

# Exploring Ethical Considerations in Research: Guidelines and Practices

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## ABSTRACT

We see a gap in the literature between the ethical guidelines suggested so far for the ethical conduction of research and the issues faced in the practice of the same. The article aims to identify the ethical guidelines which have been followed recently in the conduction of research and also the issues faced with them, and the unethical practices reported, with the help of qualitative study of existing literature. With time and the advancement of technology, as the processes of research have evolved, new ethical dilemmas have also emerged which are not addressed by the existing guidelines precisely. We suggest re-evaluating the existing guidelines to address the emerging issues regarding the ethical conduction of research.

**Keywords:** Research ethics, social science, qualitative research, unethical practices, ethical principles.

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## INTRODUCTION

The extant literature on research ethics points toward how people view ethics in research, as George (2016) discusses in his work, in medical research, ethics are viewed as an exercise of getting regulatory body clearance only rather than following ethical standards to affect research work. De Wet (2010), discusses how the role of ethics is perceived as unrequired in the discipline of social science research. The paper further discusses about the importance of reviewing research work in terms of ethical considerations, role of 'the research ethics committee (REC)' and the need, to sensitize faculties and the institution about the beneficial aspects of ethical awareness in research. Other studies about qualitative research also, though, point towards understanding research ethics as being 'relational, situational and emerging' and the importance of having ethical guidelines for research and the review bodies, also, discuss that the issues related to ethics in research should be paid attention to at the instance of its occurrence during research and not just at the desktop, (Øye *et al.* (2016)). Available literature also suggests the lack of discussion over ethical guidelines in the publication process concerning research in the management discipline (Greenwood (2016). Honig *et al.* (2017) work brings to attention the presence of the 'forces' that give rise to practice of violating research norms. They discuss the rising pressure for publication

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amongst researchers and the editors and reviewers and their view that practicing ethical norms would pose an impediment towards their goals.

## Summary of Hypothesis

In light of these studies that suggest the ever-evolving need to adapt in response to the environment, same being the case with ethics, we see a need to re-evaluate the defined ethical boundaries of research. Or realign the existing ones to suit the present environmental setting. How researchers are currently following the previously defined ethical considerations to conduct quality research while at the same time, maintaining the efficiency of research and securing the interests of human subjects and society. Do they need to be reviewed to suit the present environmental setting or do they pose a problem in the conduction of research, defeating the purpose itself? Is the essence of research

lost in following the ethical considerations or will the changes of any kind will help enhance the purpose and efficiency while realigning the boundaries such that they change the face but retain the essence. Considering the above questions, we identify the following objectives of study:

- To identify recent guidelines for practicing ethics in research
- To identify and explain unethical practices in research.

## METHOD

A qualitative study of the literature was done to identify current practices related to ethical considerations in research.

### *To identify recent guidelines for practicing ethics in research*

In reference to the recent guidelines and practices involving research ethics, Pietilä *et al.* (2019) in the chapter 'Qualitative Research: Ethical Considerations' discuss about the ethical principles to be followed in research, namely, 'autonomy', 'justice', 'beneficence' and 'non-maleficence'. Here 'autonomy' talks about the participants' rights to 'self-governance, liberty, privacy, individual choice, and freedom of will'. The core of the principle lies in the thought that the study participants should be free to make conscious decisions about themselves and have complete control over their lives, free from any external influence or coercion. Principles of 'beneficence and non-maleficence talk about the ethical obligation of the researcher to maximize the benefits associated with the study for the society as well as the participant. Whereas maleficence describes the need to minimize any kind of risk for the participant associated with study. Though qualitative research methods do not harm the subject physically, but it may cause emotional turmoil, reminiscing of hurtful past or any other psychological or emotional harm like – fear, embarrassment, grief or shame. Thus, the participants' exposure to such scenarios must consider the anticipated benefit and the expected social value of research in return. This is necessary to avoid exploitation of the subjects. Justice, this principle states that all the individuals of a population should be treated equally and fairly in terms of opportunity for selection and distribution of beneficial outcomes or burdens concerning research.

While 'the Belmont report' (1979) provided these founding principles of ethics in research, it also states

about their application. The 'Respect for person' principle finds application in the form of 'autonomy' and 'informed consent', beneficence in the 'assessment of risk and benefits' associated with the research work, and 'justice' in the 'selection of subject'. Informed consent is necessary for conducting any research involving humans. Before participation, the subject should be well informed about all the aspects of the research concerning him, including disclosure and use of vital information provided by him. Participants or subjects who are not capable of exercising good judgments over proposed research participation due to factors like illness, mental disability, poverty, age, social or cultural factors and language barriers, conducting research over them does not bring respect to the research subject. Also, the confidentiality of the data and respondents' privacy is a critical aspects that should be given prominence while planning and implementing research.

Broesch *et al.* (2020) discuss the need for reviewed ethical considerations in the cross-cultural research domain. They suggest involving the community, which is the research subject, and upholding their interests at all times like when planning the research, its methodology and approach, communication of results, sharing of data etc.

In the digital research arena, Ravn *et al.* (2020) discuss the ethics involving informed consent and the need to evaluate the practice of using the data available on social media platforms, though deemed as public, in terms of ethical considerations when used for analysis. Here, discussing the case of Instagram, they argue that the use of photos/posts or data available on Instagram as 'public' for analytical work without drawing consent from the user is unethical. It can be considered unethical because the understanding of the word 'public' in the eye of the individual users is different. What an individual considers to be his public for the post that he or she is sharing may not be the same, or remain the same, once his publicly posted data has been used for analytical work done by a third party about which he/she is not aware. To draw the data from a publicly available domain gives the analysts/researcher ease of obtaining consent without having to actually reach out to user and ask for his/ her consent regarding the proposed research/ any analytical work. Thus, the author suggests taking user consent personally by informing him/her about the intended use and expected outcomes before use.

Davies *et al.* (2020), highlight that, to uphold the values and to keep up with the ethical standards of research, several institutions have set up a community for research ethics, whose role is to review the upcoming



research work from the respective institution, there is a need to review these communities for the robustness of their functioning. As these communities play a critical role, now there is a need to understand the work and identify the areas of improvement. Taking a case of the ethics community for social science in a South African University, they demonstrated that though the score for submissions and review-related processes were higher, scores were found to be lower for training and education in ethics and for tracking previously approved submissions. They indicated the lower score was a lack of resource support and funding.

Also, for ethics involving publication of research work, COPE (1999), provides guidelines involving good publication practices. The guidelines are developed to address 'study design and ethical approval, conflict of interests, authorship, the peer review process, duties of editors, media relations, redundant publication, advertising, plagiarism, data analysis and how to deal with misconduct'.

#### *To identify and explain unethical practices in research.*

Many authors have discussed about unethical practices in publications of research work. (Singhal *et al.* (2021); Juyal *et al.* (2015); Moylan *et al.* (2016); Wiwanitkit *et al.* (2017); Sharma *et al.* (2020); Sivasubramaniam *et al.* (2021)) discuss the different types of unethical practices in research publication, namely, duplicate/ redundant publication, falsification of data, plagiarism, authorship conflict and conflict of interest. Duplicate publication or Redundant publication refers to the publication of a research work with substantially the same content of an already published paper without proper referencing. Reviewers report another minor form of duplicate publication, commonly referred to as 'salami slicing', which is publishing the same study's results in parts in different papers or reanalysis obtained from the same study. Authors indulge in this kind of practice to increase their number of publications and citations. It is considered unethical because such a practice might result in over-judgment or distortion of findings. It also might result in wrong conclusions as, a study which was done on a fixed number of subjects had its data reported in fragments in different journals. In such a case the publishing journals might or might not be aware of the practice (Singhal *et al.* (2021)). This results in waste of time and efforts of the reviewers in reviewing the same piece of article without any benefit to the research community and, thereby, humanity at large. The time

and efforts that could have been utilized to review several other bodies of research work where many more fruitful outcomes could have resulted and contributed in enhancing the knowledge base, all that time and effort were wasted on duplicate submissions. Such a practice is considered unethical. Falsification of data or information includes the fabrication of data where authors generate data where no data exists (Singhal *et al.* (2021) and misrepresentation of facts and findings of an experiment, or masking the same. Plagiarism is taking someone else's work, words or even idea and presenting it as their own without giving the original author its due credit, which is known as plagiarism. This is regarded hugely as an unethical practice. There are different forms of plagiarism as reported in the literature. Idea plagiarism is when an idea of someone which was presented in some conference or seminar is used without citing its proper source. It is often difficult to detect such a form of plagiarism but is considered a serious offense. Plagiarism of text takes place when a large section of someone else work is copied word by word by a researcher in his own work without proper citation of the source. It is also known as 'direct plagiarism' (Singhal *et al.* (2021)). Another hybrid form of plagiarism, known as 'mosaic plagiarism' reported, is when idea of one researcher, words, phrases and opinions from others are pooled to create a new piece of work by an author without acknowledging the original source. Self-plagiarism is a type of plagiarism where an author uses portions of their previously published work on the same topic in their subsequent works without formally citing it in quotes. Unethical practices have been reported over authorship issues as well. Authorship conflict results when anyone who has contributed in any form to a piece of research work, be it planning, ideation, designing, execution of experiment/ study, data collection, analysis or reporting/drafting, has an authorship claim to the same, which is not decided upon and informed before the publication of the work in journals (Wiwanitkit *et al.* (2017)). Also, if anyone cited in the article does not approve the publication of the work, it is considered an authorship conflict and unethical (Sivasubramaniam *et al.* (2021)). Such a type of conflict often arises when a person whose name is included in the paper has not contributed in any form to the study. Conflict of interest, when a researcher gets influenced by his personal or financial issues and the quality of the study is affected by that, it is deemed as a conflict of interest. In such a situation the impartiality of the research seems compromised.

## DISCUSSION

From the extant literature, we see that the Belmont report, COPE provides a basis to support ethical consideration concerning different areas of research, be it, planning, design, conduction or publication of the study. Several guidelines have been developed to help researchers conduct their studies ethically. However, issues have been reported regarding the practice of same. Like in the area of research concerning cross cultures, to uphold the principles of beneficence and justice, the literature now suggests the need to involve the respective communities on whom study is to be performed at the very level of planning, selecting a research methodology and approach, communication of results and sharing of data. Though the Belmont report also suggests the application of these principles in the form of assessment of risk and selection of subjects, however, to the best of our knowledge, no ethical guidelines have been reported on the involvement of community (subjects) at various levels of research conduction like planning or designing a study.

Issues regarding securing the rights of people and 'respect for the person' has emerged by how researchers view and understand the guideline of obtaining 'informed consent' in the field of digital research. The studies conducted with data available online seemingly do not require direct or face to face interaction with the people whose data has been used in the study and hence, they automatically become the subjects of the study without their knowledge. Here again, the authors raise concerns and suggest reaching out to the individuals to comply with the ethics.

In an attempt to make the research process more ethically compliant and monitor them, several institutes have setup review boards and committees in their organizations. However, concerns have been raised regarding the robustness of their functioning. It has been reported that the effectiveness of this measure seems to be affected by the lack of education in ethics and adequate support infrastructure. In the publication of the research papers, several unethical practices have also been reported in the literature. Falsification of data is recognized as the gravest form of scientific misconduct. With the advancement of technology, various tools are available to easily and efficiently identify such false reporting. The research aims to enhance the body of knowledge or existing research works. ut, to do that with the help of untrue and fabricated data and reporting findings to suit the researchers' interests is unethical.

Though the presence or involvement of ethical considerations in research is considered a hindrance

or unrequired by many social researchers, the extant literature also suggests the need for reviewed ethical guidelines. To encourage 'intellectual honesty' and prevent research misconduct, as the COPE also mentions that the ethical guidelines are not prescriptive but advisory in nature and that the guidelines would evolve with time and be refined by those who use them, we also suggest extending the guidelines with respect to the issues faced by the researchers as well as the society. As research conducted without following the ethical considerations would imply i) bringing in of bad reputation to and loss of credibility of research and its researcher and associated institutions, ii) retraction of the published work and it is declared void, iii) in case the concerned work is a part of ones' doctorate study, it might result in revocation of the doctorate title. The supervising institution, iv, could also take legal action) or if the study is ongoing, it might result in the cancellation of the grants and approvals.

## Limitations

The study is not without its share of limitations in terms of source search. All the academic databases such as Web of Science and Scopus, were not searched for retrieving concerned literature. Mainly, Google Scholar was used for it. The article suggests extending the knowledge base of ethical considerations by working towards developing guidelines that address the ethical issues faced in current times. Also, the current study may be extended through a quantitative study to bring deep first-hand insight into the research objectives.

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