Deccan Education Society's

Fergusson College (Autonomous) Pune

Research Coordination Committee

The Code of Ethics Of An Ethical Review Board For Research In Social Sciences And Humanities

Purpose of an ethical review board for research in Social sciences and humanities

There is a growing number of students, teachers and research scholars who are conducting major and minor research projects in the domain of social sciences. Human participation in these studies is not only common but unavoidable as the phenomena under investigation concern human beings.

In recent years researchers have increasingly ventured into topics that touch upon social and ethical dilemmas and controversial subjects. While the researcher has and should enjoy freedom to explore diverse topics, it is an obligation that we have towards society to protect the interests and integrity of the participants of the research. The research studies also must be carried out with the intention of social welfare. As researchers we also bear responsibility towards funding agencies and collaborators.

The purpose of an ethical review board is to ensure that the research studies being undertaken in the organization do not violate the integrity of the participants and are geared towards the betterment of society. Another objective of an ethical review board is also to ensure good scientific practice, like originality of research ideas, methodologically sound research designs, good scientific reporting practices, and anti-plagiarism practices. Recognizing the need for a body that educates students and teachers about good research practices and also one that monitors research projects undertaken at educational institutions, the UGC has recommended that each institution has its own Office of Research Integrity (ORI) at the local level (Patwardhan et al, 2020).

General ethical principles and ethical standards

The American Psychological Association (APA) has listed down the following general ethical principles for research with human participants:

A. Beneficence and non-maleficence
B. Fidelity and responsibility
C. Integrity

D. Justice and
E. Respect for peoples' rights and dignity

Of course these are broad ethical principles and should not be used to impose sanctions and should not be considered as obligations.

The overarching ethical principles that have been laid down by the **WHO** concerning research are:

1. respecting human dignity and integrity
2. ensuring honesty and transparency towards research subjects
3. respecting individual autonomy and obtaining free and informed consent (as well as assent whenever relevant)
4. protecting vulnerable individuals
5. ensuring privacy and confidentiality
6. promoting justice and inclusiveness
7. minimising harm and maximising benefit
8. sharing the benefits with disadvantaged populations, especially if the research is being carried out in developing countries
9. respecting and protecting the environment and future generations.

The need to scrutinize research proposals that methodologies involving human participation

Numerous tools like surveys, self report questionnaires, rating scales, projective techniques, interviews, experiments and observations are used to carry out research studies. It is likely that a participant's identifying data is revealed in the process. It is also possible that the participant feels uncomfortable while answering questions in inventories or interviews or while participating in experiments. If researchers are accused of violating the personal rights of the participants they can be subjected to heavy penalties as this constitutes a criminal offense. The use of informed consent in research is therefore crucial in social science research. Also the participants must be explained that they can leave the research project any time they wish to without having to explain their decision to the researcher. The detailed description of what is needed to be included in **informed consent** is as follows:

A. Explaining participants the aims, methods and implications of the study.
B. Clarifying that participation is voluntary.
C. Explaining the benefits, risks, burden or discomfort involved in participation. Giving an estimate of the time and effort expected of participants.
D. Explaining precautions to ensure participants' safety and provide information on insurance, if there is any.

E. Explaining who is funding the research and why.
F. Disclosing who will benefit from the research.
G. Giving a firm commitment to protect participants' anonymity and privacy (provided that this can genuinely be guaranteed).
H. Making a clear commitment to treating personal and sensitive information confidentially.
I. Reassuring participants that there are secure procedures for analysing any data gathered.
J. Explaining clearly who will have access to any data that participants provide.
K. Considering any unintended/unexpected/incidental findings and explaining how such findings will be dealt with.
L. Explaining briefly where research findings will be published.
M. Offering to provide respondents with further information about research if they ask for it.
N. Giving the name and contact details of the contact person who can answer any queries participants may have.
O. Clarifying possible uses to which data may be put in future (if this is envisaged) and clarifying whether participants will be asked for consent again if this is the case.
P. Explaining any issues relating to copyright of data and other materials used in the research.

Sometimes **controversial methodologies** need to be used in social science research. Some such methodologies are:

A. use of deception in research
B. covert research
C. internet research and social media data in research

These methodologies are used in social science research because the open explanation of the aims and purpose of the research might inhibit honest responses of the participants. In case of the use of such alternative methodologies, strong justification for their use must be provided.

Other circumstances which necessitate the approval of the research proposal from a research committee include:

A. Vulnerable participants such as children, refugees, irregular migrants, sex workers, people with cognitive impairments, dissidents, traumatised people at risk of re-traumatisation (e.g. people from conflict areas, victims of crime and/or violence); and people in dependent relationships with the researcher or the research team (e.g. students doing course work with researchers). When there is a risk that these participants might be stigmatized, re-

traumatized or otherwise harmed through their participation in the research, it needs to be carefully scrutinized.

B. Use of children in research

The ethical committee reviews the proposal of the research before the study begins as well as during the proposed period. In case the findings of the study fall outside the scope of the research project, appropriate measures need to be taken to report such findings or to protect the data.

Not every research proposal where human participation is enlisted can be risky for either the researcher, the collaborators, the funding agency, the participants or for society at large. Therefore most ethics boards have a process of risk assessment. A research proposal may be classified as "minimal risk project" when the potential discomfort that participants might experience because of the study is judged to be not above the discomfort they may experience in their day to day life.

But if the research project runs risk which goes beyond the "minimal risk" level, a full review of the proposal by a research ethics committee is required. These "high risk" researches include circumstances when:

A. participants are expected to talk about sensitive topics, highly private topics of their life,
B. Research involving potentially vulnerable groups and people unable to consent;
C. research involving sensitive topics and those which might cause psychological stress, anxiety or humiliation;
D. Individuals or groups in cases where a gatekeeper is normally required to give permission for initial or continued access to participants,
E. research involving justified deception without participants' valid and informed consent at the time the research is carried out;
F. intrusive interventions or data collection methods, such as the administration of substances, vigorous physical exercise, or techniques where participants are persuaded to reveal information which they would not otherwise disclose in the course of everyday life,
G. research which would or might induce psychological stress, anxiety or humiliation, or cause more than minimal distress,
H. research where the safety of the researcher may be in question;
I. research involving respondents through the internet, in particular where visual images are used, and where sensitive issues are discussed or where participants and other individuals may be identifiable in the visual images used or generated, social media and participants recruited or identified through the internet, especially if the understanding of privacy in

these settings is contentious when sensitive issues are discussed - for example in 'closed' discussion groups where there is potential for quotes to be identifiable, and including those where visual images are used or

J. any research where biological samples are collected and/or medical imaging technologies are used as part of social science research.

WHO guidelines about the constitution of the research ethics committee:

Composition of research ethics committees

The research ethics committee (REC) is constituted according to a charter or other document that establishes the manner in which members and the Chair will be appointed. The appointing entity ensures that the REC has a multidisciplinary and multisectoral membership, that its composition is gender balanced, that it reflects the social and cultural diversity of the communities from which research participants are most likely to be drawn, and that it includes individuals with backgrounds relevant to the areas of research the committee is most likely to review. The entity establishing the REC takes the following factors into consideration when appointing members.

1. Members include individuals with scientific expertise, including expertise in behavioural or social sciences; health care providers; members who have expertise in legal matters and/or ethics; and lay people whose primary role is to share their insights about the communities from which participants are likely to be drawn.

2. Lay people and other members, whose primary background is not in health research with human participants, are appointed in sufficient numbers to ensure that they feel comfortable voicing their views.

3. In order to enhance independence, committee membership includes members who are not affiliated with organizations that sponsor, fund, or conduct research reviewed by the REC

4. Committees are large enough to ensure that multiple perspectives are brought into the discussion. To this end, quorum requirements provide that **at least five** people, including at least one lay member and one non-affiliated member, are present to make decisions about the proposed research.

Core documentation required by ethics review committees

The following is a brief summary of the *minimum* items required for submission to an ethics review board or committee. Additional items that may be required will depend on the nature and scope of the proposed research.

The core documentation should include:

- the research proposal, showing the exact methods and procedures to be followed;
- evidence that the investigators' education and experience are appropriate for the proposed research;
- a statement on potential risks, demonstrating that they are within acceptable limits and are justifiable in relation to the anticipated benefits to participants, and to the role of the research in furthering global knowledge;
- a statement that no unethical deception of participants is involved, and no exaggeration of proposed benefits;
- a description of how confidentiality will be protected;
- a statement of how free and informed consent will be obtained. This will include the informed consent form to be used, describing the aims and objectives of the research, the procedures to be undertaken, and how this will be presented to participants;

The informed consent form should contain the following elements:

- a statement indicating that participation is voluntary, obtained without institutional or social pressure, and that there are no penalties for non-participation;
- a statement of any risks that may be incurred during or following participation;
- a statement of any inducements or compensations for participation;
- a statement confirming that participation can be withdrawn at any time, for any reason, without penalty;
- a statement on protection of privacy through strict confidentiality of the data;
- an indication that only information or samples described in the informed consent form can be obtained without additional review and approval by the ethics review committee;
- information on contacts within the RI for participants in case of questions or concerns.

For research involving IP, this essential documentation would also include proof of collective consent, and a copy of the research agreement, if one exists.

The need for upgrading the knowledge of current good research practices for ethical committee members

The Ethical Research Committee needs to undergo periodic training in order to keep up breast of the recent trends and good practices in research. The educational institution needs to organize such training programmes for ethical committee members from time to time.

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