in many social encounters and may occur especially frequently in heuristic inquiry due to the personal nature of the topic of inquiry to all members of the research team. Should you experience a countertransference reaction, or should you become aware that a co-researcher is potentially experiencing transference toward you, bring some attention to the temporary shift in your encounter (see Chapter 6 for more). Assess the utility—to the co-researcher, to the study, and to yourself—of disclosing your countertransference. Also, have predetermined support systems in place, for yourself and for co-researchers, so there is minimal blurring of roles during the study.

For example, suppose you are a therapist-researcher and during a study interview a co-researcher experiences distress. You may feel the urge to embrace your therapist role and provide therapeutic care for this co-researcher. In fact, not doing so may cause you extreme discomfort (Orb, Eisenhauer, & Wynaden, 2001). However, doing so presents an ethical conflict in separating your dual roles of therapist and researcher and can result in serious boundary breaches should you lose your grasp on facilitating the study and, later, struggle to redefine your role. To minimize this type of issue, one support that is regularly offered in psychotherapy-related studies is a referral for low-cost or free therapeutic services provided by an outsider to research partners who experience distress. For research in other disciplines, it may be helpful to suggest or secure the services of a supervisor, consultant, or mentor. Should a seemingly irreconcilable interruption in interaction take place with a research partner, become aware of any discrepancy between your behavior toward that particular research partner compared with your behavior toward others, as well as any conflicts of interest that arise. Review relevant ethical guidelines and codes, engage an ethical decision-making model, consult with an external auditor or peer reviewer, and consider consulting your review board and, if you are a student, consulting your research advisor.

Being both a psychotherapist and heuristic researcher, I truly believe the success of the heuristic research process lies within warm and supportive researcher–research partner relationships. As researchers, it is our task to maintain proper boundaries that serve to protect both co-researchers and ourselves, and to remain alert to fluctuating patterns of the power differential (see Chapter 7 for more information). It is simply a matter of maintaining the balance on the subjectivity∞objectivity continuum, although maintaining that balance is hardly a simple matter, as it demands constant attention. Maintaining I∞Thou interaction within the framework of professional conduct is

critical while being mindful not to impose unwanted relationship dynamics on research partners and to respectfully and nonjudgmentally explore any seemingly boundary-breaching exchanges. You will publicly share some of the intimate accounts co-researchers freely shared with you, which may lead some of them to feel deceived (McGinn, 2008) or exploited. Again, reflexive, self-aware engagement with all aspects of your study, review of ethical codes and standards, and consistent, authentic dialogue with co-researchers will help you bring interpersonal dynamics back to balance.

Transparency

We discussed the matter of transparency in heuristic research in Chapters 8 and 9 within the context of evaluating the study and writing the research manuscript. However, transparency is a far more complex issue that transcends the parameters of evaluation and writing. From an ethical perspective, transparency encompasses sharing information about the goals and expectations of the study with co-researchers, as well as exploring and exchanging information about the role of each member of the research team. It also involves revealing your personal agenda and inviting (but not coercing) your co-researchers to explore and disclose the same; this includes information about funding or conflicts of interest. From a structural standpoint, being transparent means including details about the research methodology and design, as well as relating and reporting the research process and findings accurately (Braun & Clarke, 2013) and discussing the strengths and limitations of your study (Preissle, 2008).

Researcher Competence

Heuristic inquiry is a fairly obscure qualitative research methodology (I'm selfishly hoping this will soon change!). It's very possible you've never conducted a formal heuristic study, although it's quite possible you have conducted many informally. If you are contemplating conducting a formal heuristic study (I imagine you might be, if you are reading this book), please allow yourself an opportunity to apply the heuristic methodology in an informal exploration first. Find a topic that is near to you—a phenomenon that you have experienced and that has haunted you since time immemorial and just won't let you be—and spend some time exploring it through the heuristic lens. Pretend you are conducting a formal study and go through the various processes and phases, documenting your experience in a journal. Get a feel for the terrain and vibe of this very unique research approach before plunging into a formal study.

Addressing Emergent Ethical Dilemmas

I use the word *emergent* intentionally; anything can come up in a heuristic study! Earlier in the chapter, we discussed decision making and consequences.

You may have noticed that when I mentioned the ethical dilemma that emerged surrounding the request from one of my research partners not to remain confidential, I did not offer a resolution. In fact, I deliberately refrained from mentioning my course of action. When an ethical dilemma arises, there are usually no clear answers, which is why you have an ethical dilemma. Instead of telling you what I decided, let's review some actions you can take to facilitate your deliberation and decision-making processes, including consulting discipline-related ethical codes, using ethical decision-making models, and engaging reflexivity.

Consulting Discipline-Related Ethical Codes

Earlier in this chapter, we went over the ethical principles of ACA as documented in the *ACA Code of Ethics*, and I provided a list of a few other discipline-related ethical codes. Upon your first encounter with an ethical dilemma, seek out an ethical code from your discipline or from a similar discipline if your profession does not have its own code. Reading through discipline-related ethical codes clarifies a profession's stance and will help you decipher discrepancies between that profession's standards and your own attitudes. Ethical codes provide us with a standardized set of ethical considerations that help us maintain consistency in deliberation and decision making.

Using an Ethical Decision-Making Model

Making moral judgments is a fairly common human experience fueled by our desire to make sense of issues that are challenging for us to comprehend. Because morals are usually informed by social norms, it may seem appropriate to make a moral judgment surrounding an emergent ethical dilemma. However, making moral judgments brings personal biases, values, and attitudes center stage in the decision-making process, minimizing and marginalizing other perspectives. As heuristic researchers, we already have high stakes in the research study we are facilitating and guiding. To create some balance between our personal interests and the interests of others involved in the study, and with the study itself, it's helpful to have a guiding structure for ethical decision making. Ethical decision-making models exist for a number of socially oriented disciplines. For example, in the counseling profession, we have a variety of ethical decision-making models from which to select, including the social constructivist model (Cottone, 2001) and the transcultural integrative model (Garcia, Cartwright, Winston, & Borzuchowska, 2003). Since I used the *ACA Code of Ethics* earlier in the chapter as an example of a discipline-related ethical code, I'd also like to offer you an at-a-glance breakdown of an ethical decision-making model from the counseling profession (Forester-Miller & Davis, 2016) to demonstrate the general structure of such models and their utility in working through ethical dilemmas you may encounter in a heuristic study:

1. Identify the problem.
2. Apply the *ACA Code of Ethics* (or a code of ethics of relevance to the topic or discipline of your study).
3. Determine the nature and dimensions of the dilemma.
4. Generate potential courses of action.
5. Consider the potential consequences of all options, and determine a course of action.
6. Evaluate the selected course of action.
7. Implement the course of action.

To this and any other ethical decision-making model from any other discipline or profession, I would add the following:

- Apply any relevant legal codes (e.g., national, federal, state, provincial).
- Seek consultation from peers, experts, or ethics task forces.
- Document every phase and action of your ethical decision-making process.

Using an ethical decision-making model lends structure and accountability to your ethical decision-making approach, enhancing the overall transparency and rigor of your study.

Engaging Researcher Reflexivity

I recognize that I've mentioned reflexivity numerous times in this chapter and repeatedly throughout this book. However, I cannot stress enough the importance of this process to ethical heuristic research. As you work with reflexivity during your study, I strongly recommend using such heuristic processes as self-dialogue, tacit knowing, intuition, and focusing. To facilitate reflexivity while pondering an emergent ethical issue, below are some questions with which you can begin your work:

- What do I *think* is the central ethical issue? What do I *sense* is the central ethical issue? How do I make sense of any disparity?
- If/when I present this concern to another person, what does he view as the central issue?
- Who are the individuals involved in this dilemma, and what are their roles?

- What is my general understanding and/or sense of how this dilemma is impacting them?
- Are all those involved allowed to voice their perspective? Why or why not?
- If there is a potential for harm, who is at risk of being harmed, how, and to what identifiable degree?
- Have I done everything possible to minimize risk?
- What is the social/cultural backdrop of this dilemma?
- What decision-making process do I plan to use? How did I go about selecting this particular process in lieu of other approaches for decision making? Am I taking a purely cognitive approach, or am I engaging other ways?
- What do I need, both personally and professionally, from this study, and what role might my need be playing in this dilemma?
- How am I constructing and co-constructing new knowledge through this ethical dilemma?
- Have I done everything I can to support my own and others' ethical conduct?
- Are the rights, dignity, and worth of all individuals involved being considered?
- Will any decisions I make promote justice and empowerment? What other benefits might each member of the research team, including myself, reap?
- Did my co-researchers have opportunities to ask questions and participate in decision making?
- How am I assessing the rightness or goodness of my choices? Am I thinking those choices through? Am I allowing space for emotions and felt sense?
- From a *cognitive* perspective, is this methodology still appropriate for my topic? What about from a *felt sense* perspective?

Now let's take this reflexive exploration one step further in an exercise that offers you an opportunity to experiment with ethical dilemma scenarios using some of the methods discussed above, including referring to an ethical code, applying an ethical decision-making model, and engaging reflexivity (see Exercise 10.1). Although the dilemma scenarios are categorized by topic, the foci of the ethical issues and concerns may overlap.

EXERCISE 10.1

EXPLORING AND ADDRESSING EMERGENT ETHICAL DILEMMAS IN HEURISTIC RESEARCH

- *Confidentiality.* In your study of the experience of resentment toward one's siblings, a co-researcher reveals that her experience of resentment is so consuming, she has considered poisoning her brother. You explore the issue further and realize she has not only considered sibling homicide but has a plan for carrying it out.
- *Participation and withdrawal.* In your study of the experience of sexual harassment in occupational settings, you have collected and analyzed data for your study when a co-researcher decides he is uneasy about what he has shared during the interview process. He informs you that he is considering withdrawing but doesn't want to compromise the study. He seeks your opinion, stating that it is an important part of his decision making, as he feels torn. You are aware that this co-researcher's data provided support for an unanticipated theme that emerged in one other co-researcher's data.
- *Relational boundaries.* In your study of the experience of poverty in early childhood, a co-researcher first affirms your autobiographical experience of childhood poverty, then challenges you to prove that your poverty, or the poverty of any of the other research partners, was more desperate than hers. To amplify the challenge, she provides additional information about factors that complicated her poverty, including sexual and emotional abuse, homelessness, substance addiction, and a pregnancy at the age of 14. In the midst of your dialogue, this co-researcher breaks down into inconsolable sobbing.
- *Compensation.* You are considering conducting a study to explore the experience of living with chronic back pain and for which you require outside funding. A potential funder offers two methods of sponsorship: (a) a cash grant to support your research expenses and (b) participation of all members of the research team (including you) in a 6-month clinical trial of a new pain medication. This funder lays down the condition that you must accept both methods of support simultaneously; that is, you cannot accept only the cash grant and decline the clinical trial. No other funders have come forward, and without external funding, you cannot proceed with your study.

The Perils of Researching Sensitive Topics: Maintaining Researcher Well-Being

Qualitative research suffers a questionable reputation among other research methods due primarily to its subjective, personal approach. Unfortunately, select forms of qualitative research that include the personal experience of the researcher (such as autoethnography and heuristic inquiry) suffer such a reputation even among some qualitative research traditions, with accusations such as *self-centered*, *narcissistic*, and *self-indulgent* leveled against researchers who embrace such methodologies. Despite this, and despite the history of risk assessment in research being focused on the experience of co-researchers (Liamputtong, 2007), there is rising interest in the emotional demands of qualitative research and the impact on researchers (Dickson-Swift, James, Kippen, & Liamputtong, 2008, 2009; Lee & Lee, 2012). One reason behind this is that the researcher's state of being reflects on co-researchers, other individuals participating in the study (such as peer reviewers), and the study itself.

While researchers stand to gain from conducting studies about personal and emotional topics, adverse reactions inevitably emerge within the shared space between researcher and co-researchers—within the I=Thou of intersubjectivity. Some of the many emotions researchers may experience include fear, anger, disgust, helplessness, vulnerability, and grief. Yet those emotions are as much a part of the research as any other elements. Denzin (2007) encouraged the use of both cognitive and emotional information to attain understanding. On the other hand, heuristic inquiry demands engaging the multidimensional self, transcending the cognitive and emotional, and including the sensory=kinesthetic, the perceptual, the spiritual, and the social=relational in the pursuit of new knowledge. With that in mind, heuristic researchers may, in addition to cognitive and emotional symptoms, experience physical symptoms, sensory and perceptual incongruities, and spiritual and relational disconnection. This exerts taxing pressure on researchers, especially as they are tasked with carrying out most duties associated with the study, including data collection=organization=analysis and transcription (which demands that we relive our co-researchers' narratives over and over).

As a psychotherapist who specializes in trauma and grief, I am all too familiar with terms such as *vicarious trauma*, *compassion fatigue*, and *burnout*. Vicarious trauma is a transformation in therapists' inner experience resulting from empathic reaction to clients' traumatic experiences (Adams & Riggs, 2008; Sultan, 2017a). It places therapists in the situation of living the clients' experiences as if they were the therapists' own. Compassion fatigue is a similar condition but is caused by preoccupation with client concerns (Sultan, 2017a). Symptoms of compassion fatigue include apathy, desensitization, repressed emotions, and isolation (Figley, 2002). Burnout is a condition instigated by a combination of numerous physical and emotional concerns that may jeopardize therapist efficacy and well-being (Lee, Cho, Kissinger, & Ogle, 2010).

As a mental health practitioner and human ready to embark on a heuristic research endeavor, I had researched, written about, and personally experienced vicarious trauma, compassion fatigue, and burnout. Tasked with exploring poignant and often distressing human experiences, I guessed that one or more of these phenomena might make an appearance during my dissertation study (Sultan, 2015). I substituted *researcher* for *therapist* and *co-researcher* for *client*, and thought I had things in the box. This was especially true because I *am* a therapist and planned to research other therapists' experiences of embodiment, a phenomenon that is fairly acknowledged among body psychotherapists (i.e., my study population). So what could possibly go wrong? I discounted the countless informal explorations of human phenomena I had carried out heuristically throughout my lifetime (as poignant and consuming as they were) as insignificant and irrelevant, assuring myself that because I was conducting a formal study, I would manage to hold things together. *This will be different*, I told myself. I should say, I deceived myself!

As my co-researchers and I embarked on our co-exploration of the experience of embodiment in body psychotherapists and impact on clients, a number of topics emerged immediately and repeatedly, including accounts of divorce, chronic physical illness, mental illness, immigration, isolation, loss of a sense of identity, dissociation, social marginalization, and the suicide of family members. Many of these accounts told of the shared experience between therapists and clients as mediated by therapist embodiment. My triggering began with the first interview. Thankfully, I had a lengthy break between my first and second interviews. However, following the second interview, I got into a frenzy of transcribing, organizing, and analyzing in an effort to remain on task (or maybe I was distracting myself?). By the third interview, I was reeling from emotional exhaustion, and I recognized I was experiencing symptoms similar to those I had suffered during my counseling training as I worked with parents who had lost children—and with children who had lost parents, siblings, grandparents, and family friends—to suicide, homicide, chronic illness, or sudden death. My symptoms included crippling pain in my neck, shoulders, and upper back and incessant ringing in my ears, coupled with leaps between emotional numbing, crying spells, and feelings of social isolation. By the fourth interview, I felt insecure in myself and my ability, both as a researcher and as a therapist. I questioned the purpose of my research, of my doctoral studies, of wanting to be a counselor educator, and of being a therapist.

Because our profession is highly supervision- and consultation-friendly, I sought support from each member of my dissertation committee (all of whom are licensed mental health practitioners). Each of them provided me a unique support approach, which helped me get fully back on track. I also created some space for incubation by distancing myself briefly from further data collection, immersed myself in journaling, took lengthy walks in nature, and amped up my meditation and body movement practice. It didn't take long for me to recover, and I plunged back into the study, telling myself that

I now knew what to expect and how to address whatever came up. During my second-to-last interview, I hit another wall with an especially heartrending account that rekindled memories of loss, inconsolable grief, and feelings of guilt and shame. This was when I recognized just how vulnerable heuristic research can leave us. It wasn't until then that I realized that due to the time constraints imposed by the research and other professional and personal commitments, I had not visited my therapist in several months. I knew it was time for me to take that next step.

As you can see, despite being a therapist with the supposed know-how of handling human suffering, my heuristic research journey was laden with challenges. What helped keep me in check was consultation, personal counseling, journaling, and other strategies for minimizing risk and attending to self-care. Regardless of your discipline and due to the highly subjective nature of topics undertaken through heuristic studies, you may experience similar challenges. Formal strategies for minimizing risk usually involve others and may include the following:

- Enhanced heuristic research training with a seasoned qualitative researcher or proficient heuristic researcher
- For nonclinical researchers, training in basic counseling skills and concepts (with the caution that retaining such skills may also present an opposite effect)
- Peer debriefing and mentoring (minimal level of structure)
- Supervision and consultation (higher level of structure)
- Allowing space between interviews

Strategies for attending to self-care tend to be more individually oriented and may include the following:

- Personal counseling
- Journaling or art journaling (some experiences may be too challenging to process verbally)
- Mindfulness
- Mindfulness-oriented journaling (Sultan, 2017a)
- Meditation
- Spiritual practices (e.g., chanting, prayer, fasting, gratitude)
- Body movement
- Social and informal support networking
- Maintaining a healthy work–life balance

Finally, I'd like to invite you to become an advocate for researcher risk awareness. Perhaps your upcoming heuristic study is an opportunity to begin a conversation with your review board about the perils of researching human experience using the whole self as an instrument. It may also be an occasion for members of such boards to realize that though the path of a heuristic journey is labyrinthine and murky, it embraces and affirms the blemished magnificence of being human.

Closing Reflections

When ethical issues emerge during the course of a heuristic study, you may struggle with the threat of losing your direction. Do not abandon the process. Explore and gain a clear understanding of your ethical dilemma. Follow the ethical guidelines of your discipline or profession to gain clarity on where to direct your focus. Engage an ethical decision-making model as well as various processes of heuristic inquiry reflexively. Also, remain in dialogue with research partners and other individuals, such as peer reviewers or mentors. Consultation is key to conducting ethical research, is a collaborative approach that aligns with the relational nature of heuristic inquiry, and should be part of exploring any ethical decision-making process. Keep in mind, however, that you are tasked with making the final decisions.

Decision making will hardly ever be a straightforward or clean-cut process and will depend in large part on the nature of the dilemma. To avoid frustration, keep in mind that there are no straight or right answers. Simply put, there are no elegant endings or resolutions to ethical dilemmas. With that, as with all other aspects of heuristic inquiry, working through ethical dilemmas demands attention, rigor, collaboration, and open and authentic dialogue. Mutual consideration of ethical concerns invites the possibility of mutual tolerance and understanding. Additionally, conducting ethical research demands your keen awareness of how you are interacting with the various phases of the study and especially of any triggers you may experience while engaging with potentially traumatic co-researcher narratives. Researcher well-being impacts the overall health and success of a heuristic study and can be maintained through self-awareness and proactive measures that minimize potentially damaging emergent content- and interaction-related issues. Again, mutual dialogue and self-care practices open doors for self- and other-understanding, clarity, and integration. Nestled within the challenge of conflict lies the gift of imperfection, offering the opportunity for growth and transformation!