



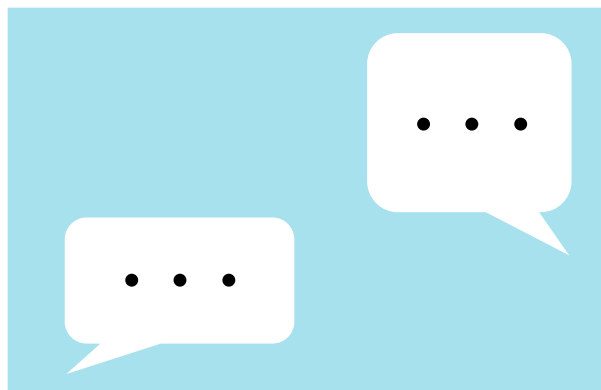
ETHICS IN FEMINIST PARTNERSHIP-BASED AND PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH

A SHARED RESPONSIBILITY

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FOREWARD

The RéQEF (Réseau québécois en études féministes) is a strategic network which brings together researchers and representatives from practice communities involved in this research topic. Its members are from all Québec universities and cover the rich spectrum of disciplines that comprises the feminist studies. In recent years, RéQEF's research ethic committee composed of Myriam Gervais, Francine Descarries and Berthe Lacharité led in-depth discussions among its members on ethic procedures in feminist qualitative research.

As a result of a survey on the ethics review process with its members, it became clear to the Committee that the role of other actors in the research have been overlooked. This observation is particularly problematic given the principles and values that defend feminist partnership-based and participatory research approaches. For instance, research partners can be considered as subjects but at the same time actors in the ethical conduct of research. These have become topics for discussion with representatives of practice communities from the various areas of Québec.

This document presents the key elements of this reflection and highlights the practice communities' perspectives and recommendations on how all research partners can improve their practices on ethics in feminist partnership-based and participatory research projects. The list of its co-authors reflects the participatory nature of the exercise.

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INTRODUCTION

'Who said that ethics belongs to the University?'

Ethics as applied in academia concerns the rights of subjects as well as the obligations of researchers to preserve their anonymity and identify the risks subjects may face by participating in studies.

Feminist qualitative research argues that the ethical implications are not the same depending on the role assumed by the subjects in the research, and according to the specificities of the fields¹. In feminist partnership and participatory research more specifically, subjects (individuals or partners) actively take part in some or all stages of the research.

By modifying the role usually assigned to subjects, this approach effectively involves actors other than researchers in the development and conduct of ethical practices in the research project. It implies that the protection of participants concerns all partners involved in a research project, not just the researchers. This raises the question of whether the day-to-day ethical practice reality matches the principles advocated above? If not, what are the challenges faced and how do we address them? More importantly: who should provide the answers?

¹ Myriam Gervais, Francine Descarries and Berthe Lacharité, *La recherche féministe qualitative avec des êtres humains*, Committee on Ethics in Feminist Research, RÉQEF, Montréal, 2020. [Memorandum to the Panel on Research Ethics of the federal Tri-Agency Research Councils]

The answer to the latter question is informed by the principles of participatory, collaborative, feminist, and community-based research. Accordingly, the issues, questions and solutions presented in this document were raised through knowledge exchange between the research and practice communities in the form of webinars and workshops held in virtual mode, mainly in 2021, in collaboration with Relais-Femmes. More specifically, the discussion was launched around the following topic: "Who said that research ethics belongs to the University?"

Based on the findings and recommendations from these knowledge exchanges (sections 3, 4 and 5), a checklist of ethical issues to consider – reproduced in section 6 – was developed to facilitate a common vision on ethics among research partners. But first, sections 1 and 2 summarize the ethical standards that researchers and institutions must strive to meet as well as the targeted norms of conduct that feminist partnership-based and participatory research approaches must endorse.



1 – ETHICS IN RESEARCH AT A GLANCE

Research ethics are guidelines that inform the codes of conduct in research involving human beings. It aims to protect all parties involved in the research process, such as the researchers and the participants. It relies on the idea that participants have rights and that, consequently, norms of conduct ought to be established to guarantee that their rights are respected:

- a) The subject has the right to decide whether to participate (and the right to withdraw at any time);
- b) The subject has the right to be protected.

As applied in university research settings, researchers are responsible for ensuring ethical conducting projects involving human beings. They have an obligation to obtain their participants' free and informed consent and to ensure the confidentiality of their personal data, as well as to minimize the potential risks associated with their participation in the research.

Free consent: the subject consents fully and voluntarily to participate in the research, without undue influence or coercion from the researchers, with the right to withdraw from the research at any time.

Informed consent: the subject is informed of the research' objectives, of its duration, their rights to withdraw at any time, and of the measures taken regarding their personal data.

[Source: *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans - TCPS2, 2018*]

The following table succinctly summarizes the ethical obligations for projects conducted by academic research communities of all disciplines (human sciences, health sciences, natural sciences, and engineering).

Academic Standards - All field of Studies -
Ethics is the researcher's responsibility.
Free and informed consent must be obtained at the outset of the research.
The anonymity of subjects and the confidentiality of their personal data must be guaranteed and preserved, in the various forms of dissemination of research results (article, thesis, book, report, etc.).
The risks of participation are identified and managed by the researchers. Mitigation measures are described in the application form for ethics certificate and included in the ethics protocol.
The material produced belongs to the researchers as well as the dissemination of the results, but the findings must be communicated to the groups/communities targeted by the research.

Source: Myriam Gervais, Francine Descarries and Berthe Lacharité, *La recherche féministe qualitative avec des êtres humains*, Committee on Ethics in Feminist Research, RéQEF, Montréal, 2020.

These standards were developed based on conventional research models where subjects provide information - quantitative or qualitative - to the researcher through surveys, testimonials, or interviews. The research objectives, data collection, analysis and dissemination remain under the control of the researcher. But *these academic standards do not directly address the rights of subjects (partners or individuals) who participate in defining the research objectives, collecting and interpreting the data*. What responsibilities do they have in identifying risks and taking steps to ensure confidentiality? What role do they play in formulating obligations to respect the rights of subjects? Feminist qualitative research approaches could provide some insights.



2 – ETHICS IN FEMINIST PARTNERSHIP-BASED AND PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH

The quality of the relationship between researchers, partners and participants has always been a central cornerstone of feminist research ethical discussions. The choice of a horizontal approach aims at establishing conditions that are conducive to the participation of subjects in the production of knowledge.

By offering autonomy of action to subjects through research, the most common approaches of feminist research involving human beings consider that scholarly knowledge is not the only source of knowledge. Recognizing the contribution of practical knowledge and lived experiences as scientific sources, the relationship between researchers and participants or partners is thus conceptually based on notions of equity

between the different actors in the research and of respect between different forms of knowledge.

Partnership Research

Research based on an agreement between researchers, or between researchers and a practice environment to document and build knowledge on a given issue or solve a problem. Such research can take different forms depending on the level of involvement of each partner.

Participatory Research

Research based on the experiential knowledge and empowerment of girls and women and that is characterized by the use of collective inquiry with targeted girls and women to generate knowledge and take actions that promote change to their individual and collective conditions.

In feminist partnership and participatory research, subjects have more extensive rights than those provided under current ethics protocols, and the exercise of these rights is based on horizontal relationships between researchers and subjects (i.e., more equal, and less focused on a knowledge hierarchy):

- subjects have the right to express themselves on the studied problem and to exercise their power to act within the research;
- subjects have the right to assess the risks associated with their participation;
- subjects have the right to agree with the researchers on how anonymity and the data privacy policy can be applied;
- subjects have the right to define with the researchers the terms of ownership, use and dissemination of materials produced during the research.²

This key role of research subjects contributes to the enhancement of the ethical environment of the research. Having said this, what does the practice of ethics within feminist partnership or participatory projects tell us? Based on their experiences, the practice settings share in the next section how they have been engaged in the ethical process.

² For more details on feminist participatory research approach, see Myriam Gervais et al., *Guide pour faire de la recherche féministe participative*, 2018 (This handbook is available on its own website: <http://guidefeministeparticipative.tumblr.com>. An abridged version in English (2020) is also available on IGSF website.



3 – ETHICS IN PRACTICE

According to the principles that characterize feminist partnership research, the protection of the rights of research participants concerns all partners/participants involved in a research project. This implies that researchers and partners have a common understanding of how to address the ethical aspects of the project.

But in practice, things don't always work out that way ...

Ethics is often perceived by all the partners (including researchers) as an administrative formality imposed by the granting agencies and primarily the responsibility of the academic research partner. Project-specific ethics procedures are developed by the researcher(s) and adjusted to comply with the requirements of the university ethics committee.

Past experiences in partnership research show that despite prior contacts and agreements on the objectives and conditions of research and ethical certification, misunderstandings or opposition on ethical issues do not fail to arise during the research. For example,

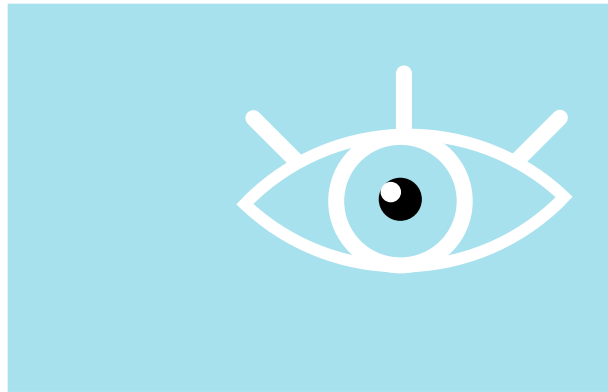
- the strategies planned for the anonymity of research participants or for risk management prove to be poorly adapted to the context;
- the partner is not granted access to the database;
- in the analysis phase, one partner wants to impose on the other partner its interpretation of the results and/or the statements gathered from the participants in the research;

- the use of participants' personal data to explore other aspects of the research is a source of disagreement between partners or even within the research team itself;
- the forms of dissemination do not meet the needs of participants or practice settings.

These assessments, which stem from the presentations made by representatives of practice settings during the exchange sessions, highlight that if the ethical question is not approached in a concerted manner between the partners before undertaking the research, each partner deprives itself of the expertise of the other. This can result in strategies and measures that are not always in line with the protection of the rights of research participants and can even affect the smooth running of the research and its success.

Discussion with members of the practice settings revealed the following findings:

- *From the perspective of research practitioners, fewer ethical dilemmas/challenges tend to arise when...*
 - When consent (and its conditions) is validated and reconfirmed throughout the research project.
 - When horizontal relationships are established between research partners, when the knowledge of each partner is valued, and when research conditions are fair to all involved.
- *If an ethical dilemma/challenge emerges or is at risk of emerging, the researcher-practitioners think it wins to:*
 - Involve the practice community partner to resolve it, even when the issue is between researchers.
 - Acknowledge the partner of practice settings expertise, particularly in the protection of their rights to jointly develop "contextualized" strategies with researchers.



4 – RESEARCH PARTNERS' PERSPECTIVES ON ETHICS

Just as the university partner has knowledge to take into account when implementing ethics guidelines for the partnership-based research project, the partner from the practice settings argues that he also has knowledge and ways of doing things that could benefit the research project on ethical challenges. The community partner or the practice environment remind us that he masters the social-cultural context, the conditions specific to participants involved in the research project and is therefore better able to identify the possible risks for them.

According to the practice community representatives, through this knowledge exchange:

- risks for participants can be better anticipated (perceived and understood), and strategies to counter them better conceptualized;
- the protection of the rights of partners and research participants is better guaranteed;
- the quality of the research process and its results is optimized.

The following table summarizes the position of partners from practice settings on ethics in research as expressed during the exchange sessions.

TARGETED NORMS OF CONDUCT FROM RESEARCHER PARTNERS' PERSPECTIVES

Knowledge exchange Workshop 2021

Respect the expertise and knowledge of participants and practice partners

Use a participatory approach to make ethical decisions and resolve dilemmas/challenges that may arise during the course of the research

Establish horizontal relationships between research partners

Reiterate or confirm consent —and its terms — at all stages of research

Recognize the role of participants and partners from practice settings for the protection of their rights

Co-develop “contextualized” strategies to define participants anonymity and ensure data confidentiality

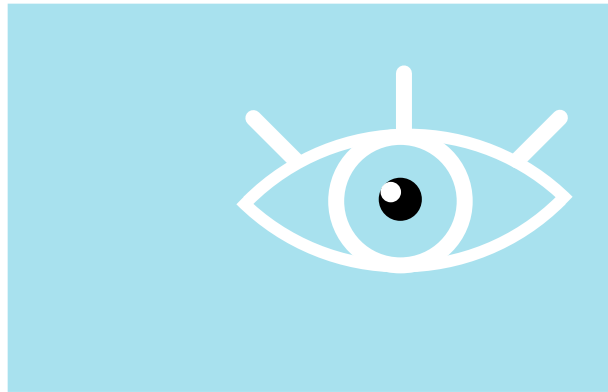
Specify potential risks to practice partners and clarify data/results ownership rights (ex. duration of these rights, use of the data once the research is completed).

The exchanges with members of the practice environment reveal a reality that is somewhat different from that expected for ethical practices in feminist research partnerships. As evidenced by the summary of exchanges, ethical issues and challenges arise during the course of research collaboration: whether from risk management, data ownership, rules of anonymity, or from sharing of the benefits of the research. By placing full responsibility on academic researchers to decide how the ethical challenge or issue is to be addressed or resolved, ethics code — as understood and applied at the university level — result in an imbalance of power between research partners, even in feminist participatory research. We are thus moving away from the conduct of an ethics that is intended to be reflexive within feminist research in partnership.

To avoid this pitfall and strengthen co-responsibility for ethical issues, *the members of the practice communities who took part in the discussions on ethics in feminist partnership research propose to:*

- clarify with their academic partners the issues that are relevant to ethics before engaging in the certification process;
- put forward a participatory decision-making process involving both partners to resolve issues that may arise during the course of the research.

In summary, the responsibility rests with all partners to exercise an ethical approach that is mindful of the rights of those engaged in research.



5– CONSOLIDATING KNOWLEDGE FOR STRENGTHENED ETHICAL STANDARDS

With the aim of encouraging adherence to the same principles, the table in section 1 on standards of conduct for academic research is reproduced below *to include targeted norms issued from theoretical description and actual practice for current and future feminist research partnerships*. Section 6 provides some insights on what to discuss between research partners about ethics certificate or even ethics in general at the outset of partnership-based research.

ETHICS IN FEMINIST PARTNERSHIP-BASED AND PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH

RéQEF 2020 & Knowledge exchange Workshop 2021

Right to decide to participate in Research
Right to withdraw at any time
Right to be protected

<i>Academic standards</i>	<i>Targeted norms of conduct in Feminist partnership-based and participatory research</i>
Ethics is the researcher's responsibility	Ethical responsibility is shared between research partners/participants A participatory decision-making process is established to resolve any issues or ethical challenges that arise during the research
Free and informed consent must be obtained at the outset of the research	Consent is negotiated and reiterated all throughout the research process
The anonymity of subjects and the confidentiality of their personal data must be guaranteed and preserved by researchers	Joint decision on contextualized strategies between partners on how to apply anonymity and the rule of data confidentiality
The risks of participation are identified and managed by the researchers.	Partners and participants exert control over the research (including risks and analyses)
The material produced belongs to the researchers as well as the dissemination of the results, but the findings must be communicated to the groups/communities targeted by the research	Mutual commitments regarding ownership of the material produced (including access to data) and forms of dissemination of the results

Source: Myriam Gervais, Francine Descarries and Berthe Lacharité, *La recherche féministe qualitative avec des êtres humains*, Committee on Ethics in Feminist Research, RÉQEF, Montréal, 2020; Myriam Gervais, Berthe Lacharité and Julie Raby (organizers), Workshop 'Who said that ethics belongs to the University?', RÉQEF, Montréal, February 22-24, and March 17, 2021.

6 – CHECKLIST: HAVE YOU DISCUSSED ETHICS?

Have you discussed ethics certificate or even ethics at the outset of partnership-based research?

Ethical responsibility is not a mere administrative formality and concerns all partners involved in a research project – the following checklist provides guidelines for implementing such an exercise.

1	Once the directions of the research partnership have been defined, have the roles and responsibilities within the research been clarified among all partners?
2	In what respect are student researchers participating in the research? → <i>In relation to an individual project</i> → <i>As research assistants</i> → <i>By assuming coordination tasks, etc.</i>
3	Have the risks associated with each partners' participation been discussed? → <i>Time allocated to research</i> → <i>Financial constraints,</i> → <i>Usefulness of the research</i> → <i>Withdrawal of one of the partners</i> → <i>Supervision of student researchers, etc.</i>
4	If applicable, have the risks for research participants been assessed?
5	Will strategies be developed (and by whom) to define the participants' anonymity and to guarantee, if necessary, the confidentiality of their personal data? → <i>Taking into account the specific context of the research participants, etc.</i>
6	What forms of consent will be retained, and by whom will their content be validated? How will consent be reconfirmed at different stages of the research?
7	Have data-ownership rights been clearly established? → <i>Who owns the data produced?</i> → <i>Who can access it?</i> → <i>For how long will the property rights be applicable?</i> → <i>How will the data be used after the research is completed?</i>

8

If ethical issues or challenges arise during the research, how will they be addressed and resolved?

→ *Planned process,*

→ *Participatory decision-making, etc.*

9

Who is involved in the interpretation and validation of the research results obtained?

If disagreement arises, how will it be resolved?

10

How will decisions regarding the dissemination of the research results be made?