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Ensuring ethical approach to research

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Abstract

Research serves to clarify and advance current knowledge for the purpose of informing action, offer the necessary evidence to support hypothesis. Ethics in research refers to adhering to and putting into practice a proper, legal, and moral code of conduct that would direct research. Considering these, this study discussed ethical principles that ensures that potential risks of harm are minimized for research participants and to examine the values/principles of ethical approach to research. To achieve ethical conducts in research, informed consent from volunteers, upholding confidentiality and anonymity to safeguard against malfeasance and protecting the study participants must be considered.

Keywords: Ethics; Research; Ensure; Conducts

1. Introduction

Research is an important aspect of life and can be done in different aspects of existence either in personal life, in the setting of the economy of the society/community, in academics, business, and in social settings. It helps to provide the needed evidence to assumptions, understand and upgrade the existing knowledge for the purpose of informing action [1].

It is very important that research is done within established principles. Research has ethical codes which guide it, and which should be adhered to by anyone that is participating in research.

Ethics in research refers to abiding by and implementing acceptable, legal, and moral code of conduct that would guide the conduct of research [2].

Johnstone [3] refers to ethics as a “system of principles which can critically change previous considerations about choices and actions.” The role of ethics in research cannot be overemphasized as it helps to raise necessary concerns if needed and guide all the stages of the research process, making sure that research is done in a responsible, legal, and moral manner [4].

The following ethical principles were identified to ensure that potential risks of harm are minimized for research participants:

- Beneficence
- Non-maleficence

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- Respect for persons
- Justice

The onus lies on the researcher/investigator to make sure that the study being conducted is done in a responsible, legal, and moral manner and that the people or subjects involved in the research are safeguarded from any harm, indignity, or embarrassment because they participated in the research. The privacy of the subjects of any research should be protected, as well as their rights and their autonomy.

Issues of ethical principles occur at different stages of the research process. According to Parveen and Showkat [2], these ethical principles are divided into:

- General research ethics
- Ethics related to research participants.

It is very important that ethical issues are considered and implemented whenever research is conducted, more so, research that involves human participants. The investigator is required to remove or minimize to a great extent any potential harm or risks to the research participants. This is done by ensuring the application of the principles of beneficence, non-maleficence, respect for persons, and justice [5].

The ethical approach to research can be ensured by ensuring that the values below are reflected and practised in the research process.

- Ensuring informed consent is gotten from the participants
- Maintenance of Confidentiality and Anonymity
- Protection of the participants through cooling off period and adequate care to the /for the vulnerable.
- Deception (Beneficence) when needed to protect the participants
- Using Debrief (Justice) as appropriate

These values/ practices will be examined further in this paper.

2. Ensuring informed consent is gotten from the participants

It is the responsibility of the investigator to make sure that the people that are participating in the research are adequately informed about the research, and that they grant informed consent [6]. This relates to the principles of non-maleficence and respect for persons.

The informed consent is expected to be clear in its scope including that the participants have the absolute right to withdraw from the research at any stage, either in the beginning, middle or end of the research without any repercussions to them. They also should be able to demand the recall or retrieval of the information that they had already given the investigator if they so desire when they withdraw their consent and or decline participating in the research [6]. This ensures respect for persons, a core principle of ethical research. Informed consent practised in this manner as described above will also fulfil the ethical principles of non-maleficence which means that the researcher / investigator will not do any harm to the people participating in the research by for example forcing them to take part in research which may negatively affect them either physically or psychologically.

The adoption of informed consent and its relation to these ethical principles as enumerated above can be traced to the formation of the Nuremberg Code, the formal code that aided the introduction of ethical conduct in medicine, research and professions throughout the world and which is the foundation of many international human right treatises. It was the Nuremberg code that signified the origin of the formulation of standards of natural laws in respect to the use of human beings in research worldwide. It came about following the barbarism of using humans against their will, consent or knowledge for experiment in concentration camps during the dark age of world turmoil in the recent past. The judgement of the justices involved in the Nuremberg trials was important in this regard [7].

The Nuremberg Code has central to its principles the ethical code of no maleficence which informed consent takes note of. This protects people who are vulnerable from harm and protects people from being harmed by malicious or out of control scientists and medical personnel especially as it pertains to research that uses human subjects.

3. Maintenance of confidentiality and anonymity

There is an increasing insistence and pressure on researchers to maintain the tenets of good research ethics – anonymity and confidentiality of the participants of their research projects. This is to help shield them from victimization and other ills that could befall them if their identities are exposed, or confidentiality breached. This relates to the principle of non-maleficence.

Many Journals and publishers encourage authors to shield the identity of their research subjects / participants through the removal of personal information that is vital and that could lead to compromising the ethical guarantees of the participants of the research. They are encouraged to adopt ‘pseudonyms’ for instance to hide the identification of the research participants. The maintenance of the confidentiality of participants in research will help protect those participants from shame and exposure to either psychological / physical harm and ensure that their private data is not compromised and or used for malicious purposes [8].

Anonymity ensures that pseudonyms are used to hide the real identity of people involved in the study as to shield them from witch-hunts which could arise due to their participation in a study [8].

Anonymity is very important in management research as revealing the identities of employees for instance who are involved in a research done in a firm could put the employees in the cross-hairs of the employers/management and have disastrous consequences for the employee especially if the management feel that the information provided by the employee had made a poor impression of the management of the company or had affected the reputation of the company or put their competitors ahead of them. This could lead to dismissal or suspension of the participating employees if the researcher doesn’t make conscious efforts to conceal their identities.

However, in the case of the entire organisation participating in the research as a block, concealing the identity of the organisation involved is dependent on the nature of the research, because hiding the identity of the organisation may have far-reaching implications on the acceptability of the research findings.

In cases where humans are used as research subjects in research pertaining to social sciences, it is the ethical standard to represent the participants anonymously to ensure they are protected from harm [9]. Example, people who participate in a study that investigates criminal activities should be protected against repercussions from the criminal organisations that is being investigated, and this can only be achieved by ensuring confidentiality and anonymity by using pseudonyms or ‘unnamed source’ to represent the participants of that research.

4. Protection of the participants through cooling off period and adequate care to the /for the vulnerable

The Research Ethic committee in the Qualitative Methods conference advanced a tactic to protect human research participants from harm coming to them during or as a result of research. This was termed the ‘two days cooling off period’. This refers to the period between when the investigator contacts the potential human subject of the research and the time the person / people involved agree to be part of the study [10].

The conference submissions notes that the presence of the investigator could be strong enough to pressurize the vulnerable participant to engage in the research when they could have had a different decision if they were given some time to think through their participation in the research. Example, people who have been raped or had traumatic experiences which make them vulnerable may consent to such research if they are not given adequate time to come to the decision on their own accord. The “cooling off” period therefore affords the potential research participants the time and preparation to engage and agree to participate in the research to avoid physical or emotional harm [10].

The investigator in research studies is also duty bound to ensure that individuals or groups that participate in the research are protected from physical or psychological harm and that vulnerable population groups such as people with disabilities, old, young, and infirm have adequate and the right care to make their participation in research convenient and easy as possible, without subjection to embarrassment, fright or fear and in a comfortable space [10].

5. Deception (beneficence) when needed to protect the participants

In some cases, there is the need to deceive the would-be study participants about some aspects of the research by misinforming with information that could be misleading.

This deception done in these cases could be used to establish the promotion of wellbeing and maximize the potential benefits of the research to the human subjects.

Deception carried out in research can be either of two forms.

- Deliberate deception
- Deception by omission

In deliberate deception, the participants of the study are misled about the aims of the research through the manipulation of the instructions they receive during the collection of the data.

In deception by omission, there is a failure of full disclosure of information about the study, or ambiguous information given about the study unknowingly.

Example, participants involved in research that could have the potential to cause a psychological emergency could be deceived and encouraged to participate in the research by not divulging all the information about the research and after they have gone through the research, a post study therapy could be provided to them to preserve their mental health.

In some socio-psychological & management research, there is the employment of deception routinely. Some of these studies involve the need to deceive the study participants to gain knowledge that could help in improving their situation. Participants in some of these studies would not have participated if deception was not employed before their participation.

It is important that after deception has been done and the aims of the research achieved, that study participants are properly debriefed as below.

6. Using debrief (justice) as appropriate

According to Treece and Treece [11], debriefing means the clarification of the true aims & objectives of the research to the human subjects of the research, post participation in the study, and the disclosure of the reasons behind withholding of full information about the study prior to their participation.

It ensures that the justice component of research ethic principle is practiced.

This usually occurs when there has been a deception in the research which involves / involved concealing aspects of information that pertains to the objective of the study.

According to Treece and Treece [11], human subjects in a research study should be made comfortable so that they can express their real feelings and communicate their thoughts.

In studies that the participants experience a high level of discomfort, after participation in the study is over, there should be a debrief session or the individuals involved should be referred for appropriate necessary professional intervention [12].

This ensures the ethical principle of justice by removing or ameliorating the risks both physical and psychological that the research participants are exposed to and ensures fairness. The investigator should also make sure that the research participants understand the aim of the debriefing and their concerns are addressed. When this is done well and correctly, it will ensure fairness.

7. Conclusion

Ensuring ethical approach to research is a process that involves actions that uphold the ethical principles such as doing no harm to participants, promotion of the well-being of the human participants of the research, respect for individuals involved in the research and ensuring justice and fairness in the research.

The above can be achieved by ensuring informed consent from participants, maintenance of confidentiality and anonymity and in that way ensure non-maleficence, protecting the study participants through cooling off days/ period

and ensuring adequate care for the vulnerable. Through deception and debriefing, the ethical principles of beneficence and justice can be achieved.

Compliance with ethical standards

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Disclosure of conflict of interest

The authors declare no competing interest.

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