

CSIP5403: Research Methods and Applications

Lecture 7: Ethics in Research

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Outline

- 1 Introduction
- 2 Stakeholders in Research
 - Ethical Issues Concerning Research Participants
 - Ethical Issues Concerning Researcher
 - Ethical Issues Concerning Sponsoring Organisation
- 3 Summary

Introduction

- All professions are guided by a code of ethics that has evolved over years to accommodate the changing ethos, values, needs, and expectations of stakeholders in the profession
- Most professions have an overall code of conduct that also governs the way research is carried out
- Many research bodies have evolved a code of ethics
 - Medicine, epidemiology, business, law,

Ethics: the Concept

- According to *Collins Dictionary*, “ethical” means
 - “in accordance with **principles of conduct** that are **considered correct**, especially those of a given profession or group”
 - Keywords: “principles of conduct” and “considered correct”
- The above definition raises several questions:
 - What are these principles of conduct?
 - Who determines them?
 - In whose judgement must they be considered correct?
 - Are there universal principles of conduct applicable for all professions?
 - Do and should principles of conduct change over time?
 - What if a professional does not abide by them?

Ethics: Some Comments

- Each profession is continuously changing according to society's needs and available technologies. So, ethical codes also need to change
- As the service and its delivery differ from profession to profession, no code of ethics can be uniformly applied across all professions
- However, certain behaviours are considered unethical in any profession: Causing harm to individuals, breaching confidentiality, using information improperly, introducing bias
- It is the overall body of professionals or government organisations that collectively develops a professional code of conduct and forms a judgement as to whether or not it is followed, and relevant penalty if not followed.

Stakeholders in Research

- There are many stakeholders in research
- Regarding ethics, three categories of stakeholders:
 - The research participants or subjects, including
 - Those who are directly or indirectly involved in research
 - Those who are likely to be affected by the findings
 - The researcher: Anyone who collects information for research
 - The funding body: The organisation(s) responsible for financing the research

Ethical Issues Concerning Research Participants

- Collecting information: Why should respondents give info?
 - Research is required to improve conditions and help society
 - So, we must consider the relevance and usefulness of research and convince others of this.
- Seeking consent
 - Unethical to collect information without informed consent
 - Three criteria regarding informed consent:
 - Participants must be competent to give consent
 - Sufficient information must be provided for a reasoned decision
 - Consent must be voluntary and uncoerced
- Providing incentives: Is it ethical?
 - Some think proper; others think it is unethical
 - Most people participate not for incentives, but for importance
 - So, giving a small gift after information collection is ethical, while before data collection is unethical

Ethical Issues Concerning Research Participants

- Seeking sensitive information
 - Ethical dilemma: asking for some sensitive information may upset respondents; but, it may be impossible to pursue research and make contribution without such information
 - Ethical to ask such information if you clearly/frankly tell respondents the type of information and give them sufficient time to decide whether to share the information with you
- The possibility of causing harm to participants
 - If participants may be harmed, make sure the risk is minimal
- Maintaining confidentiality: It is unethical to
 - Share information about respondents with others for purposes other than research
 - Identify an individual and the information provided by him/her

Ethical Issues Concerning Researcher

- Avoiding bias: Bias is a *deliberate attempt* to hide findings or highlight something disproportionately to its true existence
 - Bias on the part of researcher is unethical
- Using appropriate methodology
 - Unethical to use deliberately an inappropriate method to prove or disprove something, e.g., selecting highly biased sample, using invalid instrument, drawing wrong conclusions
- Correct reporting: Unethical to report findings in a way that changes them for anybody's interest
- Appropriate use of information: Unethical to use information in a way that affects respondents adversely
 - If necessary, it's ethical to tell respondents the potential use of information, including the possibility of its being used against some of them, and let them to decide whether to participate

Ethical Issues Concerning Sponsoring Organisation

- Restrictions imposed by the sponsoring organisation
 - Sponsoring organisations fund research for a specific purpose
 - Sometimes they may exercise direct or indirect controls
 - They may select the methodology, prohibit the publication of findings, or impose other restrictions (e.g., prohibiting obtaining and disseminating accurate information)
 - Both the imposition and acceptance of these controls and restrictions are unethical
- The misuse of information
 - Sometimes sponsoring organisations use research as a pretext for obtaining management's agenda
 - It is unethical to let your research be used for justifying management decisions when your research findings do not support them

Summary

- Ethical issues apply for both quantitative and qualitative research
- Being ethical means adhering to the code of conduct of a profession
- Ethical issues can be viewed regarding participants, researchers, and sponsoring organisations