

RESEARCH ETHICS

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Ethics is a familiar part of everyday life. All of us evaluate the moral character of other people, the fairness of government policies and our own behavior in relation to our personal ideals. Like the air we breathe, ethics is everywhere.

Recognition of the ethical dimensions of professional life has given rise to a growing number of areas of special interest, including health care ethics, legal ethics, veterinary ethics and journalism ethics. Among educators, business leaders and national policy makers, there is a growing consensus that young people are better prepared to embark on a professional carrier if they have been introduced to critical thinking skills with which they face the ethical challenges.

There are three primary ethical principles that are traditionally cited when discussing ethical concerns in human subject's research. A more complete enumeration of these principles is available in the Belmont Report, written by The National Commission for the protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioural Research in 1979.

COMPONENTS OF ETHICAL RESEARCH

For an informed consent to be ethically valid, the following components must be present:

Participation must be voluntary: All ethical research must be conducted using willing participants. Study volunteers should not feel coerced, threatened or bribed into participation.

Researchers must obtain informed consent: Informed consent is a procedure in which all study participants are told about procedures and informed of any potential risk. Consent should be documented in written form.

Researchers must maintain participant confidentiality: Confidentiality is an essential part of any ethical psychology research. Participants need to be guaranteed that identifying information and individual responses will not be shared with anyone who is not involved in the study.¹

In Most Research studies three parties are involved: the researcher, the user and the subject. The interaction of each of these parties with one or both of the other two parties identifies a series of ethical issues. A number of questions arise because researchers believe that they have a certain right to privacy. Just as there are ethical aspects concerning all human interaction, there are some ethical questions about business research. Some of the code of ethics to be followed by the researchers as given below:

- Researcher should maintain high standards to ensure that the data are accurate.
- Researcher should not intentionally try to prove a particular point.
- Researcher should ensure that the data have been scientifically investigated and his findings are totally objective.
- Researcher should not misrepresent the statistical accuracy of data, nor should he overstate the significance of the results by altering the findings.
- Researcher should ensure that privacy and anonymity of the respondent are preserved.
- Researcher, prior to entering business research, should check for code of ethics set out by the professional associations.²

ETHICAL ISSUES WITHIN THE RESEARCH PROCESS ITSELF

When considering research involving human participants issues to be taken into account will include consideration of whether the research has been done before and whether



there are consistent results in this area. This will be based on examination of the literature review and the justification of the need for the study.

Research design: Within the design of any study it is imperative that researchers ensure that potential harm to participants is reduced to the minimum possible level, whether such harm is physical, psychological or social in nature. Researchers must also acknowledge that, when experimental designs are adopted, some participants may act as controls and so not receive a potentially beneficial intervention. This should be taken into account in the consent process, and may be remedied once the study has been completed.

Sample: Decisions related to sampling may have a significant impact on the meaning that can be attributed to the findings. The size of the sample must therefore be considered and justified to ensure that it is sufficient to provide valid and generalizable results. Where the research is designed to enhance understanding, as in the case in some qualitative studies, this must be satisfactorily explained.

Data collection: The research design largely depends on the nature of the research question(s) and/or hypothesis(es) to be tested; care must be taken to ensure that these are appropriate. The design, in turn, will determine the methods of data collection to be used; these must be clearly described.

A number of ethical problems can arise in determining data collection techniques, for example in studies that are reliant on covert methods of data collection (e.g. participant observation); such approaches should be used only in rare circumstances where data simply cannot be collected in any other way. Similarly, within any interview, researchers must demonstrate their awareness of the power relationship that may exist between themselves and their participants and take steps to ensure that this is overcome.

Unforeseen needs: Clear plans must be in place to address particular needs that may arise during the course of any research but which may lie outside the researcher's knowledge, skills or expertise, bearing in mind the need for confidentiality. The subject's permission must be obtained before disclosing any information to a third party.³

FOCUS OF RESEARCH ETHICS

PLAGIARISM

Plagiarism is the act of passing off somebody else's ideas, thoughts, pictures, theories, words, or stories as your own. If a researcher plagiarizes the work of others, they are bringing into question the integrity, ethics, and trustworthiness of the sum total of his or her research.⁴

In addition, plagiarism is both an illegal act and punishable, considered to be on the same level as stealing from the author that which he or she originally created. Plagiarism takes many forms. On one end of the spectrum are people who intentionally take a passage word-for-word, put it in their own work, and do not properly credit the original author. The other end consists of unintentional (or simply lazy) paraphrased and fragmented texts the author has pieced together from several works without properly citing the original sources.^{5,6}

No part of the spectrum of potential plagiaristic acts are tolerated by the scientific community, and research manuscripts will be rejected by publishers if they contain any form of plagiarism – including unintentional plagiarism.

PEER REVIEW

Peer review is the process in which an author (or authors) submits a written manuscript or article to a journal for publication and the journal editor distributes the article to experts working in the same, or similar, scientific discipline. The experts, otherwise called the reviewers, and the editor then enter the peer review process. The process involves the following:



- Reviewers and editors read and evaluate the article
- Reviewers submit their reviews back to the journal editor
- The journal editor takes all comments, including their own, and communicates this feedback to the original author (or authors). The peer review process seldom proceeds in a straight line.

The peer review process seldom proceeds in a straight line. The entire process may involve several rounds of communication between the editor, the reviewers, and the original author (or authors) before an article is fully ready for publication.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

Conflicts of interest arise when a person's (or an organization's) obligations to particular research project conflict with their personal interests or obligations. For example, a university researcher who owns stock in XYZ Pharmaceuticals is obligated to report truthful and accurate data, but he might be conflicted if faced with data that would hurt stock prices for XYZ pharmaceuticals. Conflicts of interest are particularly important to examine within the context of biomedical research because research subjects may be particularly vulnerable to harm.⁷

A researcher should attempt to identify potential conflicts of interest in order to confront those issues before they have a chance to do harm or damage. If conflicts of interest do exist, then the objectivity of the researcher and the integrity of the research results can be questioned by any person throughout the research review process – from the IRB review through the peer review phase. It is therefore imperative to address conflicts of interest up front and discuss how to combat potential lack of objectivity, before the research is called into question.⁸

DATA MANAGEMENT

Data management, in respect to research ethics, references three issues:

- The ethical and truthful collection of reliable data
- The ownership and responsibility of collected data
- Retaining data and sharing access to collected data with colleagues and the public.

Each issue contributes to the integrity of research and can be easily overlooked by researchers. Oftentimes, researchers will downplay the importance of data management because the details can be time consuming and they assume they can “figure it out” as they go along. It is not adequate research practice to assume issues involved in data collection will work themselves out on their own. Instead, a clear, responsible, ethically sound, and carefully outlined plan for data management is required at the beginning of research to prevent all manners of conflicts and inappropriate research methods.

Ethical data collection refers to collecting data in a way that does not harm or injure someone. Harm and injury could range from outright physical injury to harmful disclosure of unprotected confidential health information. In comparison, truthful data collection refers to data that, once collected, are not manipulated or altered in any way that might impact or falsely influence results.

RESEARCH MISCONDUCT

Research misconduct is the process of identifying and reporting unethical or unsound research. The United States' Office of Scientific and Technology Policy (OSTP) released a new definition of research misconduct that went into effect in December of 2000. OSTP defines misconduct, and its components, as follows:

- Research misconduct is defined as fabrication, falsification, or plagiarism in proposing, performing, or reviewing research, or in reporting research results.
- Fabrication is making up data or results and recording or reporting them.
- Falsification is manipulating research materials, equipment, or processes, or changing or omitting data or results such that the research is not accurately represented in the research record.



- Plagiarism is the appropriation of another person's ideas, processes, results, or words without giving appropriate credit.
- Research misconduct does not include honest error or differences of opinion.⁹

CONCLUSION

Society at large has the right to research that is conducted as neutrally as possible. Sometimes researchers have a conflict of interest in the research they are conducting. Perhaps they have spent hours upon hours developing a counseling program and want to provide evidence that the counseling program is effective and their work has not been in vain. Maybe a researcher has developed a new textbook and will financially benefit if the textbook is found to greatly improve learning outcomes. These biases can have a significant impact on how a research study is designed, the participants selected, the instruments used, how data is analyzed, and the final conclusions that are drawn. However, society has a right for research to be as "value-free" as possible and not hampered by the biases of researchers. As a researcher, you need to be aware of the biases you may have - perhaps biases as explicit as financial gain, but also biases as implicit as simply wanting to provide evidence that your way of thinking is correct. Before embarking on a research study, spend time thinking about what biases you may have, and make those biases explicit in your report.

Finally, researchers need to provide direction on how their research findings can be used to improve society. Imagine that a researcher finds a new way of teaching addition to young children that result in much better academic performance. This researcher now has a responsibility to find ways of promoting this new teaching strategy. Research should be used to improve society whenever and where possible. Share positive findings with key stakeholders to try to improve society.

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