Chapter 34
Ethics and Empirics: Essence of Ethics in Social Research

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Abstract Over the last one and a half decades, some fundamental changes have occurred in social research, and the renewed emphasis on ensuring ethical standards at every step of the research process constitutes one of such changes. The purpose of the discussion here is to shed light on the fundamental steps and issues concerning research ethics—as commonly encountered, especially by early career researchers and research students—and highlight the fact that ethics constitutes an essential element in maintaining the quality of research. The chapter focuses on the primary stages, methodology, and procedures of ethical protections that the modern social research institution has established to protect study participants' rights and privacy. Keeping the participant anonymous throughout the research process is one of the fundamental principles of research ethics. Another important ethical consideration concerns the hierarchies between researchers and participants (respondents); one implication is that research participants may not be coerced into participating in research anymore. They have the liberty to withdraw from the study at any time. Depending on the level of (physical, psychological, political, and financial) sensitivity, the matter of ethical approval for a particular research project has to go through various levels of the ethical screening process.

Keyword Ethics · Social research · Institutional review board · Sensitivity · Confidentiality

Introduction

Without research, society would not have progressed as much as it has today. There is no doubt that positive changes in policies and goals for human improvement have resulted from research. As a result, a sound and ethically verified technique should serve as the foundation for any research (American Psychological Association, 2002; Resnik, 2015; Ullah et al., 2020). A decade ago, a hierarchy was maintained between

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M. R. Islam et al. (eds.), *Principles of Social Research Methodology*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-5441-2_34

the researchers and the researched, implying that the researchers are on top and the researched at the bottom. Thus, the researchers are placed in a position to feel obliged to furnish information. As the ethical standard is set, this trend is supposed to decline. The risks and vulnerabilities that respondents/researched face should be considered with care (Angell et al., 2006; Sales & Folkman, 2000; Ullah & Huque, 2014). This means a significant shift has taken place about ethical concerns in research from the previous decade.

In the pre-ethics age as if, whatever questions the questionnaires had could be asked of the respondents. Privacy, the risk of injury, vulnerability to abuse, and the implications of these factors were not significant. The practice has been in most cases like respondents are coerced or made obliged to provide data, and they cannot withdraw from being interviewed as they start. The reality is that the researchers or respondents do not benefit from the research they are involved in. Instead, the researchers reap an immediate benefit in reputation, upward mobility in professional careers, and enhanced incomes. Of course, the results of the data benefit society, the nation, and humanity as a whole. Nonetheless, they have been labelled as obligated to supply information regardless of how destructive or unsafe it may be for them. This is unethical by any reckoning.

The relationship between researcher and research is important in methodology. Understandably, the researchers have been enjoying a privileged position over the research. The inherent power imbalance between the researcher and researcher are frequently discussed, but the problem is that the discussion is directed from the researchers' point of view (Råheim et al., 2016). However, some counter-arguments defining what information counts in a specific researcher–researched interaction is not the researcher's entire responsibility because participants may bring their own goal to the study scenario (Karnieli-Miller et al., 2009). Of course, this is not the case for most research fields in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Asymmetric relations between researcher and researched yield worse results than expected from data collected from the area (Burns et al., 2012; Lalor et al., 2006; Malacrida, 2007).

The emergence of research ethics began to protect human and animal subjects involved in any research in whatever way it takes. The first attempt to craft regulations began during the Doctors Trial of 1946–1947, a segment of the Nuremberg Trials for Nazi war criminals (University of Minnesota, 2003). In reaction to abuses during medical experimentation on humans, the first contemporary code guiding research ethics was formed during the Nuremberg trials of Nazi war crimes (Levine, 2009). "In the Doctors Trial, 23 German Nazi physicians were accused of torturing and abusing concentration camp inmates in grotesque and horrific "experiments". Thousands of victims were tortured, brutalized, crippled, and murdered in the name of research by the accused doctors. Some of their experiments entailed exposing patients to severe temperatures and altitudes to gain scientific data on the human body's limits (University of Minnesota, 2003: 1)".

A fundamental question I am asked frequently 'why research needs to be based on ethical standards?' My answer is simple: we cannot harm human and animal subjects for our study due to ethical failures. The researchers have to stand to guarantee that their research must not harm anything and anyone. If a researcher is asked questions

about their political opponents and the findings are published in any form, the study could be in danger at some point in time. A researcher, for instance, either deliberately or carelessly, falsified data in a clinical trial may endanger or even kill patients, and a researcher who violates safety regulations may imperil his or her health as well (Resnik, 2015).

Research that involves human and animal subjects raise unique and complex ethical, legal, social, and political issues. Hence, a few objectives come to the fore Burkhardt et al. (2014). They go on to argue that because ethical standards are so widespread, it is easy to dismiss them as common sense, and why are there so many ethical disagreements in our culture if morality is just common sense? The primary objective is to protect human and animal participants from any risks and vulnerabilities are emanating from the research they are involved in. The next one is to ensure that research is carried out to benefit individuals and society. The other goal is to assess the ethical soundness of specific research activities. While I concur with Burkhardt et al. (2014), I contend that research ethics shift power from researchers to those who are researched. Why is a power shift in researched–researcher necessary?

This chapter expounds on the key of research ethics and the processes involved in ethics application. In doing so, personal experiences as faculty chair of the ethics committee are the primary source as well as an applicant for ethics approval. Some interviews have been incorporated in this chapter as well. Challenges involved in research are primarily the issues of the researchers, and research ethics are related to the interests of research.

Significance of Research Ethics

The principles of ethics guide us in doing our research without harming the participants of the study. Ethical guidelines in conducting research are essential to establish the validity of the research. Since the emergence of research ethics, it has become an important component of research methodology. A common review report on submitting a paper for potential publication is whether the research [based on which the paper is written] underwent ethical review. Also, budgets for research grants are released subjected to ethical approval from a respective ethics committee. Resnik (2015) offered a few reasons why ethical norms are important to adhere to in research and justified the reasons by saying that norms promote the aims and integrity of research. These efforts rectify fabrication, falsification, or misrepresentation of research data and thus minimizing errors. Ethical standards encourage trust, accountability, mutual respect, and justice, which are vital to collaborative work. Ethics ensure the accountability of the researchers to the public, which helps to build public support for research. Research projects are more likely to be funded if the quality and integrity of research are ensured through ethical procedures. This is due to the ethics' bold promises of social responsibility, human rights, and animal care, as well as legal compliance and public health and safety (Dyrbye et al., 2007; Nowak et al., 2006).

Ethics is a strategy, approach, or viewpoint for determining how to understand difficult situations. For example, when analysing a complex issue like global warming, one can approach the subject from an economic, ecological, political, or ethical standpoint. While an economist looks at the costs and benefits of various global warming measures, an environmental ethicist might look at the ethical values of the issue (Gajjar, 2013: 1).

Even though defined ethical guidelines and principles are in place, there are situations when research runs afoul of possible participants' rights. No set of ethical guidelines can predict every ethical situation. Most organizations have established an ethics committee to assess research or funding applications for ethical implications and determine whether additional steps are required to safeguard the safety and rights of potential participants (Colt & Mulnard, 2006; Stair et al., 2001). This procedure protects both the researchers and the individuals who are being studied from the legal ramifications of failing to address major ethical issues raised by participants (Gajjar, 2013; Ullah & Huque, 2014).

The Ethical Process

Indeed, researchers face a range of ethical requirements, and the level of requirements for ethics applications often depends on the rigour and implications of the research and the organizational and national policies as well. In a democratic society, sensitivity is defined differently from that of a society under a dictatorial system. In a country where Shariah law, for instance, is in effect, research on gender issues or lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) may be considered extremely sensitive. Therefore, requirements for putting an application for research to get it approved by an ethical committee could be cumbersome in terms of long wait time. Documents to be appended with the application package as well vary widely. Although most communities have legal standards that govern behaviour, ethical norms are typically less formal than laws. Even though most countries utilize laws to enforce broadly accepted moral norms and that ethical and legal norms use comparable notions, ethics and law are not the same things (Resnik, 2015).

To place the application to the IRB, the applicant has to assemble the application documents package, which includes application forms and supporting documents such as PIF, PCF, survey instruments, and recruitment advertisements. Table 34.1 shows the documents that should be submitted to the review panel. Relevant persons before submission should duly sign the forms. Then the IRB would be in a position to assess the level of risk of the application and allocate to a possible review pathway. If revisions are required, the IRB may request them and then approve or disapprove the application after they are satisfied with the revisions. The ethics permission may be granted or denied, and the office contacts the chief investigator/research supervisor.

In general, applications are considered under two tracks: The fast track and the full consideration track. Some institutions allow the chair only to consider the applications, which are not too sensitive to approve under a fast track. The rests go through

Table 34.1 Documents to be submitted to the review panel

Materials submitted	IRB considerations	Potential problems
Trial protocol(s) and amendment(s)	The protocol is updated and all amendments have been incorporated carefully	All elements are not adequately detailed and justified
Investigator's brochure	Approved IB	IB lacks the required information. Studies referred to in the protocol not detailed in the brochure
Written and verbal informed consent form(s) and consent form updates	Adherence to respective IRB requirements for the template and any standard language	Failure to follow local IRB consent form template. Use of consent form language that differs substantially from institutional standards
Subject recruitment materials	Provides sufficient detail to inform the potential participant of study requirements, duration, and compensation (for time and transportations)	The recruitment process does not protect the patient's confidentiality, and/or privacy. Researched/respondents receive unsolicited phone calls!
Written information to be provided to subjects	Must not be coercive. Indicate that the materials are related to a research activity only	Problems exist with type size and ease of use and the tone of the language
Available safety information	All of the available information regarding studies and sufficient safety data to support the use of the test article for the expected duration of participant enrolment	Most often safety reports may exist that are not incorporated into the IB
Information about payments and compensation to subjects	Compensation should not create an unfair inducement for study participation. Timing and method of payment should be clear	The process should be clear to the IRB and the study participant
Investigator's current curriculum vitae and/ or other evidence of qualifications	Licensure and training are necessary to safely perform all study-related activities. Inclusion of other study team members where special expertise is required	Many clinical procedures are used for screening and monitoring. It should be clear that qualified individuals are being used to interpret this information
Any other documents required by the IRB/IEC	Completion of an IRB-approved course in human and animal subjects research	Lack of investigative training of the IRB members may delay the study

Sources Adapted from Jacobs (2010), Ullah and Huque (2014)

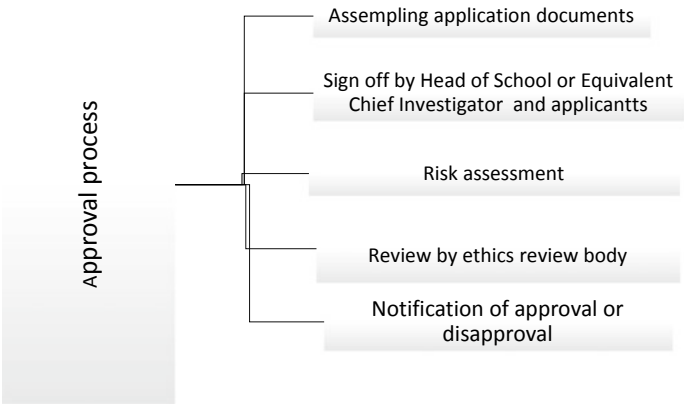


Fig. 34.1 Approval process. *Source* Author

full consideration by the entire ethics committee. It is, of course, difficult to measure the level of sensitivity quantitatively (Fig. 34.1).

Institutional Oversight

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) and Independent Ethics Committees (IECs) of respective institutes oversee the research conducted on human or animal participants by particular institutes. The primary goal is to make it easier for human and animal subjects to participate while ensuring that their rights are maintained. IRBs and IECs are in charge of safeguarding the rights and safety of participants (Fitzgerald & Phillips, 2006; Gunsalus et al., 2007; Jacobs, 2010).

All institutes are expected to respect the highest ethical standards in research while allowing their academics, staff, and students to perform research efficiently (American University, 2016; Fitzgerald & Phillips, 2006). The IRB's primary role should be to help researchers achieve these goals by examining, approving, suggesting changes, if necessary, in research protocols. The detailed elements of the approval procedure are presented in Fig. 34.2. The IRB process is generally based on rules and regulations of the policies of the respective country. Some institutions need their own IRB to review every research, while others rely entirely on a central IRB for particular types of studies. At least five members of the IRB should represent from diverse backgrounds (i.e., professional skills and interests, including both sexes, with at least one member who is not directly linked with the university). While the minimum number of members is five, some IRBs include more to accommodate additional expertise (Jacobs, 2010).

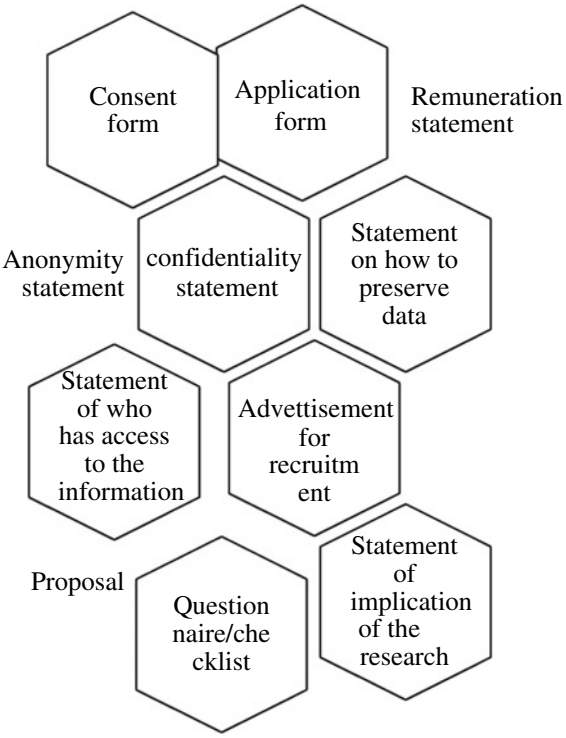
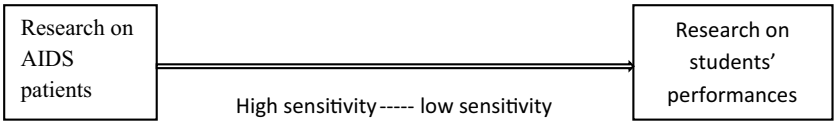


Fig. 34.2 Elements of ethics application. *Source* Author

Although codes and policies are important, like any set of rules, they do not cover the range of situations; they frequently necessitate a great deal of interpretation. As a result, researchers must understand how to interpret, evaluate, and apply a variety of research standards, as well as how to act ethically in a variety of scenarios (Resnik, 2015; Ullah & Huque, 2014). The government's restricted definition of scientific misconduct has sparked a lot of debate, and many researchers and policymakers are unhappy about it. In any research setting, a study involving vulnerable people, such as children, people with developmental impairments, or homeless or undocumented, raises particular difficulties. Overall, research ethics is a set of rules for conducting research responsibly to educate scientists to maintain a high ethical standard (University of Minnesota, 2003).



Debates are ongoing on students' projects [both at graduate and undergrad levels] about whether they should go through the IRB process. The debates are stemming

from the notion that the IRB process may appear as a cumbersome job for them which may eventually demoralize doing research. On a personal level, I keep arguing that any research that involves human and animal subjects must go through the IRB process to ensure the safety of the subjects. Of course, a range of research may not go through IRB or may need to go through a fast track/expedited procedure so that students do not have to re-register for the module/course that results in delayed graduation.

An example from the USA is that research conducted by specific US federal agencies, overseen by the Food and Drug Administration, or carried out by institutions that have opted to subject all of their research to the Common Rule criteria is legally obligated to undergo ethical review (Larson et al., 2004). What kind of research can be expedited? According to Jacobs (2010) and Ullah and Huque (2014), the IRB may consider expediting the evaluation of research activities that pose just a little risk and fit into one of the following categories. Some issues appear suddenly and need immediate research attention must go through an expedited review process (Ullah & Nawaz, 2020; Ullah et al., 2020). For example, research related to COVID-19 must obtain prioritization approval from any IRB (Ullah, 2010a, 2010b, 2012, 2016). Some human subjects may fall into categories exempt from ethical scrutiny (Ullah et al., 2015). This category excludes studies that rely solely on educational examinations, survey processes, interviews, or public behaviour observation unless the data collected are both identifiable and potentially dangerous if made public (Amdur & Bankert, 2011; Millum & Menikoff, 2010).

Fundamental Principles of Research Ethics

The issues of ethics form a key element in research (Barbour, 2000; Chetty, 2016). As a result, anybody engaging in research must adhere to the research's goals of transmitting true knowledge, truth, and error prevention (Barbour, 2000). Accountability, trust, mutual respect, and fairness are all principles that must be shared by all stakeholders involved in research. Hence, ethical considerations in research refer to a researcher's responsibility to the general public by safeguarding the human or animal participants of a study (Kumar, 2014). Ethical principles—moral judgements—are an expression of how we should behave as individuals (Amdur & Bankert, 2011; Fanelli, 2009; Grady, 2002). Ethics should be based on the principle of non-discrimination against colleagues or students based on sex, race, ethnicity, or other factors not related to scientific competence and integrity (Jacobs, 2010; Resnik, 2015; Ullah & Haque, 2020; Ullah & Huque, 2014). Given the importance of research ethics, it's no wonder that many professional organizations, government agencies, and universities have developed specific research ethics codes, norms, and policies (Resnik, 2015). Honesty is the primary principle in any research; hence it is the best policy in ethical consideration. Avoidance of subjectivity and adapting objectivity means that avoiding biases is an important component of ethics. Biases could distort the research

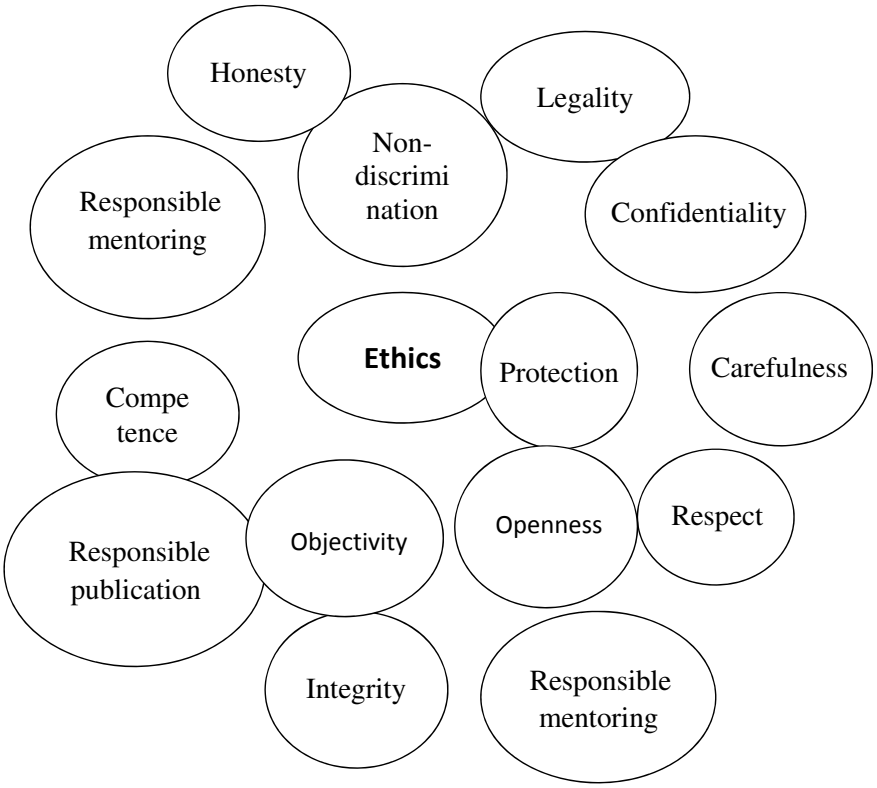


Fig. 34.3 Components of ethics. Adapted from Shamoo and Resnik (2015)

finding, which may lead to a destructive policy formulation. Integrity, openness, and carefulness help minimize errors.

Respect for intellectual property and colleagues—one of the important principles of ethics—leads to deterring or avoiding plagiarism and maintaining the veracity of the data and analysis. The confidentiality of the research is crucial to maintaining an ethical standard. In any event, social responsibility should not be overlooked because ethical practices such as research, public education, and lobbying help to alleviate societal ills (Burman et al., 2003; Candilis et al., 2006; Koocher, 1998). Shamoo and Resnik (2015) has outlined detailed components of ethics (Fig. 34.3).

Discussion and Epilogue

After reviewing ethical policies of at least 40 prominent institutions (universities, research organizations, etc.) from Asia, North America, the Pacific, and Africa, it is evident that ethical approval has been made a requirement for all research undertaken

by any staff or student that involves human and animal participants. These days, many university regulations demand ethical approval even if the research does not directly involve human participants but raises additional ethical considerations due to the study's potential societal or environmental effects. It is also critical that researchers figure out ahead of time whose review body permissions are required for the type of research they will be conducting.

The main point is that human reasoning is important in ethical decision-making, but its ability to answer all ethical challenges in a fixed time is limited (Shamoo & Resnik, 2015). Maintaining a high standard of ethics of research means that it must be ensured that participation is voluntary, and any participant must not be coerced to participate in any study. The necessity of informed consent is closely tied to the concept of voluntary involvement. In practice, this implies that potential research volunteers must be thoroughly informed of the processes and dangers associated with the study before agreeing to participate. Participants must be paid for their time and for their transportation (unless participants decline to accept). Venues or locations of interviews should be the choice of the participants. Researchers must be familiar with the ins and outs of any foreign law that may apply to their research. Confidential records should be kept in a safe location with limited access, and identifying information should be removed as well (Meslin & Quaid, 2004). Before the interview is conducted, it is must be made clear to the participants about how the data will be preserved and who will have access to those data and the implications of such accesses, and when they intend to destroy the data.

In my case, it took more than six months to get my ethics application approved. The challenge lies with the fact that sometimes the entire period of the research project is one year. This delay will put the completion of the research on time will be jeopardized. In order to obtain informed permission, participants must be explained about how their data will be used, what will be done with case materials, images, audio and video recordings, and all other forms of data acquired in the study (Emanuel et al., 2000). Misconduct is most often caused by both environmental and individual factors, such as when morally weak, uninformed, or insensitive individuals are placed in stressful or flawed circumstances. In any case, even if it does not prevent wrongdoing, a course in research ethics can be valuable in avoiding deviations from norms.

By introducing them to concepts, tools, principles, and methodologies, ethical processes should assist researchers in dealing with the problems they are likely to face during the study process. People will get a better grasp of ethical standards and policies due to this, and eventually, their ethical judgement and decision-making will improve. Deviations may occur because some researchers are unaware of some of the most basic ethical research rules. Ethical guidelines also state that researchers should not put participants in situations where they might face bodily or psychological harm as a result of their participation. All research must ensure participant anonymity, which means that identifiable information must not be shared with anybody who is not directly involved in the study. The notion of anonymity is a tighter norm, which means that the subject will stay anonymous during the study—even to the researchers.

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