



Reflections and challenges on the importance of ethics in socioeducational research

Reflexiones y desafíos sobre la importancia de la ética en la investigación socioeducativa

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Abstract

This article aims to address a theoretical-reflexive work that facilitates understanding the state of the ethical question in socio-educational research from a qualitative perspective. Faced with the predominance of quantitative research in universities at both the international and national level, we are committed to qualitative research from the perspective of Critical Pedagogies. In this way, it is understood that education and research can transform reality and a fundamental aspect of analysis is the ethical question. Firstly, key ideas about research in the socio-educational field from a qualitative perspective at the University will be addressed. Secondly, the historical view of ethics in socio-educational research will be analysed. Thirdly, it will point out key ethical issues in socio-educational research from a qualitative perspective. Fourthly, it will reflect on research competence in education, including both challenges and opportunities that we are currently facing in universities. Challenges such as the collective construction of knowledge; the need to consider the intersectionalities of gender, race, social class, etc.; the care of all the people involved in research processes. In conclusion, the political and ethical relevance of any socio-educational research process is highlighted, underlining the need to continue reflecting on this issue in relation to the construction of a participatory model that focuses on the care of the people involved.

Keywords: research, university, research ethics, qualitative methods, research competence, education professionals.

Resumen

Este artículo pretende abordar un trabajo teórico-reflexivo que facilita entender el estado de la cuestión ética en la investigación socioeducativa desde una perspectiva cualitativa. Frente al predominio de las investigaciones cuantitativas en las universidades tanto a nivel internacional como nacional, apostamos por una investigación cualitativa desde las Pedagogías Críticas. De esta manera se entiende que desde la educación e investigación se puede transformar la realidad y un aspecto fundamental de análisis es la cuestión ética. En un primer lugar, se abordarán ideas claves sobre la investigación en el ámbito socioeducativo desde la perspectiva cualitativa en la universidad. En segundo lugar, se analizará la visión histórica de la ética en la investigación socioeducativa. En tercer lugar, se señalarán aspectos éticos claves en la investigación socioeducativa desde la perspectiva cualitativa. En cuarto lugar, se reflexionará sobre la competencia investigadora en la educación incluyendo tanto desafíos como oportunidades a los que nos estamos enfrentando actualmente en las universidades. Retos como la construcción colectiva del conocimiento; la necesidad de considerar las interseccionalidades de género, raza, clase social, etc.; el cuidado de todas las personas implicadas en los procesos de investigación. En conclusión, se destaca la relevancia política y ética de todo proceso de investigación socioeducativa. Es fundamental mantener la reflexión sobre esta cuestión en relación con la construcción de un modelo participativo que priorice el cuidado de las personas involucradas.

Palabras clave: investigación, universidad, ética de la investigación, métodos cualitativos, competencia investigadora, profesionales de la educación.

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1. Introduction

It is true that there is a predominance of quantitative research in high-impact publications in Spain, however, there is also a commitment to qualitative research due to its contribution to educational research (Fernández-Navas et al., 2021). Research in the socio-educational field is increasingly taking center stage in an academic space more concerned with addressing problems, tensions, that may arise throughout the research processes and when making decisions about them (González et al., 2012; Opazo, 2016; Pascual-Arias and López-Pastor, 2024; Suárez, 2017). In addition, education and research in Social Sciences can play a fundamental role in developing democratic societies (Levy et al., 2023). In this regard, we want to point out that we understand research as a political and committed act (Darretxe et al., 2020; Murillo & Duck, 2018), because we defend a critical, dialogic-constructive and responsible academy and it is in this context that it is necessary to refer to ethics. In this sense, the university's task is also the ethical and political formation (Ramírez-Pardo, 2012) and, therefore, the formation of the deontological culture of the students (Vainola & Khliestova, 2017). Therefore, critical pedagogies allow to reconstruct new meanings marking their transformative potential (Ramírez-Pardo, 2012), since we understand that it is about generating processes of co-construction of knowledge together with the groups involved from the field of Critical Pedagogy (Visotsky, 2020).

In this line, an important frame of reflection and generation of knowledge regarding the importance of ethics in research is the whole perspective of critical and decolonial research (Avila Camargo, 2014; Dominguez, 2018; Francis, 2023; Guelman & Palumbo, 2018; Kvietok et al., 2022), which guides us to see beyond rankings and meritocracies, making us ask questions as relevant as: what are we investigating?, for what reason?, with whom?, in what way?. In addition, the importance of collecting other relevant approaches that help us to situate us times plagued by uncertainties, such as those of a feminist science of the "transition, unstable, reflexive, critical, uncomfortable, destabilizing" (Deharde, 2020, p.175), that put their objectives in change, questioning hegemonic models that perpetuate inequalities and distancing us from democratic spaces of knowledge construction and fairer societies.

2. Historical view of ethics in socio-educational research

Considering this issue from a historical perspective, it is necessary to refer to some sources by their importance and imprint they have left in the various proposals in this area. As Hirsch and Navia (2018) point out, the ethics of research with human beings has its origin and has been specially developed by the Health Sciences. From this field, it has been expanding, considering and developing in other areas. De Miguel (2021) places the beginnings in the Social Sciences from the decades of the 70s and 80s of the last century, with the constitution of ethical committees and various declarations that will investigate and demarcate the question. However, the starting point that we must consider in the current vision of ethical issues has a dramatic origin, having to refer first to the Code of Nuremberg (International Tribunal of Nuremberg, 1947). This document is a consequence of the abuses that occurred against people in biomedical experiments during World War II, outlining the first criteria regarding the question of biomedical research with humans. It meant the internationalization and socialization of this issue. The document identified essential aspects that should be taken into account, such as voluntary consent or the preponderance of the rights of the individual over the research itself. This code has been the main foundation of the research, theorizing, codes and protocols on Bioethics that have been developed.

Subsequently, the Belmont Report (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979) that contains a series of principles and guidelines to facilitate the protection of participants, basic ethical standards that provide a methodical framework to solve these problems: limits between practice and research; basic ethical principles; and applications. In addition, it provides another set of principles that are relevant: respect for people, charity and justice, based on the acceptance of these by the very "cultural tradition" in which we find ourselves. The *respect* to the person implies, on the one hand, the recognition and respect of his autonomy, i.e., the capacity of deliberation, of decision and of action that each subject has on his actions as long as it does not imply damage or prejudice to other people. On the other hand, it also refers to the protection of people whose autonomy is dimi-

nished. Issues such as denying information in order to be able to act in full consequence, for example, violates this principle. The second basic aspect is *charity*, which is understood as the obligation not to produce any damage and “to maximize the possible benefits and reduce the possible damages” (p. 3). The principle of confidentiality or professionalism in not prosecuting the information provided by the person who collaborates as an informant in the investigation, for example, must be framed within this idea of charity.

Finally, *justice* relates to two other issues. One refers to the selection of subjects and whether this selection is made with a criterion based on the study problem or if there is another reason (ease of obtaining consent, coercion, easily manipulable subjects...); the other issue, implies that the discoveries made are not for a group or sector exclusively, but extend to the whole set of people who can benefit from it. These principles in research thus entail informed consent (Meo, 2010), benefit and risk assessment, and the selection of subjects as requirements of the research designs and processes. Informed consent means that subjects are given the choice. The procedure involves three elements: information, understanding and voluntariness, i.e., that all information is transmitted and that nothing is hidden; that this information is fully understood, clarified and explained so that it is totally understandable, and it is the responsibility of the person who investigates to ensure all this. In addition, it implies that the potential participant is free from any possible coercion and is fully informed.

The assessment of risks and benefits will condition the decision of potential participants to take part in the project. It involves an assessment of nature as well as its systematic assessment. This must be related to the protection of personal data or the confidentiality of the information they provide. As the report points out, the damages can have diverse nature: psychological, legal, social damage, etc. and can affect both the subject and his environment or the group that belongs to the selected sample. From the perspective of benefits, these can be individual or group as well, but they will always have to be greater than the possible risks encountered. In any case, all this is always limited by the protection of the rights of which the participant is the holder.

The selection of subjects concerns the dimension of justice. Its relevance is given to two levels: social and individual. At the individual level, it

should be considered that the researcher will not make a selection based on personal preferences conditioned by the subject to be investigated, i.e., to choose affectively close subjects in the case of a “potentially beneficial” investigation or to choose “undesirable” subjects in the case of more dangerous or risky investigations. Regarding the social level, it is proposed that the selection should assess who should participate and who should not in relation to “the ability of members of that class to carry burdens and as appropriate to add other burdens to people already burdened” (p. 7), thinking about populations or groups that, due to their personal or environmental characteristics, have less advantageous conditions than others when participating (prisoners, family obligations, racialized minorities, sick people, ...) and assessing, also, who will be more benefited from the results. Even if the researcher is completely impartial and the Ethical Committee approves this selection, injustices in the selection can occur as a result of “social, racial, sexual and cultural biases that are institutionalized in society” (p. 7). We find that current works such as Armijo and Willat (2022), continue to take the Belmont Report as a reference.

Another document of interest is the project *Educating Staff in Community Agencies about Human Subjects Protection in Research* (Training Community Agency Staff in Human Protection in Research), which is based on the *Belmont Report*. Conducted by the *Office of Research Integrity* (2004), it provides a series of guidelines and guidance on ethics and community research. As they point out, research involves understanding the world and trying to improve it, and in turn, if it is carried out with human beings, it entails a series of responsibilities that must be guided from an ethical perspective that allows us to act in the right way, respecting all the rights of the people involved. The project presents a research protocol that starts from three general issues: recruitment of participants, confidentiality and professionalism. This protocol clearly resolves important issues regarding the role of the investigator, both during the process and after completion. In its development and level of specification-clarification, there is a clear reflection and deepening on many of the issues that should be considered during the design of any project, and to which should be answered initially before being carried out. Table 1 presents the three aspects and their key points:

Table 1. Key elements of the training of staff of Community bodies on the protection of human beings in research

Recruitment of Participants	1) People may be found to be suspicious of research; 2) The recruitment process is part of research; 3) Everyone has the right to refuse; 4) Seeking informed consent is a sign that participants are treated with respect; 5) People participating in research are often in a vulnerable situation; 6) Even the simplest research tools such as questionnaires, interviews and focus groups can cause harm.
Confidentiality	1) Keep information private; 2) Disclosing confidential information could have serious effects; 3) It is harder to collect intimate information if the person being investigated is known; 4) Confidentiality should last a lifetime; 5) People only go to agencies where they are treated with respect and feel safe; 6) Information acquired during the investigation should not be published. Keep it confidential; 7) Break confidentiality rules if we know that someone intends to harm themselves or another person.
Professionalism	1) Be aware of the role of the researcher in the Community; 2) Maintain appropriate boundaries; 3) Each and every one of us is responsible for our conduct; 4) Those who participate in research are people whose experiences and knowledge of life have much value; 5) Do not promise more than can be offered; 6) Be very aware of the risks to which we are exposed as researchers.

Note. Own elaboration adapted from Office of Research Integrity (2004).

Finally, we must refer to the Declaration of Helsinki, finding in 1964 its first version, and which has been revised over the last few years (last official version of 2013). The WMA Declaration of Helsinki – Ethical Principles for Medical Research in Human Beings is made by the World Medical Association (WMA). Although it is mainly intended for medical professionals, it contains sections that endorse what was stated in the Belmont Report and that, we believe, are also applicable to research in the Social Sciences. For this reason, it is important to collect those that we consider applicable to social research and see their concordance or similarity with the other sources presented.

In this way, this Declaration, from its general principles, affects how research is subject to ethical rules that must protect all people and that, this right, is always above any objective or purpose of any work of this nature. Confidentiality, privacy and informed consent must be ensured in all aspects. It speaks of the importance of voluntary participation, which can be invalidated at any time without suffering any retaliation; how participants should be properly informed in all relevant aspects of the investigation and making sure that they have understood all the information, so it is essential to consider the specific needs they may have and adapt to them. Aspects such as dissemination and publication are also subject to the ethical dimension, both the integrity and accuracy of the written, and the availability of these research to the public, sources of funding and affiliation. It also points to the need to publish negative results as positive or inconclusive or, where appro-

priate, to make them publicly available and to give participants the option to be informed of the results.

In this document, the reference to the role of the Ethics Committees also becomes relevant, as well as the issues referred to with the dissemination and publication of results, another of the main axes on which research should pivot, especially when we refer to the participants. Related to this, we collect what Yu et al. (2022) point out regarding the need to safeguard the independence of the academic and scientific bodies of the States and their related spaces. The question of the ethical dimension at the highest levels and their responsibility is undoubtedly essential and should not be left out of the debate.

3. Ethical aspects in socio-educational research from a qualitative perspective

Research personnel using qualitative methodologies are often faced with having their study designs questioned by research ethics review committees or funding agencies (Ells, 2011). Furthermore, decision-making on the ethics of qualitative research is a challenge when research design is emerging and the balance between risks and benefits for people involved in research is still difficult to determine before the implementation of the study (Ramcharan & Cutcliffe, 2001).

However, ethics in socio-educational research is related to the criteria of the scientific nature of qualitative research. This question involves fundamental matters to be taken into account. As Hortiguëla et al. (2017) indicate in the current model

of scientific production, the quantity is valued more than the quality and the real contribution of the contributions, which conditions both the way of doing and of understanding the own science and leads to underline the importance of the ethical dimension in this area. In qualitative social research, the ethical dimension should focus, at least, in the academic debate (Abad, 2016). It should not be forgotten, as different works collected by Yurén et al. (2018) point out, research ethics is usually left as a value that would be below the technical-methodological competences and epistemological positioning. In this way, we must understand that ethics is indissoluble from personal qualities (Cardona, 2020).

Therefore, we must place ethics in socio-educational research as a cardinal factor since the fundamental object of research is the people. This implies the existence of issues that emerge during the process that must be questioned and answered also from an ethical perspective. Arias and Giraldo (2011) point out that qualitative research consider both the role of values and the existence of an ideological bias that mediates throughout the research process, which forces to have the ethical element present. De Miguel (2021) emphasizes that the production of knowledge is always a political act and therefore it requires taking responsibility, thus questioning the supposed positivist objectivity. Gómez and Molina (2006), regarding ethics and responsibility, indicate that the established ethical rules and regulations should not only be known, but should be internalized, leading us to a reflexive process about our work in research and the effects of our actions, demanding responsibility. This responsibility involves three aspects (Arias & Giraldo, 2011): a duty to do well; awareness of the possible consequences; and the obligation to respond to someone. Sandín (2003) relates the validity and credibility aspects of qualitative research with the necessary consideration of ethical implications, considering that both are inextricably linked. The author emphasizes that the work with people—through meetings, interviews, participation and cooperation, among others—i.e., the relational nature of the methodology, confirms and manifests this interrelationship between both issues. Many of the decisions that are made strategically, practically or methodologically are, finally, ethical questions. Finally, for Nancy Walton (2016), there are three objectives of ethics in research processes: protection

of participants; that research responds to the interests of people, groups and society; and the validation of an activity from an ethical perspective, considering elements such as risk, confidentiality and informed consent (Walton, 2016 in Hirsch & Navia, 2018).

In the educational field, Sandín (2003) considers that there are three main ethical issues in the qualitative research process: informed consent; privacy and confidentiality; and stay in the field. On the latter, the author refers to two issues: the *process of negotiation of entry* and the *type of relations* that are established. Regarding admission, it is proposed how to access sources of information in a space that is usually structured hierarchically, such as educational centers. On the relational aspect, it emphasizes both the importance of presentation and the clear explanation of intentions. It can be observed that all the aspects raised must be included both in the reports and in the statements made, being in the hands of those who investigate the obligation to carry out their work under these ethical approaches, not as dogma, but as human and investigative coherence that strengthens the own result of the investigation. As Rodríguez et al. (1996) state, the ethical component supposes “a guarantee of moral integrity” (p. 278) of the investigators.

4. Research competence in education: challenges and opportunities

The consideration of ethical principles in social and educational research must be unquestionable and a principle required in any research that has as a means and as an end the people. A small vision of its origins and development place us in front of issues that betray its importance. In this approach, we have seen how the language is changing, and this same language is the one that configures any reality, including ethics. Thus, we see a fundamental qualitative leap between the *Belmont Report* and the *Educating Staff in Community Agencies about Human Subjects Protection in Research*. The basis is provided by the *Belmont Report*, but the following document no longer talks about informing subjects, but about participants, going from being an object to a person with whom one interacts in a dialog to contribute knowledge, giving way to a collective construction of that knowledge, result of the interaction (De Miguel, 2021). As Abad (2016) points out, a review of both

procedures and ethical assessment criteria is necessary and must be adapted to the different realities and different moments of the research processes beyond standardized protocols or models that are repeated mechanically (Yurén et al., 2018). In this way, when referring to this necessary revision of the proposals and models, the realities that are gaining relevance in each time and space cannot be ignored, which must oblige to review both the epistemological and methodological aspects and any other nature that relate to this ethical dimension. As a clear example, we can mention the debates regarding artificial intelligence (AI). Firat and Kuleli (2024) refer to some works that question the lack of transparency of its structure, presenting it as “contrary to the movement towards transparency and science” (p. 225), which places us before new ethical challenges regarding new situations that are totally conditioned by new means and that, in turn, advance faster than the processes of reflection that should be promoted regarding its uses and functions.

Given all this, there are new issues to consider, reflecting the changes that are happening in our nearest world, and that have taken on special relevance making its way also, in this issue. Authors such as Sandra Harding and Donna Haraway (cited in Aguilar, 2008; Deharbe, 2020) point out the existence of an anthropocentric view of the sciences and that conditions them in all its elements. Thus, the very norms of knowledge, among which we must include ethical postulates, would be biased by this construct. Faced with this, a feminist science is positioned and proposed, with an emancipatory objective and, therefore, possessing a social responsibility, committed and critical, without being able to situate itself or present itself as independent of politics or relativism. These postulates go further, and also refer to the existence of other intersectionalities that must be considered in addition to gender, such as those of race or class.

Authors such as Vigoya (2016), point to another series of intersectionalities related to the aforementioned ones (race, ethnicity, religion...) that condition the life and social position of people or collectives. This author presents intersectionality as a tool of analysis that allows to see these categories and their interrelationships, identifying inequalities or privileges from the interrelationship of these. Following this, Arias and Giraldo (2011), briefly

collect a proposal made by Mauthner et al. (2002), which “diminishes the emphasis on laws and principles” and that decision-making is based on the “feminist ethics of care” (p. 511). Gender is something in which we must deepen more in the field of socio-educational research and the ethical dimension, not forgetting its importance (Blázquez, 2012; García and Ruiz, 2021; Jiménez, 2021). As Conesa and González (2018) point out, in recent years in scientific institutions there are organizational changes more related to competitive models that, in turn, entail all kinds of pressures and tensions in those who bet on developing work in this area. Thus, they raise the importance of relying on models based on feminist approaches, in which the ethics of care takes on a relevant importance in the ways of doing and being, a substantial change in what that production of knowledge also means. At the same time, in relation to other intertwined issues such as the importance of gender equity (Salinas Boldo, 2018), other intersectionalities linked to this, such as race and social class, conditioned by existing power relations, should not be ignored (de Miguel, 2021; Montecinos et al., 2023). How these elements are combined, also indicate the own vision of the research model and how we stand before it from the same research design and all its elements.

In addition to what has been pointed out, as Hirsch and Navia (2018) indicate in their research, although these protocols or proposals on ethics focus on promoting the protection of participants, they remind us that it may be equally important to consider the protection of those who investigate, given that there are contexts in which security is not always guaranteed. As Armijo and Willatt (2022) say, there is a tension between protection and participation that must be considered and must be resolved in an ethical way. Some of these issues are already covered in some protocols as seen, but they also require reconsideration. Firstly, due to the importance of the hierarchy relationships that exist between participants and the researcher, but also with respect to the spaces in which the research is carried out, remembering that they must be of security and trust (De Miguel, 2021). It should not be forgotten that not every person who investigates is in that position or place, for many different reasons that can be related to diverse issues such as power relations, gender, the subject of research, or the place in which it deve-

lops (de Miguel, 2021; Martínez-López et al., 2022; Montecinos et al., 2023; Pulido, 2017; Yu et al., 2023; Yurén et al., 2018) finding that, in many cases, some or all of these intersectionalities occur at once. Nor can it be forgotten that working in places of conflict, for example, puts at risk not only the work of professionals who seek to contribute with their work, but also their lives. When we talk about issues such as ethics, which traces its current vision to situations that occurred after a world war, it leads us to reflect deeply on these elements that, as they mark their principles, aim to contribute to the improvement of people's lives. In this way, the review and continuous debate on the ethical dimension in research must be continuous and respond to the challenges and relevant questions that are continuously appearing, with the focus on the elements that favor the care of all the people involved from a professional and humanly ethical work and meeting.

Consequently, care requires in-depth analysis. Currently, in the face of the frenetic pace of life in which we find ourselves and the culture of rapidity, Berg and Seeber (2016) reflect on the "Slow" movement in academia, which would also include what is related to research in terms of dedication of time and energy, for example. "The Slow University" is an idea that many supporters need to turn into an international movement (Rosso, 2019). The slow research feminist movement and its care ethic can offer ways forward for all the neoliberal reforms we face (Bergland, 2018). According to Cravens et al. (2022) knowing how to say "no" is an emotional work that involves respecting limits, i.e., saying no as an act of self-care. From self-care ethics itself has a broader, human and necessary reading.

5. Conclusions

Research in the socio-educational field is not exempt from tensions, either due to external factors such as meritocratic issues, or internal factors related to decision-making in the research process. Considering that education is political, and therefore research is also political, the topic of ethics has been analyzed as a fundamental aspect in any research process. There is no doubt that we are facing challenges such as the construction of knowledge in a more participatory and democratic way, counting on all the voices involved in the processes; the need

to consider various intersectionalities that for a long time have been limited to power relations, thus avoiding that many people are silenced from history; and the reflection on the care of both the research group itself and all those people with whom a communication is initiated in the research process.

In short, ethics drives us to think, feel and act, both in the academic and research fields. Therefore, it is essential to continue reflecting on this issue, especially from the point of (inter)action.

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