Research Ethics Procedures & Practices

Orientation for Researchers & Reviewers in Education

purpose

This document provides a light-touch orientation to the research ethics procedures through Rhodes' Education Faculty Research Ethics Committee (REC), but also aims to strengthen the ability of researchers to act ethically throughout the course of their studies and projects, specifically in Education, but also in other fields, including transdisciplinary fields.

From conceptualisation to publication and beyond, there are many moments during research when decisions are made that have ethical implications. Ethical clearance *procedures* can prepare researchers for only *some* of these decisions. This document aims to bridge between the procedures and the *practice* of research ethics; to engage the ethical sensitivity of researchers and to help researchers figure out when and how we need to respond to ethical matters in research.

This is a living document. Please share your experiences of research ethics in practice to help us all expand our collective ethical sensitivity and response-ability.

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introduction

Ethical dilemmas and decisions are part of the everyday practice of doing research - all kinds of research. Whether we do educational experiments involving children, action research with our peers, case studies or surveys on communal land, or even only indirectly involve people when we analyse documents or other artefacts pertaining to them - there are ethical considerations to be made. These considerations are influenced by some general principles for ethical research, but also by the purpose and the type of study we are undertaking, in particular contexts that may shape how we apply these principles. Universities' Research Ethics Committees (RECs) may be strongly influenced by the requirements for clinical research. Research ethics are strongly rooted in Health fields because they grew out of the remedial actions taken to prevent a recurrence of the harmful medical and psychological research done on captives during World War II, involving experiments on people without their consent. The review in Europe of these unethical research practices, resulted in the Nürnberg Protocol (1946). A

more recent example is the Declaration of Helsinki in 1996, produced by the World Medical Association, but referred to for all research across disciplines.

Since the 1960s, academics have also formulated guidelines more appropriate for social research which does not involve clinical interventions, but nonetheless involves people. Many were concerned that applying guidelines for biomedical research to social research, without careful thought, could actually be less ethical, because social research involves different kinds of starting points, intentions, and risks. The field of research ethics is however one characterised by much debate and requires ongoing deliberation.

African universities have embraced the need for ethics protocols for studies done in Africa, often with Northern partners, to avoid exploitation of local 'subjects'. There have been debates as to whether the same standards and principles should be applied across Northern and African contexts. While Africans are in no way less worthy of protection than European subjects, normative practices and risks may vary across contexts (including the diverse contexts on continents).

Evidence of ethical clearance is now required in most academic contexts, at the point where a study is first approved, examined, and published. This, and the introduction of the RECs who have the task of providing this clearance, has been linked to a rising tide of managerialism in higher education worldwide, where universities and publishers put in place procedures to protect themselves from litigation, should they be found to have produced or published unethical research. The RECs consist of academics who volunteer to alert fellow researchers and the institution if an study is being planned that may, either intentionally or inadvertently, be harmful to the researcher, research participants, or the university's reputation. For this purpose, the REC's often use a set of standard questions. In South Africa the Department of Health's National Health Research Ethics Council (NHREC) produced *Norms and Standards* (2015) with a short chapter on "qualitative research" (pp.73-75) and a recommendation that researchers should in addition to general principles, refer to "discipline - or paradigm specific ethical norms and frameworks" (p.75).

"Ethical research is much more than research that gained the REC approval"

REC's and online application forms cannot foresee all possible ethical decisions that will be relevant in a particular study. Researchers must consider ethics beyond the REC form, expand on their ethical intentions and preparations in their research proposals, and attend to them throughout the study. Completing a form and getting a clearance letter does not absolved us from further ethical considerations. Similarly, when we complete the forms, or review researchers' responses in forms, we need to consider what is actually appropriate for a particular type of study in a particular context. The NHREC *Norms and Standards* recognize that ethical tensions may arise "from specific methodologies and analytic approaches" and require RECs to consider these "competently, fairly and without prejudice" (*ibid*). Ideally, the REC protocols allow for contextual interpretation. There needs to be a relationship between the protocol and research practices in the field, and this relationship should be reflexive in nature. That is, as researchers and REC reviewers, we need to ask:

- How do ethical principles apply to this particular study, with this purpose and in this context?
- Is the purpose of this study ethical? Does the framing & design support an ethical purpose?
- What ethical risks can be foreseen about the way in which this study is likely to roll out, that can be reduced up front, or prepared for?
- What is the role and position of the researcher, and how could this be influencing processes?

The bridge between a once-off ethics procedure (application for ethics approval) and ongoing ethical research practices in the doing of research, is reflexivity, on the part of reviewers and researchers.

ethical principles for research

The primary responsibility for the conduct of ethical research lies with the researcher and in the case of inexperienced researchers, with the supervisor appointed by the university to guide them. Researchers need to continuously act ethically in conducting and communicating their research. To do so, a researcher can draw on a number of different approaches to research ethics, for example:

- Utilitarian approaches (for the greater good, the end justifies the means)
- Kantian or deonotological (apply rules or principles regardless of context)
- Rights-based approaches (guided by individual human rights, a form of deontological)
- Justice-based approaches (individual rights may be supplanted by justice considerations)
- Critical and emancipatory approaches
- Covenantal (researcher has a trust-based agreement or shared objective with participants)
- Situational ethics (application of principles vary according to the situation)
- Relational ethics, e.g. ethics of care.

Some approaches may be more appropriate in a particular study than others, depending on the research purpose, methodology and context. Researchers must be able to justify their choice to peers, reflexively, e.g., by carefully examining the underlying assumptions in the design of the study, and the effects of these assumptions in the enactment of the research and its findings.

respect

Researchers must respect the integrity and dignity of their participants, and not simply use them for the benefits of the researcher. The Kantian maxim explicitly highlights that:

“People should never be used merely as a tool to advance someone else’s aim, a mere means to another’s end.”

In this statement we see principles of respect for others, and of benefit. If we respect research participants, we treat their contributions honestly and accurately; we also make sure they know they are part of a research process, what it will entail (as much as we can foresee this beforehand), that they can withdraw at any point, and that they have a right to speak back to the research.

Respect is expressed differently from villages to boardrooms, and how it will apply in a particular context, requires thought on the part of the researcher, perhaps in conversation with others. Do your homework about the context! The KhoiSan communities in Botswana and Namibia, who have hosted many researchers over the years, have drawn up a code of conduct for researchers. There may be similar guidelines for the context in which you want to do undertake your study.

Also think about how to engage people as research participants, who would actually agree that the research is a good idea, and willingly sign up for and stay with it, rather than as research subjects, who should ideally be kept in the dark about much of the research, or coaxed to contribute, every step of the way. Researchers can find innovative ways of engaging people in participating in the enquiry process, such that there is little need for coercion.

Example: If one is interested in the problem of farmers who shoot or poison wildlife that may prey on their livestock, one could go about the study in different ways. For example, one could seek a correlation between variables like *farmer personality* and *attitudes towards wild predators*. This framing of the research is likely to see the researcher administering a personality test which would probably not involve full disclosure of the motive of the study. Alternatively, one could engage farmers in open conversations about their practices in relation to wildlife, and the kinds of factors that may interest them in changing those practices.

Could both these study designs result in new knowledge? Which would be more ethical? Which would better address the problem of wildlife killings by farmers?

consent and assent

Full information about the study and its intentions, in accessible formats, is a respectful way to encourage and enable participation in research. Information about a study can be shared in a written page or other accessible format, e.g. a voicenote in the intended particicipant’s home

language. Give careful thought to what information a person would need, in order to make an informed decision about participating in the study. This could include: the intended benefits, the potential risks and discomforts (if any), that participation is voluntary, how the research will be communicated, the rights to privacy, how personal information will be protected, and the freedom to withdraw at any time. In some cases, the researcher may already be part of a collective with participants. An example is a study which involves all B.Ed. lecturers deciding to collectively research their assessment practice, or a development officer starting a research project with a youth group she has been leading for some time. Still, it is important to document that everyone understands what the proposed research entails and how they want to be involved. This is particularly so where there may be power differences, for example where a researcher is, say, the head of school observing junior colleagues doing their assessments.

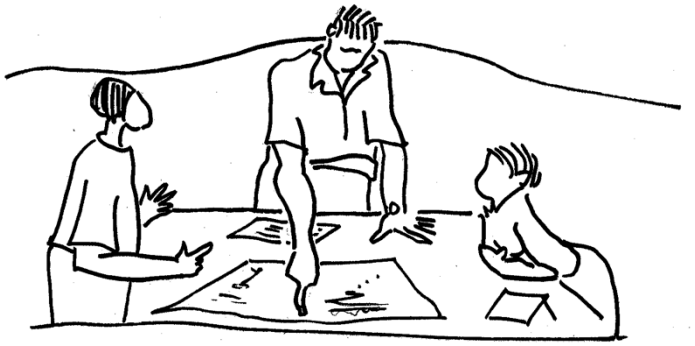
The potential benefits of the study need to be clear. The relational ethics approach suggests that we can be educational and developmental when we approach potential participants, expanding their understanding of the benefits the research may hold, and also hearing back from them what would be beneficial. Here the principle becomes not simply "do no harm" (known as non-maleficence) but, "do some good" (known as beneficence). When researchers attend to societal concerns in earnest and attune themselves to expressed needs, it becomes possible to engage with potential participants in a co-constructive dialogue with transparency and honesty.

Benefits emanating from research, besides advancing the researcher's career, may be indirect e.g. contributions to knowledge generation, advancing professional practices, theory, and opening up new knowledge fields (so-called "blue skies" research). Benefits can offset risks BUT only if they are actually shared. Especially where there is the possibility of harm (direct or indirect) or where psychological pain or discomfort is likely to be experienced by participants, the researcher must have strong justifications in terms of potential benefit, processes to minimise potential harm, and the means to manage harm if it does occur. (An example would be a distress protocol, to assist a person who is upset during an interview about sexual harrassment at work).

"Informed consent is not a moment but a process. It occurs in the relationship between researchers and participants - rather than in the documents produced for the REC."

It is not always possible to know whether a study will benefit others, or what risks might arise, as we cannot foresee how the process may unfold and what the outcomes will be. For this reason, researchers may implement a continuous dialogue or processual approach to consent. In relational ethics, informed consent is not only applicable before the study starts, but an ongoing process in which the researchers checks in with participants throughout the study. They are given opportunities to give and withdraw consent at any time during a study. It is good practice to ask for consent to interview and record, at the start of an interview or focus group discussion, but also to ask participants to what extent they wish to give consent for its use, and whether they want to be anonymous or named as the source of the information, after the session is concluded, and again when the transcript is shared. This is an example of "processual consent".

Note that consent needs to be recorded, but it need not be in writing and for all but the most high-risk studies, it need not be witnessed (as a legal contract). Letters and information sheets must to be comprehensive in terms of pertinent information, but also succinct, error free and professional.



In the case of children or adults who may struggle to understand the purpose of the research, it is a requirement to get consent (in form of a letter or other record) from parents, guardians or caretakers who can judge whether the research poses a risk to any individual. Here consent means that these individuals may be approached by the researcher, based on full information about the research provided to guardians. Once consent is given, the researcher can seek assent from the participants, which may be given and recorded in any appropriate way. Assent is proof of willingness to participate in research given by persons defined as too young (younger than 18 years) or otherwise having limited capacity to give informed consent.

Note: In educational research, children are not necessarily at high risk.

The risk level can be low or moderate e.g. in a study by a teacher who: has an existing relationship with the children; conducts tests of skills or knowledge that do not constitute more than the risks inherent in normal daily activity (in this case schooling); and uses her or his professional judgement, knowledge of the children, and mitigation measures (e.g. debrief with learners who obtained poor results). Nonetheless, research can be a departure from the daily routine and is likely to be made more public than normal schooling. Children (and colleagues) need to know this and need to indicate whether and to what extent they want to be involved and visible; that they can exit from the study (even if previously agreed); that they will not be sidelined if they opt not to participate, and that they can choose whether and how they want to be known, when the research becomes public. In many cases, children will enjoy being part of a research project that adds interest and variety to the school day. The impact on their learning can be positive. However, it can also be detrimental, e.g. if their teacher becomes too distracted and fails to actually teach them. Making a judgement call about this requires the researcher and supervisors' careful consideration, followed by second and third opinions from the REC; and will also require educational authorities' scrutiny. Most authorities have rules about research taking place during teaching time, which should be carefully considered. This links to another dimension of access to research sites, even if the site is one's own classroom, which is sometimes called "gatekeeper permission" and is discussed next.

gatekeeper permission

Gatekeepers are individuals or institutions that act as intermediaries between a researcher and the potential participants, with the power to give or deny access to carry out the intended research. Not all study contexts have gatekeepers. However, some institutions do require that officials or managers be informed of planned research taking place in the institutions or workplaces for which

they have responsibility, and will need to see the proposal and ethics instruments before giving their formal approval for the study to go ahead. Such approval should be recorded, in writing or otherwise, and the record kept by the researcher. Officials and managers may change over the life of a study, and an unrecorded agreement can be disputed when circumstances change.

Gatekeepers are 'guardians' of an institution and of those for whom they would have some responsibility at the time that the research is conducted. The 'gatekeeper' must make a judgement call as to whether the proposed research will disrupt the activities at the institution, and whether any intended benefit will offset this disruption.

Examples of gatekeepers are:

- Principals and other officials, for research taking place in schools - each national education department or ministry has published their particular regulations in this regard
- The registrars at universities, for research with current students
- The Department of Higher Education and Training, for research in the Department or associated entitities like Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs) (in South Africa)
- Employers (usually the Human Resources or HR department), for research in the workplace
- Social work professionals and/or officials, when research is to involve youth in a care facility
- Authorities at prisons, mines, hazardous sites and other places with restricted access
- Leaders of churches, labour unions, political parties and membership organisations if the research could carry a risk for the body in question (this could under some circumstances be waivered - see below).

Whether a particular study requires gatekeeper permission or not is often a grey and/or contested area. The gatekeeper is literally the holder of power, and in some studies that power or the conditions it creates, may be the very topic of interest in the research. For example, researchers may be interested in the absence of academic freedom in a university with an authoritarian senior management group. Or, research could be into ways in which traditional law limits women's access to resources in a village with a traditional authority. In such cases, the researcher can acknowledge that gatekeeper permission would ordinarily be sought, but argue that in this case, it should be waivered (set aside).

The Human Resource (HR) department at a university should be given an opportunity to guard its institution against a potentially inflammatory study on a topic that is known to be particularly sensitive in that institution. On the other hand, if a researcher plans to do interviews about homework among the parents in a university town, at their homes, it is unlikely to need HR permission to interview even those parents who work at the university, as they will not be interviewed as staff. Should the study be linked to a university-developed course supporting staff with homework support, then such permission may on the other hand be appropriate.

The researcher and the REC together should establish whether gatekeeper permission is required, or not. Where gatekeeper permission is considered necessary, it should be requested and recorded in a

format suitable to the context. It could be in the form of a letter on the university's letterhead and signed by the supervisor, to be co-signed by the gatekeeper. In the case of a traditional leader it may be in the form of a cellphone recording of a formal meeting between the researcher or their supervisor and the leader, in which the study is explained and the permission to proceed, is verbal. Information given should cover the necessary content and be factually correct. It should also include a contact number where the gatekeeper can get further information about research ethics at the university. Leaving such a number behind in a letter could be a complement for a voice recording.

anonymity and privacy

Another ethical consideration is whether or not to disclose the identity of research participants, and to attribute specific research findings to certain individuals. Always keep participants' personal information secure. South Africa has laws, based on the Protection of Personal Information (POPI) act which safeguards details such as identity number, address and phone numbers, as this is information that could be used for harmful purposes (like identity theft for commercial crime, or stalking) should someone with ill intent manage to obtain them from poorly kept research records.

In most medical and psychological studies, and research on illegal practices (such as poaching, or the buying of degrees) being identified can put the research participant at risk of harm or embarrasment. In such cases, the participants should be assured of confidentiality; that is, the information they contribute will not be communicated in such a way that it can be traced back to them, either because their name is used, or because they can be identified in some other way e.g. through their position, or the name of their institution.

Some information shared may be so sensitive and create such high risks, that it is best not to use it. Should the researcher deem it appropriate to nonetheless use this information all identifiers should be removed when analysing and writing up the research findings, and where data is stored. Where participants are easily identifiable by their characteristics or their positions in an organisation, inform them that it may be difficult to assure their anonymity and they should think about that what information they do share with the researcher, or what opinions they do voice out.

In many studies, however, anonymity and confidentiality may not be issues at all. In some types of research, in fact, such as participatory action research, participants may *want* to be recognised by name or by pseudonym for the contributions that they have made, in the research report, and/or in talks given about the research. In historical studies about well-known public figures, it may be particularly important to provide the names of the sources. Each discipline will have conventions in this regard, and these, along with the particular study being undertaken, should be taken into account, before anonymity is offered as the assumed only ethical practice.

As suggested earlier in relation to processual consent, the researcher needs processes to determine whether the information shared in interviews, focus groups, written documents or questionnaires is confidential or not, and need to treat it accordingly. Codes are normally used for confidential information, and in such cases the identity of the source should not be traceable back to the code or to other information the thesis, paper or presentation (e.g. naming the sources as "the VC of Rhodes

University"). Remember however that for many, participating in research and contributing to the envisaged benefits, can be (turned into) an enriching experience, and they may even prefer to be acknowledged, by name or otherwise, for their contributions. It is good ethical practice to determine whether this is the case.

"The face of the other must be visible (meaning they should be recognized as a concrete person rather than a generalized or abstract person) for ethics to be enacted."

vulnerability and justice

The concept of vulnerability in ethics focuses our attention on groups or individuals who may require special consideration to ensure that their participation in research does not expose them to additional risk. There are groups or individuals who, *in some contexts*, may already be vulnerable to risks such as stimatization, economic exploitation, physical harm or psychological pressure, in ways which could be exacerbated by research if we are not careful.

Researchers should describe ethical practices with respect to *all* intended research participants, considering that some individuals in a group may be vulnerable (at times) and others not, e.g. a child who had been bullied on social media may not want to be filmed while other childrenin the same group may love the camera. When identifying people as vulnerable, also consider context; a young woman of limited financial means may be vulnerable while seeking employment but resourceful and strong in relation to her family, and research that positions the "subject" as *essentially* and *always* in deficit, can in itself cause harm when it treats or describes people in ways that may make them feel less than they are.

Think back to the example of the head of school observing junior lecturers doing assessments. The situation may make them vulnerable, or it may empower them, depending on how it is approached. In some theoretical framings of ethics, *justice* looks at the fairness of the research to participants, what is required of them (e.g. the kind of information they are expected to divulge, or being put to the test in someone else's experiment) compared to who benefits from the research, who carries the burden or takes the risks. But where social, environmental or economic justice is the main intent of the planned study, more considerations start to apply. Here, the researcher and REC may want to ask:

- Is the proposed research justified?
- Should we avoid research with vulnerable groups (e.g. poor people, children)? Or should we actually focus our research on such groups?
- What may be the unintended impact of positioning people as essentially vulnerable, deficit, less literate/educated/wealthy/capable?
- Can we create the conditions in which people would be(come) more capable and resilient, less vulnerable? Can and should research create more just conditions?

positionality and reflexivity

It is advisable that in all studies, the researcher explicitly considers their own positionality and its possible impact on the study, as part of research ethics. There are several dimensions to researcher positionality. One is the standpoint or stance of the researcher in relation to the topic of the study; for example, a researcher who admires the ruling political party is likely to approach a study of the party differently to a researcher whose starting point is to be critical of the party. Either way, the stance of the researcher will influence aspects of the research design and perhaps even the outcomes, for better or worse, and readers of the research should be privy to this information. Another aspect of positionality is the researcher's role or position in the context in which the study will take place, either in the community, the organization or the participant group. A researcher may be a long-standing colleague, a senior official, a funder, from a different country or language group.

The position of the researcher, in the ways mentioned and many others, may influence the research process in countless ways, e.g. how questions are asked or constructed, the choice of method for the study, how participants respond and how findings are interpreted. It is well known that people express different views and values in different contexts, without necessarily being dishonest. When explaining their study choices to friends, students may emphasize different aspects compared to what they may share with their lecturers, their parents, or a prospective employer. Whether they are interviewed by a fellow student, or a lecturer-researcher, may therefore influence research findings. A researcher is *reflexive* about their positionality when they acknowledge and interrogate the influence of their particular characteristics (age, gender, language, race, status, beliefs, sexual orientation, networks, political or other allegiances, etc.) may have in a particular context.

"Researchers should outline their own position in relation to the research, and the implications that their position might have on influencing various aspects of the study, including its starting assumptions."

Reflexivity is evident when researchers as drivers of a research project understand how choices about research processes may shape outcomes, reflect upon the ways in which the research project is carried out and self-examine their own beliefs, judgments and practices and how these may influence everything from the research design to the final conclusions.

applications in context

determining risk levels

HIGH RISK: There is a real and foreseeable risk of harm which may lead to serious adverse consequences if not responsibly managed. E.g. highly sensitive topics like experience of violence; participants with multiple vulnerabilities e.g. children of substance abusers; research involving deception; research that is likely to place participants or researchers in the way of harm. Remedial interventions by external professionals can be taken should harm occur; support or counselling must be provided for participants / researcher.

MODERATE RISK: Likely risk of some harm for participants and/or the researcher, but steps can be taken to mitigate or reduce risks. Discomfort or limited harm to a participant e.g. anxiety or stress. Support / counselling services and a distress protocol (what to do if harm occurs) must be in place, if appropriate.

LOW RISK: The likelihood or magnitude of possible harm is no greater than that imposed by daily life in a stable society, including routine educational or psychological tests. OR Where the only foreseeable risk is that of inconvenience or discomfort, OR there may be some sensitivity to questions asked.

All methods whereby data or information is collected and recorded will be considered to determine the study's level of risk, e.g. observations, photographs, filming, interviews and phone recordings, photocopying of public or private documents.

risk associated with research locations

Some **locations** hold more or less risk for researcher and participants. A communal area can be safer for both parties than a private area, or not, depending on the topic and context.

causing distress and how to respond

DISTRESS PROTOCOL must be activated in the case that an interviewee becomes distressed.

ethical treatment of data

The researcher needs to indicate in his/her proposal what good ethical practices would be used during sharing and dissemination of research results and findings.

re-using data for other studies

Researchers should indicate whether stored data from the proposed research can be made available for reuse in another research study, publication or longitudinal survey follow up. This needs to be explained and justified to ensure that privacy, anonymity and confidentiality of participants will be maintained where applicable.

research ethics in emergencies

In 2020 and possibly into 2021, the world is in the grip of the Covid-19 pandemic. While there are as yet no vaccines for the novel Coronavirus-2, our best measure for reducing the risk of infections is to limit direct contact between people. This means that research involving human interactions must for the foreseeable future preferably be carried out remotely.

What to do if you have already received ethical clearance to conduct face-to-face data collection methods? Should you and your supervisor(s) find it appropriate to adapt your study and use online or other remote data collection methods, inform the REC Chair of the changes so these can be on record. Your chosen research methods must still be aligned to the purpose or intent of your study.

There are a number of alternative data collection methods that take social-distancing into account. Surveys can be conducted telephonically or online (using Google, Survey Monkey and other applications); there is much experience in this regard as it is an established research practice. Interviews and focus group discussions can be conducted telephonically or online, e.g. via Skype, Zoom, Microsoft Teams or Whatsapp calls. Observations could potentially be done with approved, installed cameras, or by participants themselves. A useful resource that is crowd-sourced is Deborah Lupton's *Doing fieldwork in a pandemic*. You could also consider shifting your research question so that you can gather data using sources that already exists e.g. policy documents, evaluation reports (e.g. for a meta-evaluation study) or digital artefacts.

Online research methods have overlapping as well as distinct ethical considerations with research conducted in person. One still has to consider ethical aspects concerning the environment of the research participants, which may be a much more private or a more exposed space than the spaces where a face-to-face interview would have taken place. The privacy of the research participants and others in that space, informed consent, potential risks, intended benefits, and good ethical practices during the sharing and dissemination of research findings, still apply.

New considerations are whether the research participants have access to digital connectivity, data and suitable devices, and how the use of these devices may expose them. Where those members of the population in which are are interested, do not have digital access, consider how this may skew your findings about that population. Also take into consideration that people may be feeling uncertain and anxious during this pandemic, and approach related discussions with sensitivity and care.

Should you use already existing documentation or online media texts, it is important to distinguish between private or public information.

resources

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