METHODS ARTICLE

Research ethics: Overcoming the exploitative dynamic through ethical research

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Abstract

Research ethics is a framework of principles and guidelines designed to ensure that scientific inquiry protects participants' rights and welfare while upholding integrity. Core principles includes respect for persons, beneficence, and justice which govern all research stages. Respect for persons requires informed consent, confidentiality, and additional safeguards for individuals with diminished autonomy. Beneficence involves maximizing benefits and minimizing harm. Justice demands equitable distribution of both research burdens and benefits. Despite these safeguards, exploitative dynamics persist when power imbalances enable researchers to pursue agendas at the expense of marginalized communities. Such dynamics manifest as tokenistic participation, extractive "helicopter" research, lack of reciprocity, disregard for local context, and unaddressed harms, all of which erode trust and compromise research validity. Mitigating these issues for ensuring ethical research requires proactive strategies at both the investigator and institutional levels. Researchers should co-design studies with community partners, implement participant-centered informed consent, ensure fair recruitment, prioritize participant welfare, establish benefit-sharing agreements, and maintain transparency and accountability. Academic institutions must bolster ethics infrastructures — streamlining review processes, providing ongoing ethics training, facilitating genuine community engagement, and fostering a culture that rewards ethical conduct. By embedding these measures into research design and oversight, the research community can prevent exploitation, honour participants' dignity, and advance knowledge in an equitable manner. Upholding rigorous ethical standards not only safeguards scientific credibility but also builds public trust and contributes to a more just and inclusive society.

Key messages

Ethical research should transcend mere regulatory compliance, actively addressing and mitigating exploitative dynamics inherent in knowledge production. This commentary explores critical ethical concerns such as tokenism, extractive methodologies, and the absence of reciprocal engagement, while promoting the adoption of more equitable research paradigms. By emphasizing participant agency, fostering transparency, and ensuring mutual benefit, researchers can uphold principles of integrity and equity within their scholarly endeavors.

Research ethics and principles

Research ethics is a framework of principles, standards, and guidelines that govern how research should be conducted [1]. It includes the rules and norms that researchers must follow to ensure their work is ethical. These guidelines are often established by professional organizations, institutions, and regulatory bodies [2]. Research ethics encompasses fundamental ethical principles such as respect for persons, beneficence, and justice, which apply throughout all stages of research activities-planning, conduct, and reporting. Research ethics ensures that scientific inquiry is conducted responsibly, protecting the rights and well-being of participants while upholding the integrity of the research process. It involves strategies and standards that ensure the responsible and ethical execution of scientific inquiry. The core principles [1,2] of research ethics, as described in several sources, include:

Respect for persons: Respect for Persons is a fundamental principle in research ethics that acknowledges the inherent dignity and worth of all human beings [1]. This principle underscores the importance of treating individuals as autonomous agents who have the capability to make informed decisions when participating in research. It requires researchers to provide comprehensive information about the study, its potential risks and benefits, and to ensure that participation is truly voluntary. Respect for Persons also extends to protecting those with diminished autonomy, such as children, individuals with cognitive impairments, or those in vulnerable situations, including individuals marginalised by policy choices and narratives of racial inferiority. This protection involves additional safeguards and careful consideration of their ability to provide informed consent. The principle is typically implemented through processes like obtaining informed consent, maintaining confidentiality, and allowing participants to withdraw from studies without negative consequences [1,2].

Beneficence/ concern for welfare: This emphasizes maximizing benefits and minimizing harm to participants and society [1,2]. This concept goes beyond simply avoiding harm, actively promoting participants' well-being across physical, mental, and social dimensions. Researchers must carefully balance potential risks and benefits, ensure participant safety, and contribute positively to individual and collective welfare. This principle requires providing comprehensive information to participants, respecting their autonomy, and considering broader societal implications of the research. It serves as a crucial ethical safeguard, ensuring research is conducted with genuine concern for human dignity and welfare while advancing knowledge that serves human interests [1,2].

Justice: Justice in research ethics refers to the fair and equitable treatment of all individuals involved in or affected by research [1,2]. This principle ensures that the benefits and burdens of research are distributed fairly across different populations and that no group is unfairly targeted or excluded from potential benefits. Justice requires careful consideration in the selection of research participants, ensuring that they are not chosen merely for convenience or due to their vulnerability [2]. It also demands that research questions and methodologies are relevant and beneficial to the communities involved in the studies. Furthermore, justice in research ethics extends to broader societal considerations, including how research might impact health equity and social justice at population or systems levels. Researchers must strive to conduct studies that not only advance scientific knowledge but also contribute to reducing disparities and promoting fairness in society

Historical context

The evolution of contemporary research ethics frameworks developed in direct response to historical methodological transgressions. Many international standards of ethical conduct emerged as direct responses to egregious abuses in scientific studies. Examples include Nazi physicians' non-therapeutic experimentation on concentration camp prisoners (1940–1945) [3,4], involving hypothermia trials and forced sterilization procedures (Blacker). Similarly, the Tuskegee Syphilis Study (1932–1972) [3,4] by the U.S. Public Health Service withheld effective treatment from 399 African American men infected with syphilis, under the guise of providing free healthcare, to observe the natural progression of the disease. This unethical study emphasised the importance of beneficence and justice in research practices. Another egregious example is the Willowbrook Hepatitis Study (1956) [3,4], where researchers deliberately infected institutionalised children with hepatitis to study the disease. Parents were effectively coerced into consenting by being promised quicker access to institutional services, exposing vulnerabilities in voluntary participation safeguards. In a similar vein, the Jewish Chronic Disease Hospital Study (1963) [4] involved injecting live cancer cells into elderly patients without their informed consent. The primary investigator deliberately avoided using the word "cancer" when explaining the procedure, instead employing vague language to obscure the true nature of the experiment. These types of incidents spurred the creation and reinforcement of ethical research principles, which are reflected in seminal guidelines such as the Belmont Report [1] and the Declaration of Helsinki [5], which emphasize informed consent and right to withdraw from the study, respect for persons, beneficence, and justice in research involving human subjects.

Ethical research and exploitative dynamic

Ethical research: Ethical research is a practice that adheres to established ethical principles and guidelines, upholding participants' rights and welfare throughout the research process [6,7]. Ethical research, a crucial aspect of scientific inquiry, encompasses a commitment to integrity, transparency, and accountability in all aspects of the research endeavor. It involves obtaining informed consent from participants, respecting their autonomy, and ensuring fair treatment in participant selection and distribution of benefits [2]. Ethical research also

emphasizes justice, maintaining honesty in reporting data, avoiding fabrication or falsification, and upholding scientific integrity. It also protects participants' confidentiality and privacy and responds to potential harms. Adhering to ethical research standards is essential for building public trust in research, safeguarding participants' dignity and rights, and ensuring the credibility of scientific inquiry. A key aspect of ethical research is preventing the exploitation of participants by ensuring that their participation is informed, voluntary, and free from coercion or deception. It also emphasizes that participants' contributions are respected and valued throughout the research process. By upholding these standards, researchers ensure that their work not only advances knowledge but also benefits society as a whole.

Exploitative dynamic: In research, investigators traditionally hold significant power [8], influencing critical aspects of a study from designing questions to planning, recruitment, data collection, analysis, and dissemination. This imbalance can lead to disproportionate benefits for researchers or institutions while offering minimal or no reciprocal advantages to marginalised, vulnerable, or underrepresented groups. As a result, community/ patient needs, priorities, and contributions are often overlooked, compromising both the integrity of the research process and participants' well-being. Moreover, social inequality perpetuates exploitation by reinforcing oppressive power imbalances through cultural, economic, and institutional norms-often bolstered by economic exploitation, systemic oppression, and entrenched hierarchies. In this perspective article, "exploitative dynamics" in research refer to actions that unfairly advantage investigators-for instance, neglecting proper consent, imposing unreasonable risks or burdens, or providing inequitable benefits. These dynamics can significantly hinder research involving patients or marginalised populations, particularly at the design stage, where a lack of standardised engagement practices may result in tokenistic participation, extractive methods, disproportionality, context stripping, and unaddressed harms [9]. In ethical research, such exploitative dynamics may manifest in several ways:

a) *Tokenism:* Communities/ patients are involved superficially, often to meet diversity requirements, without genuine integration into decision-making or research processes. Top-down decision making and resource disparity occurs.

b) *Extractive practices:* Researchers collect data or knowledge from communities without adequately sharing findings, credit, or benefits with those communities. This one-sided or one-off research approach can strip communities of their agency and insights. This is known as 'helicopter research', or "parasitic research" or 'parachute in and out research" [10].

c) *Lack of reciprocity:* Despite their contributions to the research, communities may be left without meaningful benefits, such as improved resources, knowledge, or outcomes. This

absence of reciprocity can foster resentment and distrust.

d) *Disregard for context:* Researchers may impose their own frameworks, goals, or methods without considering the cultural, social, or historical context of the communities involved. Such disregard can lead to misinterpretations and reinforce existing inequalities.

e) *Unaddressed or hidden harms:* The research process may inadvertently perpetuate stereotypes, stigmatize communities, or fail to mitigate potential risks or harms to participants. Ethical oversight is essential to prevent such negative outcomes.

Addressing these above dynamics is crucial to fostering ethical, equitable, and community-centered research practices that genuinely respect and uplift the voices of those involved.

Addressing exploitative dynamics

Addressing these exploitative dynamics is crucial for fostering ethical research practices that genuinely respect and benefit all participants involved. While other stakeholders-such as funding agencies, community members, and regulatory bodies-play important roles in overcoming these exploitative dynamics and ensure ethical research practices, researchers and academic institutions are the primary actors central to this effort.

Researchers' action: To overcome exploitative dynamics in research, researchers can take several proactive actions. Here are key strategies based on the context of ethical research practices:

i. *Inclusive and empowered community engagement and involvement:* Actively involve community members at every stage of the research process-planning, design, implementation, and dissemination [9,10]. This ensures the research aligns with community priorities and fosters shared ownership.

ii. *Create and apply participant-centered informed consent:* Create clear, comprehensive information about the study's purpose, risks, benefits, and participants' rights to empower individuals to make informed decisions about their involvement.

iii. *Implement fair and equitable participant selection:* Use unbiased and inclusive criteria for participant recruitment, avoiding discrimination based on gender, race, socioeconomic status, or other factors.

iv. *Prioritize participant welfare:* Conduct thorough risk assessments and implement strategies to minimize harm and maximize benefits, always prioritizing the well-being of participants.

v. *Establish benefit-sharing agreements:* Clearly identification how research benefits will be shared with participants and their communities, ensuring recognition and reciprocity for their contributions.

vi. *Ensure transparency and accountability:* Maintain openness about research goals, methods, and potential impacts, and remain accountable to participants and stakeholders throughout the process.

vii. *Commit to ongoing ethical education:* Continuously pursue ethical education to uphold high standards.

viii. *Monitor and evaluate impact:* Implement systems to track the research's impact on communities, identifying and addressing any unintended consequences or exploitative dynamics.

ix. *Advocate for ethical research practices:* Promote awareness of ethical standards and equitable partnerships within institutions and among peers, emphasizing the importance of addressing exploitative dynamics.

Academic institutions' action: To overcome exploitative dynamics and ensure ethical research practices, academic institutions can take several proactive actions. Here are some key strategies:

A. *Establish a strong ethics infrastructure:* Create and maintain a robust ethics infrastructure that includes Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) or Research Ethics Boards (REBs) to oversee research proposals and ensure compliance with ethical standards.

B. *Develop comprehensive ethical guidelines:* Institutions should develop clear ethical guidelines and policies that outline expectations for researchers regarding the treatment of participants, informed consent, and data management. These guidelines should be easily accessible to all researchers.

C. *Facilitate ethical review processes:* Streamline the IRB or REC review process to make it more efficient while maintaining rigorous ethical standards. This helps reduce delays in research approval while ensuring participant protection.

D. *Provide resources, training, and support:* Ensure that adequate resources, including funding, staff, and training, are available to support ethical research practices. This includes providing support, training for IRB/Research Ethics Board members to help them effectively conduct ethical research practices. Also, offer regular training programs for researchers, faculty, and students on ethical research practices, emphasizing the importance of avoiding exploitative dynamics and fostering a culture of integrity

E. *Encourage and facilitate community/ patient engagement:* Promote inclusive and meaningful engagement with communities/patients involved in research [9,10,11]. Also, institutions can facilitate partnerships with community organizations to ensure that research addresses local needs and priorities.

F. *Monitor research practices:* Establish mechanisms for monitoring ongoing research projects to ensure compliance with ethical standards and address any emerging issues related to exploitative dynamics.

G. *Promote transparency and accountability:* Encourage transparency in research processes by requiring researchers to disclose potential conflicts of interest and ensuring that findings are reported honestly and accurately.

H. *Foster a culture of ethical research:* Cultivate an institutional culture that prioritizes ethical research by recognizing and rewarding ethical conduct among researchers. This can include highlighting projects that demonstrate innovative approaches to ethical accommodations, implementing ethics mentorship programs, and celebrate researchers who have made significant contributions to advancing ethical practices in their fields.

I. *Engage in advocacy for ethical standards:* Academic institutions can advocate for ensuring broader ethical standards within the research community, influencing policies at national or international levels to promote ethical practices across various disciplines.

By implementing these strategies, scholars and academic institutions can play a crucial role in overcoming exploitative dynamics in research, ensuring that all participants are treated ethically and that the research conducted is of high integrity and quality.

Conclusions

As research continues to evolve in complexity and scope, it is imperative that ethical considerations remain at the forefront. By prioritizing ethical practices and addressing exploitative dynamics head-on, researchers can contribute to a more just and equitable society where the benefits of research are shared by all participants involved. Ultimately, ensuring ethical research is a collective responsibility that requires collaboration among all stakeholders involved. By fostering a culture of respect, transparency, and accountability, the research community can work towards overcoming exploitative dynamics and enhancing the overall quality of research.

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Conflict of interest

We do not have any conflict of interest.

Data availability statement

Not applicable

Supplementary file

None

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