

**A DISCUSSION ON THE ETHICAL ISSUES ENCOUNTERED
IN THE PROCESS OF CARRYING OUT RESEARCH**

By

Mwirigi Kiula, HD419-4128/2013

Directed by

Dr. Esther Waiganjo

Instructor, Research Methods

Submitted on

October 19th, 2013

1 Introduction

The National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences identifies the most common way of defining "ethics" as norms for conduct that distinguish between acceptable and unacceptable behavior (Resnik, 2011).

Research ethics provides guidelines for the responsible conduct of research, educates and monitors scientists conducting research to ensure a high ethical standard (Center for Bioethics, University of Minnesota, 2003).

Research ethics is specifically interested in the analysis of ethical issues that are raised when people are involved as participants in research (Walton).

The birth of modern research ethics began with a desire to protect human subjects involved in research projects especially after the abhorrent and torturous "experiments" in the Nazi Concentration Camps where physicians tortured, brutalized, crippled, and murdered thousands of victims in the name of research leading to the publication of the list of ethical guidelines for the conduct of research known as the Nuremberg Code (Center for Bioethics, University of Minnesota, 2003).

The field has received increased attention progressively henceforth with the Helsinki Declaration of 1964 and the Belmont Report of 1979 (Center for Bioethics, University of Minnesota, 2003). Currently, many universities and institutions of research publish guidelines for research ethics such as the University of Nairobi (University of Nairobi, Kenyatta National Hospital and KEMRI) and ethics in medicine by the Washington University School of Medicine (Callahan & Ron, 2010) among others. Many guidelines have been published in the recent years that are available locally and internationally including COPE, BERA and AERA (COPE, 2011) (BERA, 2012) (AERA, 2013).

While research ethics has traditionally focused on issues in biomedical research, today the attention has shifted to a broad range of areas (Walton). It has been adopted in all areas of research and dissemination of research activities as well as publication of research materials. This is witnessed with the existence of such institutions/forums as the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) (COPE, 2011), a forum for editors and publishers of peer reviewed journals to discuss all aspects of publication ethics. COPE also advises editors on how to handle cases of research and publication misconduct.

This diversification from biomedical research is also witnessed by the emergence of such bodies as the British Educational Research Association (BERA) and the American Educational Research Association (AERA) which provides international guidelines for quality research (COPE, 2011).

BERA is a member-led organization dedicated to supporting educational researchers and promoting high quality research in education which also seeks to enhance the field of study, the growth of public knowledge and critical understanding, and the application of findings for the improvement of educational policy and practice (BERA, 2012). AERA, on the other hand, is a national research society that strives to advance knowledge about education, to encourage scholarly inquiry related to education, and to promote the use of research to improve education and serve the public good (AERA, 2013).

The field has received much attention so far and therefore it behoves every researcher to make adequate ethical considerations in the process conducting research in any field of endeavor. The following sections review the need for ethical considerations in research and identify the core ethical issues that every researcher must address.

2 Ethical Issues in Research

2.1 The Need for Ethical Considerations in Research

Ethical considerations in research are extremely important. Ethical lapses in research can significantly harm human and animal subjects, students, and the public (Resnik, 2011).

They promote the aims of research, such as knowledge, truth, and avoidance of error; promote the values that are essential to collaborative work, such as trust, accountability, mutual respect, and fairness including guidelines for authorship, copyright and patenting policies, data sharing policies, and confidentiality rules in peer review, are designed to protect intellectual property interests while encouraging collaboration; ensure that researchers can be held accountable to the public including policies on research misconduct, conflicts of interest, the human subjects protections, and animal care and use are necessary in order to make sure that researchers who are funded by public money can be held accountable to the public; help to build public support for research through assurance of trust in the quality and integrity of research; and promote a variety of other important moral and social values, such as social responsibility, human rights, animal welfare, compliance with the law, and health and safety.

Research is a public trust that must be ethically conducted, trustworthy, and socially responsible if the results are to be valuable. All parts of a research project – from the project design to submission of the results have to be upstanding in order to be considered ethical. When even one part of a research project is questionable or conducted unethically, the integrity of the entire project is called into question (Center for Bioethics, University of Minnesota, 2003).

2.2 Ethical Principles in Research

A number of ethical principles in research have been documented. (Callahan & Ron, 2010) quoting from the Belmont Report of 1979 identify three key principles when dealing with human subjects. These include autonomy, which refers to the obligation on the part of the researcher to respect each participant as a person capable of making an informed decision regarding participation in the research study; beneficence, which refers to the obligation on the part of the researcher to attempt to maximize benefits for the individual participant and/or society, while minimizing risk of harm to the individual and justice, which demands equitable selection of participants, that is, avoiding participant populations that may be unfairly coerced into participating, such as prisoners and institutionalized children. Justice also requires equality in distribution of benefits and burdens among the population group(s) likely to benefit from the research.

The ethical principles can be generally summarized as here below (Resnik, 2011), (Shamoo & Resnik, 2009), (Callahan & Ron, 2010) (COPE, 2011). The research ethics are further emphasized by research guidelines published by various institutions including the University of Nairobi, COPE, BERA and AERA (University of Nairobi, Kenyatta National Hospital and KEMRI) (COPE, 2011) (BERA, 2012) (AERA, 2013).

2.2.1 Honesty

Researchers are required to strive for honesty in all scientific communications. They must honestly report data, results, methods and procedures, and publication status. They are also required to avoid fabrication, falsification, or misrepresentation data. Further researcher should desist from deceiving colleagues, granting agencies, or the public.

2.2.2 Objectivity

Researchers are required to avoid bias in experimental design, data analysis, data interpretation, peer review, personnel decisions, grant writing, expert testimony, and other aspects of research where objectivity is expected or required. They are expected to avoid or minimize bias or self-deception and to disclose any personal or financial interests that may affect research.

2.2.3 Integrity

Researchers ought to keep promises and agreements; act with sincerity; strive for consistency of thought and action. This is especially important with respect to non-disclosure commitments, confidentiality assurances and research to advance noble cause.

2.2.4 Carefulness

A researcher must seek to avoid careless errors and negligence; carefully and critically examine your own work and the work of your peers. This includes being able to keep good records of research activities, such as data collection, research design, and correspondence with agencies or journals.

2.2.5 Openness

It is important to share research data, results, ideas, tools and resources. A researcher must also be open to criticism and new ideas. This is all useful in the advancement of body of knowledge.

2.2.6 Respect for Intellectual Property

A researcher ought to honor patents, copyrights, and other forms of intellectual property and abstain from using unpublished data, methods, or results without

permission. It is important to give credit where credit is due and give proper acknowledgement or credit for all contributions to research.

2.2.7 Confidentiality

A researcher must protect confidential communications, such as papers or grants submitted for publication, personnel records, trade or military secrets and patient records. It is important to protect the confidentiality of individual information obtained in the course of research or professional interactions.

2.2.8 Responsible Publication

A researcher should publish in order to advance research and scholarship, not to advance just your own career. It is important to avoid wasteful and duplicative publication.

2.2.9 Responsible Mentoring

Researchers are sought to help in educating, mentoring, and advising students as well as to promote their welfare and allow them to make their own decisions.

2.2.10 Respect for colleagues

Researcher must respect colleagues and treat them fairly. This includes colleague researchers, research assistants and laboratory assistants among others.

2.2.11 Social Responsibility

Researchers ought to promote social good and prevent or mitigate social harms through research, public education, and advocacy.

2.2.12 Non-Discrimination

As generally accepted in all other spheres of life, researchers must avoid discrimination against colleagues or students on the basis of sex, race, ethnicity, or other factors that are not related to their scientific competence and integrity.

2.2.13 Competence

Maintenance and improvement of own professional competence and expertise through lifelong education and learning is essential for researchers and they must take steps to promote competence in science as a whole.

2.2.14 Legality

Research takes place in the domain of existing policies, laws and regulations. Researchers need to know and obey relevant laws and institutional and governmental policies.

2.2.15 Animal Care

In the case of utilization of animals researchers need to demonstrate proper respect and care for the animals. Researchers should not conduct unnecessary or poorly designed animal experiments.

2.2.16 Human Subjects Protection

When conducting research on human subjects effort must be made to minimize harms and risks and maximize benefits; respect human dignity, privacy, and autonomy; take special precautions with vulnerable populations; and strive to distribute the benefits and burdens of research fairly.

2.3 Responsibility for Research Ethics

Knowing what constitutes ethical research is important for all people who conduct research projects or use and apply the results from research findings (Center for Bioethics, University of Minnesota, 2003).

All researchers should be familiar with the basic ethical principles and have up-to-date knowledge about policies and procedures designed to ensure the safety of research subjects and to prevent sloppy or irresponsible research, because ignorance of policies designed to protect research subjects is not considered a viable excuse for ethically questionable projects. Therefore, the duty lies with the researcher to seek out and fully understand the policies and theories designed to guarantee upstanding research practices.

COPE addresses people with varying responsibilities for research and publication activities including researchers and authors, editors, readers, reviewers, editorial board members, journal owners and publishers (COPE, 2011).

3 Conclusion

The value of ethics in research cannot be over emphasized. It is both an essential and necessary ingredient of quality research that agrees with societal norms and respects existing policy, legal, regulatory and statutory requirements.

There already exists a huge body of knowledge and formal guidelines for the ethical conduct of research right from the Nuremberg Code and the Belmont Report. The guidelines documented by COPE (COPE, 2011), AERA (AERA, 2013), and BERA (BERA, 2012) provide adequate references for researchers locally and internationally.

An opportunity exists to domesticate research ethics that fit within the educational, cultural and social contexts of the country. This will play a key role in reinforcing research ethics in Kenya.

4 References

AERA. (2013). *AERA Homepage*. Retrieved 10 16, 2013, from American Educational Research Association: <http://www.aera.net/AboutAERA/tabid/10062/Default.aspx>

BERA. (2012). *BERA Homepage*. Retrieved 10 16, 2013, from British Educational Research Association: <http://www.bera.ac.uk/>

Callahan, C. T., & Ron, H. (2010, 10 21). *Research Ethics*. Retrieved 10 15, 2013, from Ethics in Medicine: <http://depts.washington.edu/bioethx/topics/resrch.html>

Center for Bioethics, University of Minnesota. (2003). *A Guide to Research Ethics*. Minnesota: Center for Bioethics.

COPE. (2011, 3 7). *Promoting integrity in research publication*. Retrieved 10 16, 2013, from Committee on Publication Ethics: <http://publicationethics.org/>

Resnik, D. B. (2011, 5 1). *What is Ethics in Research & Why is it Important?* Retrieved 10 15, 2013, from National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences: <http://www.niehs.nih.gov/research/resources/bioethics/whatis/>

Shamoo, A., & Resnik, D. (2009). *Responsible Conduct of Research, 2nd Ed*. New York: Oxford University Press.

University of Nairobi, Kenyatta National Hospital and KEMRI. *Ethics and Research Application Form*. Nairobi: Ethics Research Committee.

Walton, N. (n.d.). *What is Research Ethics?* Retrieved 10 15, 2013, from ResearchEthics.ca: <http://www.researchethics.ca/what-is-research-ethics.htm>