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Research Impact as Care

Re-Conceptualizing Research Impact From an Ethics of Care Perspective

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Introduction

Continuing the effort in this volume to critically examine the relation between care and ethics, in this chapter we examine our own practices and discuss the ethos of scientific research from an ethics of care perspective. The purpose of research is nowadays discussed in terms of (positive) impact on society (e.g. Cunliffe & Scaratti, 2017; G. George, Howard-Grenville, Joshi, & Tihanyi, 2016; J. M. George, 2014) but the moral principles enhanced by a feminist ethics of care (e.g. Fisher & Tronto, 1990; Gilligan, 1982; Held, 2006; Noddings, 2003; Tronto, 1993, 2010) could provide an alternative practice for the relation between research and society. We assert that a care ethos provides an enriched view of research impact and may act as a platform for flourishing and meaningful impact efforts.

Care may be defined as the attentiveness and responsiveness to the needs of a particular other (Gilligan, 1982; Held, 2006). The definition and operationalisation of care has been and is still the site of debate (Held, 2006). In this chapter, we adopt a view of care as a practice that refers to values, feelings and actual work taking place within relationships—whether face-to-face or at distance. The concern for the needs of others is at the base of an ethics of care but the

ethical position cannot be sustained as only a moral feeling, it requires enactment through the practice of care (Held, 2006).

An ethics of care is based on feminist theory, which makes it inherently an emancipatory project with an objective to free society from the abusive forces that oppress the weakest (Tronto, 1993; Held, 2006). Because care is traditionally seen as confined within the household, feminism has had an 'uneasy relationship' with care (Sevenhuijsen, 1998, p. 5). However, ethicists of care have made clear that care has the potential to benefit society at a wider level and that the confinement to the private sphere was a strategy to limit its expansion (Held, 2006; Sevenhuijsen, 1998; Tronto, 1993). Thus, it is beneficial to examine care beyond the domestic sphere, such as in organisational spaces and conversations, in order to consider and include the interests and voices of weaker or subverted groups here as well. We inscribe this chapter in this political project by starting a conversation on how an ethics of care could enlighten the purpose of research and provide a valuable ethical foundation for the relation between academic research and society. Since the purpose of research is increasingly defined as 'research impact' (Cunliffe & Scaratti, 2017; Evans, 2016), we focus our discussion on a critique of impact from an ethics of care perspective.

In this chapter, we will avoid the term 'practitioner' as it is usually employed in the academic literature as a referent for everybody other than academics. Instead, we will try to be more particular when we refer to the participants being 'impacted' by research: the workers, members of organisations, citizens, policy-makers, entrepreneurs, students, consultants, and any other person, including academics sometimes, who agree to be, or end up being, involved in research impact efforts. The choice not to use the term 'practitioner' is to signal our criticism of an academic-centric view of the world.

The next section presents the arguments that the purpose of academic research in organisation and management studies is to positively impact communities outside of academia. Then, we critically examine the current call for research impact from an ethics of care perspective and suggest, in particular, the examination of three distinct but related

characteristics: responsive, relational and processual. Finally, we develop the implications of these critical reflections for research practice and policy. By infusing research impact with an ethics of care, we intend to inform the practice of academic researchers, the decisions of policy-makers regarding the evaluation of academic research and more broadly the critical understanding of how to create impact with diverse audiences such as members of organisations, managers, citizens, consultants, students.

1 The Purpose of Academic Research in Organisation Studies Defined as Research Impact

The purpose of academic research in our societies has been questioned over the past decade. People within and beyond academia are probing whether research conducted in organisations is relevant for managers, whether and how science can help tackle persistent societal challenges, and delineating harmful effects research in management has had on society (G. George et al., 2016; Ghoshal, 2005; "REF 21,"; Walsh, Weber, & Margolis, 2003).

There is a lively debate about the purpose of research in management ensuing (Adler, Forbes, & Willmott, 2007; Bartunek, Rynes, & Ireland, 2006; George, 2014; Walsh et al., 2003; Willmott, 2012). Many social scientists have articulated that one integral purpose of management scholarship is to create scientific work that is practically useful (Bartunek, 2003; George, 2014; Knights, 2008; Mowday, 1997). 'Practically useful' means the ability to produce and disseminate findings which influence decisions, actions, and/or behaviours of audiences outside of academia (Heracleous, 2011; Learmonth, Lockett, & Dowd, 2012; Rynes, Bartunek, & Daft, 2001). For example, on the question of the ethical aim of research on organisations, Bell and Wray-Bliss (2009, p. 82) compel researchers to articulate how research improves actual understandings of and practices for well-being: "At a time when the reach, power, and complexity of organizations risks outpacing our traditional processes of democratic accountability, intellectual

comprehension, and moral imagination, understanding organization is, we would argue, fundamental to wellbeing and survival".

Collectively, these interrogations are in part responsible for driving funding bodies and research institutions to emphasize and expect research impact—the aim to more explicitly and transparently influence audiences outside of academia with research results (George et al., 2016; "REF 21,"). In turn, researchers are facing pressure to not only contribute to the scientific community, but to have research impact upon society (Bartunek & Rynes, 2010). The Research Excellence Framework (REF), an assessment framework of the quality of research in the UK defines research impact as: "an effect on, change or benefit to the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life, beyond academia." Scholars are anticipated by their employing universities and funding agencies to disseminate their research in ever more creative and accessible ways, with the intent of having students, managers, consultants, citizens, and a host of other stakeholder groups use it to change their decisions, behaviours, practices, or even structures (Currie, Davies, & Ferlie, 2016). A collection of activities has been engaged in by academics for this impact seeking purpose—children's books, radio and television programmes, provocative writings in major national journals, and direct consultation, or confrontation, with policy-makers (Etzion & Gehman, In Press).

We aim here at contributing to this burgeoning conversation by discussing how an ethics of care would shift our understanding of the creation of research impact from a purpose of management scholarship benefiting academic institutions, to an engaged and considered process which meaningfully involves and represents those we wish to impact. While the orienting aims of the research impact movement themselves are understandable—to ensure societal relevance and usefulness of scientific endeavours (Aguinis, Shapiro, Antonacopoulou, & Cummings, 2014)—the emergent agenda is not without its substantial critiques. Especially, we would like to draw attention to three striking critiques that research impact is abstracted, instrumental, and outcome-based.

First, it has been argued that current conceptions of research impact enhance a narrow view of the stakeholders (Back, 2012; Evans, 2016; Smith & Stewart, 2017). These critiques denounce that the impact effort is mostly geared towards high-level government rather than more varied local actors. In turn, this high-level aim fosters abstracted and generalised research, since governments act in the interest of a general public, an emphasis on the greater good has the side-effect of neglecting particular situations. The second critique we would like to stress is that the current impetus for research impact tends to celebrate instrumental approaches to creating impact and overlook the importance of relationality (Cunliffe & Scaratti, 2017; Kenney, 2015; Smith & Stewart, 2017). The current view of impact assumes the possibility to affect abstracted others through measures and policies, as if impact could happen in a social vacuum, thus undermining the role of social ties in lived experiences. Finally, critiques emphasize the risk of lower quality research when it is solely and systematically measured by outcomes-focused metrics systems (Back, 2012; Evans, 2016). Rankings and ratings systems are especially favoured by state-level modes of governance but not all kinds of research shine under the knowledge produced with such systems. Relying on quantified metrics, the ranked and rated measures do not value the complexity of research, the qualitative effect of a research endeavour on people's lives or our ability to foresee different paths for ourselves and our society. The next section draws on an ethics of care to elaborate on these three critiques and suggest another conception of research impact.

2 A Critique of Research Impact From an Ethics of Care Perspective

We draw on an ethics of care to foreground novel perspectives on 'research impact', especially ones that stress responsiveness, relationality and a processual episteme. These three characteristics are interrelated and in opposition to a view of research impact as abstracted, instrumental, and outcome-based.

2.1 Research Impact as Responsiveness to Particular Others

An ethics of care implies the consideration of the other as a particular person, and the imperative to care for her as based on her unique characteristics as a person (Fisher & Tronto, 1990; Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 2003; Tronto, 1993).

On the contrary, the purposes behind the push for research impact are too often articulated in favour of the institution of science and its demands for legitimacy, rather than truly as seeking to conduct research that is useful and beneficial to others' needs (Back, 2015; Evans, 2016). This is demonstrable even in the root meaning of impact which is 'the striking of one thing onto another'. It is further strengthened by the way in which the impact rhetoric is visible inside universities. For example, research impact is not only tied to the performance of individual academics, but also perceived to be tightly coupled to the legitimacy of business schools themselves (Pettigrew & Starkey, 2016). This political intertwinement renders the process undeniably focused on institutions, rather than on the varied potential impact on participants, ultimately diminishing the ability of researchers to be responsive to varied interests and needs when disseminating scientific findings. Moreover, when the purpose of research is defined from the perspective of the researchers then the pursuit of research impact allows the possibility for 'bad' impact, i.e. the use of research for undesirable outcomes, either because of a misinterpretation of the research findings or because of an unethical exploitation of the research (Smith & Stewart, 2017).

From an ethics of care perspective, we can explain this drift by the problem of recognizing 'otherness.' Otherness refers to the acceptation of the other being dissimilar from us but also of the impossibility for us to adopt the standpoint of this other. If we accept that researchers cannot adopt the standpoint of impact participants, then how may they define and observe their research impact? This impossibility is captured in the concept of responsiveness emphasized in the care literature. Responsiveness assumes that care "requires that the

perspectives, interests, and concerns of the others be placed as a more central concern" (Tronto, 1993, p. 18). For research impact to occur from an ethics of care, researchers should therefore seek to understand how audiences interpret and react to research findings, before trying to claim any sort of ability to influence their decisions and actions.

Responsiveness is a moral requirement (Tronto, 1993) that underlies that we should not assume equality among humans. Indeed, the implicit possibility to see a distant other as similar to us and to understand her has been considered a predicament of feminist morality (Tronto, 1993). Hence, regarding impact, we should not assume that others are like us and that what we see as their needs fits their own conception. We should not assume that researchers know what impact is desirable, but instead be working with potential impact participants to understand their nuanced reactions to research and respective findings. Our research impact efforts should respond to these reactions, not intend to impose our own particular decisions and actions.

When striving to enhance responsiveness, we may also need to reimagine the relationship dynamics that are essential to impact efforts. Responsiveness originates within relationships and in turn raises awareness to relationships with particular others. Hence, responsiveness leads to a view of impact as happening within a relationship between an impact-maker (carer) and an impact-receiver (cared-for). We now develop our second suggestion and argue for moving from an instrumentalization of participants as receivers of research findings, to particular others heavily embedded within and contributing to the process of dissemination.

2.2 Research Impact as Relational Rather Than Instrumental

An ethics of care recognizes the relational self. As Gilligan (1982) argues "responsiveness to self and responsiveness to others are connected rather than opposed" (p. 61). She emphasizes a view of self and others as interconnected and interdependent rather than separate and in competition. In this view, there is no opposition between selfishness and responsibility as both ends of the

relationship will be affected. Moreover, to attend relevantly to the needs for care of particular others, ethicists of care insist on the role of the relationship between the carer and the cared-for (Gilligan, 1982; Held, 2006; Noddings, 2003). Because I am purposefully responding to the reactions of the person, I am more attuned to her expressed needs and am therefore able to draw on affective ties to attend to her needs. The ties have to be personal in the sense that we know the particular person but not necessarily in the sense that they are family or friends.

On the contrary, the modes of creating impact are highly encouraged to be of a general type rather than portrayed as a rich possibility of options for scientists to engage with particular persons. This is mirrored in the manner by which policy-oriented impact scores the highest in the Research Excellence Framework for Impact (REF). If the underlying goal is to actually positively affect society with research, then institutions must be very careful to not distort the intricate and relational processes required for engaging with various stakeholders—as students, employees, employers, etc.—in favour of always winning political confirmation (Anderson, Ellwood, & Coleman, 2017; Currie et al., 2016).

Those studies which do look at how researchers may bridge the research-practitioner divide have for instance looked at the source of identity tensions at this intersection and what can be done to navigate this space; with suggestions such as practising mindfulness, enlarging our perceptions of the individual role identities, and seeking affirmation from both other researchers and practitioners (Empson, 2013). Other authors, outside of the longstanding suggestions from action researchers, have begun advocating for data collection processes which intertwine researcher with participants' ideas, discussions, and decisions in relation to the ongoing research protocol and/or emerging findings (Bansal, Bertels, Ewart, MacConnachie, & O'Brien, 2012; Bartunek, 2007; Van de Ven & Johnson, 2006). These suggestions led largely to recommendations for more relational forms of fieldwork and theorizing (Bartunek, 2007; Dutton & Dukerich, 2006), which ultimately appreciate in a reflexive manner the many potential ways participants can and should inform the progress of a research, or impact, project they are interacting with. More broadly, we suggest that to address the needs of impact participants,

researchers need to acknowledge their relatedness to them and focus on their relationships as a means to attend to their needs.

Appreciating the interrelatedness of relationships being established during research impact enhances a process view of the world that focuses on entanglement between entities rather than separateness (Hernes, 2014). Hence, we finally suggest a view of research impact that pushes researchers to conceive of and pay attention to the process, rather than to the outcome of impact efforts.

2.3 Research Impact as a Process Rather Than an Outcome

As care is rooted in relationality, it takes place in a specific context and cannot be defined abstractedly (Lawrence & Maitlis, 2012; Tronto, 1993). "It is the relatedness of human beings, built and rebuilt, that the ethics of care is being developed to try to understand, evaluate and guide" (Held, 2006, p. 30). Because care can only be provided within the relationship, it is rather to be viewed as a process rather than an outcome. The way 'impact' is currently framed assumes that academic research is preferably evaluated as a sequence of outcomes more or less dependent upon academics directly impacting (changing) the behaviours, attitudes, and cognition of non-academic audiences. An ethics of care emphasizes the connectedness and relatedness of human beings, directly or indirectly through their common environment and destiny (Held, 2006). When taking such a perspective, it is possible to propose an evaluation of research impact that underlines what is being accomplished, the ties that are being strengthened, and the political change that is being undertaken or resisted, rather than the finished outcomes of the research endeavour as if they could be accurately described.

The processes for measuring impact have not yet been fully agreed upon or standardized, and due to the nature of the phenomena we are working with, there may need to be alternative forms of measurement emerge for the purpose (Beer & Micheli, 2018). Oftentimes, in pursuit of

the ability to rank and rate institutions, methods are devised to commensurate and quantify the value being created, even though it simplifies and obscures the myriad of qualitative properties inherent to the given value creation (Espeland & Sauder, 2007). Business schools have already been doing this for years with their Best Global MBA tables; ending up focusing attention and energies on certain activities and practices over others—such as publication levels of staff, and salaries of their graduates. While the impact agenda is striving to rate and rank institutions along this alternative dimension, it is being criticized for overlooking the relational and collaborative exchanges required to establish connections with communities, understand how the research could be useful, and the need to be flexible with forms of knowledge exchange (Baim-Lance & Vindrola-Padros, 2015). Aggregated numbers simply do not represent the extent and content of these exchanges appropriately. Alternative forms of data collection, such as open-ended feedback forms, photographs of impact events, or reflective entries from participants, that are encouraged to be of a broad, but purposeful sample of individuals who were treated relationally, and influenced, or not, by the research may be better suited to detailing the results of impact efforts. While the REF does use case studies in an attempt to encompass some of the richness of impact work occurring, it still ends up giving institutions a rating for their impact.

Perhaps this aspect of science should not be rated, but instead demonstrated to others in a way that shows its richness, breadth, and scope. How many different stakeholder groups did an institution work with? What were the results? What were the processes? What did the target communities have to say about this? Ultimately, not all portrayals of performance have to foreground competitiveness, some can be purely for improvement purposes.

If only the outcomes of research are considered while engaging with fieldwork, and then likewise focused upon in the pursuit of impact, naturally the concern for the outcomes on those individuals, being material or affective, is unlikely to be raised. If we consider that to generate impact requires that the research enables positive change for some or all of the research participants, for relevant citizens and organizations, then we can easily highlight how the instrumental perspective might lead to deficiencies in translating theoretically analysed data into

practical information. Some positive change occurs from the ground-up and will require the involvement of an array of actors. Therefore, if research is to genuinely have impact, researchers and their institutions should be shifting their focus from aiming for 'outcomes' , to how to manage the process of working with a range of impact participants, focusing on establishing contact, exchanging knowledge in meaningful ways, and following-up over time to observe what is ensuing from the research effort. This may lead to unresolved tensions between competing goals, but enacting care requires accepting this difficulty: "What care looks and feels like is both context-specific and perspective-dependent. Yet, this elusiveness does not mean that it lacks importance."(Martin, Myers, & Viseu, 2015, pp. 1–2).

3 Implications for Research Practice

We now turn to providing practical implications of our elaborations regarding what could impact as care look like for different audiences, and how could impact as care be measured. Our critiques, and respective elaboration of solutions from an ethics of care lens, are summarized in Table 11.1.

Table 11.1 Critiques of research impact as opportunities for infusing an ethics of care

Critique	An ethics of care perspective	Implications for practice
Researchers and policy-makers define by themselves what is research impact, allowing them to legitimize science and research institutions.	Benefiting from scientific findings requires an understanding of how they may correspond to needs of particular others.	**Co-elaborate impact with various potential benefiters of the research findings**. Before seeking to determine how the dissemination of research influenced decisions, actions, or behaviours, seek to understand how various particular others interpret and react to the findings.

Impact participants are instrumental in the pursuit of research impact: their decisions, actions, and behaviours must be influenced.	To influence impact participants, it is imperative that researchers nurture and respond to the relations being established when disseminating research.	**Emphasize the emergence and nurturing of relations with impact participants**. Develop relations with participants to actively and reflexively consider their needs and interests. Statements of how this will be handled in any given study could be made and reviewed in processes involving multiple stakeholders.
Research impact is considered a quantitatively measurable outcome resulting from the dissemination of scientific findings.	Research impact should be conceived of as a process that has to be appreciated through observation of unfolding change.	**Do not rely on rankings and ratings to evidence and present research impact**. Apply a diverse range of qualitative and participatory data techniques, from various viewpoints, to capture and record the experiences of impact participants involved in any impact efforts.

3.1 Differentiating Impact by Participants

We conceptually explore in this section how an ethics of care lens can help us (re)imagine the relational dynamics which occur between a researcher and various participants who may become involved in research dissemination efforts (i.e. the targets of research impact). We select what we believe to be three of the most distinct and already existing groups of participants: research participants of the conducted studies, policy-makers, and ourselves as researchers.

3.1.1 Research Participants of the Studies Conducted

Individuals within the contexts we study are often of interest for their rare or surprising features or settings, leading scientists to study them in the first place.[1] However, when it comes to impact efforts, these particular groups that scientists gained much insights from are often overlooked for potential benefits stemming from the findings. An extreme example of this type of relationships

can be found in the San people, a community in southern Africa that has been heavily studied because of their particular DNA and found itself "victim to plundering 'bioprospectors' who have raided and commercialized their biological resources and given them little or nothing in return" (Chatfield, 2017; see also Rose, Quave, & Islam, 2012). Infusing care in research practices would avoid these kinds of predicaments as the researchers would have to consider their relationships with research participants and be concerned with the needs of the San people as particular others rather than focusing solely on the general and abstracted scientific progress that their research is supposed to have. As Cunliffe and Alcadipani (2016) outline "we may be deceiving ourselves if we claim to be neutral in relation to our research and research participants because we always have goals, outcomes, and self-interest [our PhD thesis, journal articles, funding body requirements, etc.] at heart" (p. 552) [brackets our own]. There is much literature that looks at how to perform fieldwork, and the various stages of interacting with research participants. At the same time, there has been extensive research into and development of Ethical Codes of Conduct, guidelines, and implementation procedures for fieldwork. Every scientific institution either has internally, or is answerable externally to, an ethics board. Yet, this work and associated codes of conduct largely prioritize guiding researchers to perform research collection in the field in a manner that causes no harm, not to relate to participants in positions infused by care. By purposefully adopting a caring stance towards participants, researchers can arguably open doors to enable a fuller understanding of stakeholders' needs, thereby allowing researchers to provide feedback and knowledge in a form they can understand and use. This would mean that ethical codes of conduct could be used to guide questions for reflection rather than apply a closed list of pre-decided measures. Such an approach would allow elaboration of how to contribute positively to the participants, and not only how to avoid causing harm to them.

3.1.2 The Policy-Maker

Academic research also seeks impact beyond research participants and towards the broader society. However, more often than not, societal impact is assumed with a two-page report or a

paragraph at the end of an academic paper. An ethics of care lens provides the missing link between the way which research is conducted and how it will be applied: who does the work in between? Impact is not to be sought afterwards but is to be considered all along the research process. First, it matters why a certain scientific study is selected both for the scientific community and society. Second, the impact is happening within the relationship with beneficiaries of the research, whether direct research participants or indirect stakeholders. How you evaluate the impact of research matters. Present case studies or rating systems do not say much about who these people are that research is impacting. They do not say who they are for the researchers nor for the policy-makers, neither how they developped a connection and how this relationship evolved. An ethics of care encourages the unpacking and presentation of these dynamics from the point of view of each being a particular other, and in that way enables the conversation about routes to impact, and evidence of its creation, to be enlarged. We are aware that this suggestion conceives policy-making as relational rather than universalist and we do not contend that policy-making requires also an ethics of justice that looks at society from a more distanced viewpoint, however we propose that justice be achieved through recognizing individuals' particularities and the significance of social ties that constitute all of us.[2]

3.1.3 The Researcher

An ethics of care requires care for the self as well as care for others, as care can only be efficient if the carer is also cared-for (Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 2003; Tronto, 1993). Impact is a responsibility for researchers to figure out how, or why not, science is of interest and use to broad societal groups and segments. For individual researchers, it is an opportunity to move towards research which is driven more by passion, genuine intrigue, and relational developments (Schwarz, Cummings, & Cummings, 2017), rather than publication targets and dominating theoretical lenses. Of course, this requires a significant shift in academic practices and institutions, involving longer temporalities that can only thrive through new and more diverse ways of measuring academic achievements.

3.2 A Different Measurement

For those with an interest in measuring the impact of research, we suggest that alternative and more inclusive forms of measurement be derived and adapted over time for the cause, instead of the sole pursuit of another standardized measure to represent impact uniformly. In line with the precepts of an ethics of care, the people involved in any impact work are particular—with their own experiences, emotions, knowledge bases, and worldviews. Actually, taking the time to record in creative ways these variations in beginning states, changes in them, and reasons for those changes is likely to be much more illuminating then tracking any commensurate unit of influence made by the engagement with scientific research. While organisational scholarship has focused for some time on developing standardized measures in order to increase the rationality of decisions, and diminish the political nature of them (Espeland & Sauder, 2007), these processes also diminish empathy, particularity, and relationships—which are essential components to creating impact. Moving towards qualitative and participatory measurement instruments as indicators of impact, such as case studies, interviews, focus groups, experiential sampling, blogs, and diaries are highly recommended (Baim-Lance & Vindrola-Padros, 2015). Just as the ancient understandings of measurement once evoked the acquirement of wisdom (Mari, 2013), the measurement of impact will too require much more rigorous involvement in contexts to truly understand and act upon people and places in meaningful ways—not just the creation of more information. Moreover, such qualitative and participatory methods of measurement of 'impact' would allow reporting on what is or was going on for individuals in the given context rather than merely looking at outcomes in a cumulative and meaningless way.

Conclusion

In light of the recent pressure on the organisation and management research community to have more social impact with research, we propose to infuse care into the pursuits of research impact.

From an ethics of care perspective, having impact could mean being able to understand the impact participants (workers, members of organisations, citizens, policy-makers, entrepreneurs, students, consultants, fellow academics) and their situated circumstances as more than just sources of data and a potential academic paper, but as a collection of humans who are confronting very real challenges which require dedicated attention to overcome. Importantly, impact as care could only be achieved within relationships and evaluated as an ongoing collective effort rather than as an externally defined outcome. As recent critiques about management scholars' lack of engagement with critical social issues show, perhaps focusing only on popular theoretical lenses, or being caught up in pure incentive schemes, may detract necessary social science attention from crucial topics. Adopting an ethics of care lens to impact work may be just the segment needed to rebuild the bridges connecting theory with meaningful practices that can lead to positive social change.

Notes

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[1] A classic justification for choosing a particular research field is that the field (or the research participants) constitutes an extreme case and that would be ideal to test the robustness of a theory or explore how it could be refined or extended (e.g. Yin, 2014).

[2] It goes beyond the scope of this chapter to discuss the interplay between an ethics of care and an ethics of justice, so we simply state that we see them as complementary rather than opposing forms of morality. See for instance Held (2006, pp. 15–17) for a discussion of the relation between care and justice.