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Ethics in Empirical Research - Theoretical Considerations Regarding Education and Communication

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Abstract: Ethical standards are, in theory, as important, or even more relevant than the actual research itself. But the journey that led educators, academics, researchers and other specialists to arrive at modern research ethical standards was a long, disputed and unethical voyage. Ethical research is based on principles such as social value, informed consent, fair subject selection, a favorable risk-benefit ratio, scientific validity, respect and many others. Ethics takes into consideration a constellation of factors, which will be discussed and detailed in this article. The analysis compares the perspectives of micro and macro-ethics, and of research ethics in various domains of activity, such as psychology, education and linguistics.

Keywords: research ethics; ethical standards; interdisciplinary; education; psychology; communication

Introduction

'It is an understatement to claim that research ethics are important for any field of scientific inquiry' (Sterling et al., 2016, p. 15). Rightly so, ethics as a standalone theoretical field of activity refers to the system governed by moral principles, to the study of dual concepts such as right and wrong, and is often classed as a synonym for integrity, fairness and the honor system. Research ethics is concerned with ensuring that research, either medical/clinical, academic or any other type, is conducted in a manner that protects the right of all those involved in the research endeavor. A paper that looked at the ethical principles for multinational clinical

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research listed several such principles, inter alia scientific validity and social value of the research, informed consent, independent review, a fair selection of the participants and respecting them and the study communities, having a favorable risk-benefit ratio and developing collaborative partnerships between the community and the researchers (Emanuel et al., 2004, p. 931).

The field of ethics has seen its fair share of inhumane experiments and highly unethical research, especially in the social sciences. If we think about the nuclear weapons US-led Manhattan Project (1942-1945), the Nazi experiments on concentration camp prisoners during World War II, medical studies such as the Tuskegee Syphilis Study (1932-1972) or the Willowbrook Hepatitis Experiment on mentally disabled children subjects (1956- 1970), the USA Army's Project Camelot (1964-1965), psychologist Stanley Milgram's electric shocks deceptive experiments (1960') or Philip Zimbardo's Stanford prison experiment (August 1971), such abusive practices are nowadays banned (Christians, 2005, p. 147).

Calls for a responsible and humane practice started after the second World War, with the World Medical Association's Declaration of Helsinki (1964) on the Ethical Principles for Medical Research involving human subjects (WMA, 2018). The founding of the Institutional Review Boards (IRB) in the USA marked another milestone, as these entities were designated to review, evaluate, monitor and approve/ disapprove biomedical research that involves human subjects. Such groups are locally administered, usually affiliated to universities or other research bodies, include both scientists and non-scientific personnel, and are tasked with the continuous review and evaluation of the risks and advantages of empirical studies. However, plagiarism, data falsification or fabrication continue to escape the ethical filters, even if on a lesser scale as before. Publishing ethics came in as a necessary response to publication bias, and are considered the building block of any research, as they set out standards for design and result dissemination in peer-reviewed journals. Generally, there are four main categories of duties, which are duties of the authors, of the publisher, of the reviewers and of editors. There are meant to work together to safeguard the public data record and the editorial independence of the publication process, to set out best practice guidelines and to provide support with procedural and technical infrastructure (Elsevier, 2022).

The aim of this review article is firstly to bring together different perspectives in international research ethics that concern fields of activity such as psychology, law, education, linguistics and other social sciences. Secondly, we want to emphasize the importance of ethics both in empirical research and in publication of articles and other scientific communications.

2. Codes of Ethics

2.1. Responsibilities in Ethical Research

Maybe the most important document drafted in recent history that established the basis for any human rights and ethics-related matters is the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR, 1948). A few decades later, the Belmont Report was created in 1978 (and published in 1979) by the United States of America's National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research as a consequence of the earlier National Research Act from 1974. These acts came as a consequence of the inhumane Tuskegee Syphilis Study. The Belmont Report acknowledged the ethical principles for the protection of human subjects as part of research. Amongst these principles, some of the most prominent are respect for participants, the principle of beneficence and of justice (NCPHSBBR, 1979). During the same decade, the American Psychiatric Association issued the Goldwater rule (1973), following events during a presidential campaign in 1964 in the USA. This statement of ethics is meant to prevent psychiatrists from offering a diagnosis or speculating about a person (especially public figures) they have not personally evaluated. In 1991, the 'Common Rule' was published, a Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects, detailing the principles for Institutional Review Boards. More recent ethical principles were issued by UNESCO, such as the Declaration on Ethical Principles in Relation to Climate Change or the Universal Declaration on Bioethics and Human Rights.

Ethics frameworks were translated into practice with the help of practical recommendations, methodologies and guidelines. One of the fundamental concepts in ethics is the informed consent, which is an initial document that should be given to each participant before taking part in any research procedure. As per Christians' (2005) account, 'research subjects have the right to be informed about the nature and consequences of experiments in which they are involved' (p. 144). He continues to note that there are two 'necessary conditions' of participatory research: the first is the voluntary participation of subjects/respondents/ contributors, and the second one is the existence of a truthful informed consent. Therefore, the participants need to agree to take part in the research design, and they should be correctly informed about the scope of the research, the method/s involved, the duration of their contribution, potential risks or rewards associated and anything else deemed to be essential. Utilitarian exceptions are permitted, such as in the case of an experiment, where the subjects are told the real aims of the research after they have de facto gone through the experimental manipulation. But as deception is ‘morally unacceptable’, and information in fields such as medicine or some social sciences need a partial concealment of the scope of the research, ‘deception by omission’ can be a partial solution to this dilemma (Christians, 2005, p. 145).

Anonymity, confidentiality and data privacy are integral elements of safeguarding policies, that ensure the data will be collected, handled, stored, analyzed and made public only under strict confidentiality rules. This warrants two elements: the ability of participants to have their identities protected, and to be able to answer freely, more honestly, without a tendency to give socially desirable responses. The potential trap of privacy lies withing the ability of researchers to recognize data as they are ‘insiders’, and therefore ‘what appears neutral on paper is often conflictual in practice’ (Christians, 2005, p. 145).

Researchers who gather data have a responsibility towards both themselves and the scientific world to ensure data accuracy and to prevent any type of material fabrication, of fraudulent data or any inaccuracies that do not reflect reality. These responsibilities are tied to the principle of justice, mentioned above, justice which also refers to a ‘fair distribution of both the benefits and the burdens of research’ among participants, and avoidance of overutilizing certain groups of people (Christians, 2005, p. 146). Based on people’s availability, some can be overused in empirical research, therefor we need to be mindful that such ‘forced’ participation is detrimental to both researchers and contributors, issue that will be debated in the following sections.

In terms of public accountability, independent review of any research needs to be completed at the early stages of any research protocol. This is mandatory, firstly because ‘transparency enhances accountability by assuring the public that the research is not exploitative’ and secondly, to ensure ethical requirements are met and conflicts do not arise ‘because of different guidelines or regulatory requirements’ (Emanuel et al., 2004, p. 934). The review to avoid conflict of interests needs to be accompanied by a research design peer review procedure just before publication, to ensure data accuracy, publishing standards compliance and relevancy of the topic.

All of the aforementioned principles and standards make up a framework that sets the foundation for human based research. Each field of activity, be it law, education, medicine, psychology, etc., might interpret or refer to ethical standards slightly different than the other, and this is why review boards and other regulatory bodies (specialist from the local community, non-governmental organizations, local or national institutions, etc.) have such an important responsibility in ensuring that all the steps for ethical research are followed appropriately.

2.2. The Distinction between Micro-Ethics and Macro-Ethics

Research noted that the ethical implications of research entail a combination of 'moral, political, ideological and aesthetic considerations' (Georgakopoulou, 2017, p. 17). And ethical principles can vary, based on the type of methodologies used (qualitative vs. quantitative), the paradigm used to interpret the study design and results (such as positivism), or even based on opinions and beliefs that researchers hold (De Costa, 2015, Kubanyiova, 2013).

Generic ethical guidance, such as guidelines from journals, review boards, monitoring agencies or various professional organizations, are classed are 'macro-ethical'. Such regulations, labelled as best practices, should be applied and understood in the context of specific research contexts, including experiments, interviews, survey data collection and other types of qualitative or quantitative research (De Costa et al., 2020).

On the other hand, micro-ethics refer to 'practices that are customized to manage ethical dilemmas in an emergent manner, as opposed to subscribing to a one-size-fits-all approach to ensuring that ethical practices are adhered to' (De Costa et al., 2020, p. 123). Micro-ethics comprise 'everyday ethical dilemmas that arise from the specific roles and responsibilities that researchers and research participants adopt in specific research contexts' (Kubanyiova, 2008, apud. De Costa, 2015, p. 246).

Each of these perspectives received criticism, which one could argue is beneficial and much needed, for the advancement of science and the progress of ethical considerations. Ethical review boards (also called institutional boards) have been criticized for their proceduralist approach, especially during times where Western-dominated ethics regulations are applied in non-Western cultures. Experts suggest that the 'one size fits all' approach, meaning that the same rules are applied in completely different research contexts, might pose great risks, especially in research with indigenous communities, vulnerable groups such as people with disabilities, children, elderly adults, prison inmates and others (De Costa et al., 2020). Some groups of participants, such as minors, would not be able to give consent, but should still be asked about their interest in taking part in a study, before their parents or legal guardians can approve and consent for their participation. Similarly, not all cultural settings need to obtain a standardized consent form, as ‘different settings require different degrees of formality, informality and understanding’ (De Costa, 2015, p. 248). But we need to keep in mind that ethics is the building block of empirical research, and science and ethics do not conflict, but actually complement each other.

3. Key Ethical Aspects- a Multi-Disciplinary Perspective

3.1. Key Ethical Aspects in Law

Some experts have suggested that ‘fully ethical research is impossible to achieve’ (Busher; Clarke apud. Busher, 2002, p. 86). But in the field of law, ethics is an extremely complex matter, that is both subject to interpretations and also highly regarded by any legal professional.

Practitioners of law have to abide by the principles of legal ethics and the standards of conduct, which correct abuses, misconduct, malpractice or any misuses of the law. The Law Society in the United Kingdom lists the three ethical principles for solicitors (attorney, lawyer, barrister), namely to serve the interests of the clients they represent, to act in the full interest of justice, and to comply with the moral principles of the law while conducting themselves with honesty and integrity. The Solicitors Regulation Authority (SRA) was one of the first to publish and develop standards and regulations for law practitioners, that were adopted and implemented to reflect principles such as the rule of law, the appropriate administration of justice, acting with independence in the best interest of the client, while encouraging diversity, inclusion and equality (Law Society, 2020). The SRA Code of Conduct dictates the regulatory requirements and their Enforcement Strategy explains the actions the organization is taking to enforce and monitor these requirements in the public interest (SRA, 2018).

Various organizations or educational establishments base their codes of ethics on the codes that law practitioners abide by. All Universities have introduced codes of ethics, to help staff and students to make ethical decisions, to learn how to apply ethical standards in their lives and future work, and to understand how to deal with difficult or unexpected situations in an ethical manner. For example, the London School of Economics and Political Science have a code of ethics with six principles, some of which are accountability and responsibility, sustainability, collegiality, integrity, equality of opportunity and intellectual freedom (LSE, 2022).

In Romania, there are numerous codes of ethics for each individual organization. The Judicial Inspectorate has a separate procedure that concerns magistrates, the Superior Council of Magistracy has a code of ethics for prosecutors and for judges, and so does the National School of Clerks through their Code of Ethics (UNCAC). Also, personnel that works in the public sector have separate codes of ethics at each Ministry, generally titled Deontological Codes.

3.2. Key Ethical Aspects in Psychology

Much literature has been redacted on the topic of ethics in psychology, thanks in part to the systematic research that is done by students, academics, researchers and specialists connected to the field. The ethical guidelines have come a long way from the days of the American Social Science Association (ASSA, 1865), which was initially comprised of scientists from sociology, history, economics and political sciences, but in time each discipline separated (Clary, 2008).

When we refer to ethics in psychological research, we need to firstly understand what type of research can be done in this field of activity. In general, both qualitative and quantitative research in psychology (and other social sciences, such as sociology) start with a type of data collection. Depending on the research questions and the subject that is being investigated, we can collect data such as demographic questions (age, gender, ethnicity, educations, etc.), scores obtained as a result of an empirical scale (such as a questionnaire, a personality inventory, a self-checklist, etc.), performance scores on a test, or qualitative data from interviews, observation notes, essays, etc. As previously mentioned, the research design usually begins with the research questions (what is being investigated) and also how are the instruments applied to achieve accurate data collection (when-referring to time, where- location of data gathering, how often- frequency).

Surveys, experiments, interviews and case studies are generally the most used in psychological research in an academic setting. Every one of these methods can generate ethical issues, if used incorrectly. For example, recording participants without their knowledge or previous consent is both unethical and, in some countries, illegal. Similar to audio recording are any video recordings that might be captured without consent or even being made public, which is strictly forbidden by ethical laws. Another example is the interview method can generate psychological distress to some participants, if they are asked to recall trauma-related experiences that they might have gone through, or to discuss about sensitive topics such as family experiences, medical history, immigration status etc. 'Participants have a co-equal say in how research should be conducted, what should be studied, which methods should be used, which findings are valid and acceptable, how the findings are to be implemented, and how the consequences of such actions are to be assessed' (Denzin, 2003, p. 257).

It is somewhat obvious that the data collection procedure should follow strict rule and follow a truthful path, which reflects reality. Data forging, falsifications, data misrepresentations or misappropriation of information are all highly unethical and are generally followed by legal action.

3.3. Key Ethical Aspects in Applied Linguistics

As previously mentioned, micro-ethics practices were introduced to counteract omissions in applied linguistics research. Prominent linguists (De Costa & Kubaniyova, 2013) proposed that general protocols from ethics boards cannot offset misconduct, researcher bias, unprofessional or coerced relationships between participants and researchers. Linguists have demonstrated, over the course of decades of practice and testing, that in language acquisition, competences of students in terms of literacy and capacity to learn a second or a third language vary from person to person.

A leading authority in the United States is the Department of Health and Human Services, that implements the responsible conduct of research (RCR) for the graduate level students in applied linguistics (Sterling et al., 2016). The RCR is a 'set of ideas, or values, designed to help researchers conduct responsible and ethical work' (Sterling et al., 2016, p. 16). In Australia, there is the Australian Linguistic Society, which has its equivalent institution in the USA, named the American Association for Applied Linguistics, and in the UK, titled the British Association for Applied Linguistics (BAAL). Also, the Linguistic Society of America (LSA) issued a comprehensive statement on research ethics in 2009, which was based on older codes of ethics from the American Folklore Society and the American Anthropological Association (Mallinson, 2018). The codes of ethics stipulated clearly that in no way researchers should pose any risks to participants, to local communities, and have a responsibility towards them and to the field/area of study. Another indication was that any testing, investigation or experiment should be discussed in advance within the community, having the social and potentially political implications in mind, and then at the end, for the results to be made available to the public.

Alongside issues related to online testing, which poses risks to data confidentiality if handled improperly, researchers are expected to work responsibly, and ultimately prove accountable for the data collection procedure. A suggestion for such issues notes that 'ethical care can be expedited through taking a socially situated and sensitive approach to working with under-represented groups to protect their interests' (De Costa et al., 2020, p. 125). A second issue resides with the question of whether to treat qualitative research differently. The debate among some academics is that qualitative research can be 'low risk' for participants, or that the rigors of such data collection procedures are different from the strict biomedical setting (Hunter, 2018). A third aspect concerns the field of applied linguistics (AL) and second language acquisition (SLA) that 'have not placed research ethics first and foremost in discussion of research methodology' (Sterling et. al., 2016, p. 15).

More recent codes of ethics come from organizations such as the British Association for Applied Linguistics (2016) or from the International Association of Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL, 2014), both drawing guidelines of best practices with all parties involved in research within an international and multi-lingual context. Much emphasis is put on working with marginalized, vulnerable or minority communities, to inform them on their rights as participants and to educate them on the potential risks and benefits of research. For example, the Linguistic Society of America and the Sign Language Society both created information documentation in the sign language to enable deaf communities to benefit from the same rights as other users of languages. In terms of the connection between law and applied linguistics research, the framework called the Code of Ethics for Linguists in Forensic Linguistic Consulting was published in 2011, which details the responsibilities of those working in legal cases, consulting and offering testimony (Mallinson, 2018).

3.4. Key Ethical Aspects in Education and Teaching

Education institutions have a long history of promoting ethical standards, due to their direct involvement in both the educational process and the research endeavors. Universities, colleges and other affiliated educational institutions have a mission to preserve the integrity of research, to promote fairness and to guard ethical standards. They ‘recognize the need for all researchers, from beginning scholars to seasoned academics, to receive training on research ethics’ (Mallinson, 2018, p. 59).

The United States Council on Undergraduate Research has its own code of ethics, a framework that is meant to guide and inform but is ‘not meant to be a standard of enforceable conduct but rather seeks to provide a set of best practices adopted voluntarily’ (CUR, 2017, p. 1). The code lists the most important attributes that any individual involved in research should exhibit, such as Integrity, Respect, Fairness, a sense of Collaboration, all to promote communication, transparency, inclusivity, safety and interdisciplinarity across sciences, cultures and people. This document give advice on how to handle issues such as Conflict of Interests, which refers to a financially or non-financially context when either ‘an individual or institution is involved with multiple interests that may unduly influence one another, preventing objective decision making’ (CUR, 2017, p. 3).

There are numerous organizations which are concerned with ethics issues, in every single domain of activity. For example, the Association of Internet Researchers is extremely involved in the ethics field and developed their own code (Mallinson, 2018). Two major educational bodies, the National Education Association (NEA), the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS), are the regulators of ethics in the field of academic research.

If we think about practical applications of ethics in education, the examples are countless. A leading figure is Prof. Ema Ushioda, who proposed adopting collaborative frameworks between researchers and teachers, and also having teacher-let research practices. Her ethical agenda is ‘addressing real-world problems relating to language and communication in society’, based on the author’s experience in motivation research and academic activity (Ushioda, 2020, p. 16). She proposed that the ‘third-party’ classroom research approach is outdated, a potential ‘parasitic’ relationship driven by academic purposes, convenience samples, generalised findings, that do not bring any practical benefits to educational establishments, to students or their tutors.

To summarize, this section was focused on specific guidelines in research ethics, on examples of organisations that lead the field of ethics and on key aspects of social sciences in relation to human research. But what is clear and has been for decades for academics, researchers and even for participants, is that ethical issues can easily arise in any domain of activity.

4. Protecting the Interests of Researchers

Trust represents an essential element of the relationship between research ethics systems and the researchers. 'The role of research regulation as a safeguard for researchers from being too close to the subject matter or methods to see the risks/harms entailed would be lost' (Hunter, 2018, p. 293). Researchers' rights and interests are important but have been rarely mentioned in earlier literature on the subject. For example, young researchers who are working within a research team or with coordinators/ professors, are not immune to ethical breaches (De Costa et al., 2020).

Several suggestions have been made over the course of decades for the improvement of ethical practices for human studies, such as the refinement and amendment of ethics codes to improve their clarity, their efficiency and practical strength. Another suggestion is related to the IRBs, as review boards serve an important role, even if some believe they are a 'necessary evil'. IRBs are indeed critical entities, put in place to protect researchers, participants and the study design, and to make sure that their rights are protected, their values upheld, and ethical practices are implemented (Mallinson, 2018). For the academic sector, and especially for students or young researchers, experts propose organizing more detailed ethics courses, workshops, CPDs (continuous professional development), but some have said even these changes would not make a significant difference (Christians, 2005). Across time, the level of training for young researchers is similar, if not the same, when comparing ethics training from 30 years ago until today (Sterling et al., 2016). Another recommendation is placing a greater responsibility with the peer reviewers of the human studies, who would have more expertise in the field of study they review, rather than having the ethical committees decide (Hunter, 2018). Other authors highlighted the greater danger for developing countries and their respective populations, as they 'assume the risks of research, but most of the benefits may accrue to people in developed countries' (Emanuel et al., 2004, p. 930). Ethical institutions in developing nations might be less experienced, potentially underfunded and therefore less successful in preventing participants exploitation and upholding the interests of their research community. Also, many studies might involve working with vulnerable groups, such as refugees, minors, homeless individuals, abused women, ex-offenders, people with disabilities, all of which should have their specific needs considered, ethical standards followed to the letter and rights shielded. Moreso, the rights, needs and interests of researchers should also be protected and guarded, as they are at the center of research.

Conclusions

As noted above, research ethics is a complex, broad field, often subjected to interpretations and disputes. But it is also a domain that has come a long way, it changed and adapted to be able to improve and guard the interests of all the parties involved in research. Although there are many aspects of ethics that are not ‘black or white’ but reside in a gray zone, research ethics is a much-needed guardian of human research, it is indispensable and has to continue to evolve. As Sterling et al. pointed out, researchers have to make sure that their ‘research methods are reliable, replicable, valid and generalizable’ (2016, p. 33). Continuous and thorough training in ethics is needed for all new researchers, ever since they are taught how to use research methods and apply them on human-based research. The grey area that might exist in certain ethical aspects of psychology, linguistics, education, should be clarified and refined. The IRBs need to continue their work and support researchers to follow ethical standards and procedures, avoid any questionable practices and have at the forefront of their minds the greater good of the participants. No shortcuts should be taken for the ‘benefit’ of science, in the detriment of vulnerable participants, and each researcher should be encouraged to do the right things in terms of ethics. Finally, maybe the simplest yet effective suggestion is that communication between all parties involved in research should be a continuous practice, experience sharing and collaboration between researchers, Universities, the IRBs, the local communities and the participants should become normalized and encouraged.

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