LESSON 4 - ETHICS IN RESEARCH

Ethics are norms or standards of behaviour that guide moral choices about our behaviour and our relationship with others. Ethics differ from legal constraints, in which generally accepted standards have defined penalties that are universally enforced. The goal of ethics in research is to ensure that no one is harmed or suffers adverse consequences from research activities.

As the research is designed, several ethical considerations must be balanced e.g.

- Protect the rights of the participant or subject.
- Ensure the sponsor receives ethically conducted and reported research.
- Follow ethical standards when designing research
- Protect the safety of the researcher and team
- Ensure the research team follows the design

1. Ethical treatment of participants

In general, the research must be designed in such a manner that the respondent does not suffer physical harm, discomfort, pain, embarrassment or loss to privacy. To safeguard against these, the researcher should follow the following guidelines:

- Explain the study benefits
- Obtain informed consent
- Explain respondents rights and protection

(a) Benefits

Whenever direct contact is made with a respondent, the researcher should discuss the study benefits, being careful to neither overstate nor understate the benefits. An interviewer should begin an introduction with his or her name, the name of the research organisation and a brief description of the purpose and benefits of the research. This puts the respondent at ease, lets them know to whom they are speaking and motivates them to answer questions truthfully. Inducements to participate, financial or otherwise, should not be disproportionate to the task or presented in a fashion that results in coercion.

Deception occurs when the respondents are told only part of the truth or when the truth is fully compromised. The benefits to be gained by deception should be balanced against the risks to the respondents. When possible, an experiment or interview should be designed to reduce reliance on deception. In addition, the respondent's rights and well-being must be adequately protected. In instances where deception in an

experiment could produce anxiety, a subject's medical condition should be checked to ensure that no adverse physical harm follows.

(b) Informed consent

Securing informed consent from respondents is a matter of fully disclosing the procedures of the proposed survey or other research design before requesting permission to proceed with the study. There are exemptions that argue for a signed consent form. When dealing with children, it is wise to have a parent or other person with legal standing sign a consent form. If the researchers offer only limited protection of confidentiality, a signed form detailing the types of limits should be obtained. For most business research, oral consent is sufficient.

In situations where respondents are intentionally or accidentally deceived, they should be debriefed once the research is complete. Debriefing involves several activities following the collection of data e.g.

- Explanation of any deception.
- Description of the hypothesis, goal or purpose of the study.
- Post study sharing of results.
- Post study follow-up medical or psychological attention.

According to Neuman and Wiegand (2000), a full blown consent statement would contain the following: -

- A brief description of the purpose and procedure of the research, including the expected duration.
- A statement of any risks, discomforts or inconveniences associated with participation.
- A guarantee of anonymity or at least confidentiality, and an explanation of both.
- The identification, affiliation and sponsorship of the research as well as contact information.
- A statement that participation is completely voluntary and can be terminated at any time without penalty.
- A statement of any procedures that may be used.
- A statement of any benefits to the class of subjects involved.
- An offer to provide a free copy of a summary of the findings.

(c) Rights to privacy

All individuals have a right to privacy and researchers must respect that right. The privacy guarantee is important not only to retain validity of the research but also to

protect respondents. Once the guarantee of confidentiality is given, protecting that confidentiality is essential. The researcher can protect respondent's confidentiality in several ways, which include: -

- Obtaining signed nondisclosure documents
- Restricting access to respondent identification.
- Revealing respondent information only with written consent.
- Restricting access to data instruments where the respondent is identified.
- Nondisclosure of data subsets.

Researchers should restrict access to information that reveals names, telephone numbers, address or other identifying features. Only researchers who have signed nondisclosure, confidentiality forms should be allowed access to the data. Links between the data or database and the identifying information file should be weakened. Individual interview response sheets should be inaccessible to everyone except the editors and data entry personnel.

Occasionally, data collection instruments should be destroyed once the data are in a data file. Data files that make it easy to reconstruct the profiles or identification of individual respondents should be carefully controlled. For very small groups, data should not be made available because it is often easy to pinpoint a person within the group. Employee-satisfaction survey feedback in small units can be easily used to identify an individual through descriptive statistics.

Privacy is more than confidentiality. A right to privacy means one has the right to refuse to be interviewed or to refuse to answer any question in an interview. Potential participants have a right to privacy in their own homes, including not admitting researchers and not answering telephones. They have the right to engage in private behavior in private places without fear of observation. To address these rights, ethical researchers can do the following: -

- Inform respondents of their right to refuse to answer any questions or participate in the study.
- Obtain permission to interview respondents
- Schedule field and phone interviews.
- Limit the time required for participation.
- Restrict observation to public behavior only.

2. Ethics and the sponsor

There are ethical considerations to keep in mind when dealing with the research client or sponsor. Whether undertaking product, market, personnel, financial or other research, a sponsor has the right to receive ethically conducted research.

(a) Confidentiality

Sponsors have a right to several types of confidentiality including sponsor nondisclosure, purpose nondisclosure and findings nondisclosure.

- **Sponsor nondisclosure**: Companies have a right to dissociate themselves from the sponsorship of a research project. Due to the sensitive nature of the management dilemma or the research question, sponsors may hire an outside consulting or research firm to complete research projects. this is often done when a company is testing a new product idea, to avoid potential consumers from being influenced by the company's current image or industry standing. If a company is contemplating entering a new market, it may not wish to reveal its plans to competitors. In such cases, it is the responsibility of the researcher to respect this desire and device a plan to safeguard the identity of the sponsor.
- **Purpose nondisclosure**: It involves protecting the purpose of the study or its details. A research sponsor may be testing a new idea that is not yet patented and may not want the competitor to know his plans. It may be investigating employee complaints and may not want to spark union activity. The sponsor might also be contemplating a new public stock offering, where advance disclosure would spark the interest of authorities or cost the firm thousands of shillings.
- **Findings nondisclosure**: If a sponsor feels no need to hide its identity or the study's purpose, most sponsors want research data and findings to be confidential, at least until the management decision is made.

(b) Right to quality research

An important ethical consideration for the researcher and the sponsor is the sponsor's right to quality research. The right entails:

- Providing a research design appropriate for the research question.
- Maximizing the sponsor's value for the resources expended
- Providing data handling and reporting techniques appropriate for the data collected.

From the proposal through the design to data analysis and the final report, the researcher guides the sponsor on the proper techniques and interpretations. Often

sponsors would have heard about sophisticated data handling technique and will want it used even when it is inappropriate for the problem at hand. The researcher should propose the design most suitable for the problem. The researcher should not propose activities designed to maximize researcher revenue or minimize researcher effort at the sponsor's expense. The ethical researcher should report findings in ways that minimize the drawing of false conclusions. He should also use charts, graphs and tables to show the data objectively, despite the sponsor's preferred outcomes.

(c) Sponsor's Ethics

Occasionally, research specialists may be asked by sponsors to participate in unethical behaviour. Compliance by the researcher would be a breach of ethical standards. Some examples to be avoided are:

- Violating respondent confidentiality
- Changing data or creating false data to meet a desired objective
- Changing data presentations or interpretations.
- Interpreting data from a biased perspective.
- Omitting sections of data analysis and conclusions.
- Making recommendations beyond the scope of the data collected.

The ethical course often requires confronting the sponsor's demand and taking the following actions: -

- Educating the sponsor on the purpose of research
- Explain the researcher's role in fact finding versus the sponsor's role in decision-making.
- Explain how distorting the truth or breaking faith with respondents leads to future problems
- Failing moral suasion, terminate the relationship with the sponsor.

3. Researchers and team members

Researchers have an ethical responsibility to their team's safety as well as their own and also protecting the anonymity of both the sponsor and the respondent.

(a) Safety

It is the researcher's responsibility to design a project so the safety of all interviewers, surveyors, experimenters, or observers is protected. Several factors may be important to consider in ensuring a researcher's right to safety e.g. some urban areas and undeveloped rural areas may be unsafe for research assistants, therefore a team member can accompany the researcher. It is unethical to require staff members to enter

an environment where they feel physically threatened. Researchers who are insensitive to these concerns face both research and legal risks.

(b) Ethical behaviour of assistants

Researchers should require ethical compliance from team members just as sponsors expect ethical behaviour from the researcher. Assistants are expected to carry out the sampling plan, to interview or observe respondents without bias and to accurately record all necessary data. Unethical behaviour such as filling in an interview sheet without having asked the respondent the questions cannot be tolerated. The behaviour of the assistants is under the direct control of the responsible researcher or field supervisor. If an assistant behaves improperly in an interview or shares a respondents interview sheet with unauthorized person, it is the researcher's responsibility. All researchers' assistants should be well trained and supervised.

(c) Protection of anonymity

Researchers and assistants protect the confidentiality of the sponsor's information and the anonymity of the respondents. Each researcher handling data should be required to sign a confidentiality and nondisclosure statement.

Ethics in Research: Case Studies, Examples, and Application Areas

Ethics in research plays a crucial role in maintaining the integrity of the scientific process and ensuring that researchers act responsibly toward participants, data, and the wider community. The ethical concerns researchers face range from informed consent, privacy, and confidentiality to the handling of data and the protection of vulnerable populations. This discussion highlights key ethics in research using case studies, and outlines their applications in various research areas.

1. Informed Consent in Clinical Trials

Case Study: The Willowbrook Hepatitis Study (1950s–1970s)

In the Willowbrook State School study, researchers intentionally exposed children with intellectual disabilities to the hepatitis virus to study the progression of the disease. The parents were coerced into enrolling their children, and the risks of the study were not properly communicated to them. This violated the principle of informed consent.

Ethical Issues:

- Coercion: Participants were pressured into enrolling, often without fully understanding the risks.
- Exploitation: Vulnerable populations, in this case, children with disabilities, were exploited for research purposes.

Application Area:

- Clinical Trials: The Willowbrook case emphasizes the need for informed consent in medical research. Modern ethical standards (e.g., the Declaration of Helsinki) require that all participants, particularly in clinical trials, be informed of the potential risks and benefits of participating in research. They must voluntarily agree to participate without coercion.

2. Privacy and Confidentiality in Social Science Research

Case Study: Facebook Emotional Contagion Study (2012) In this experiment, Facebook manipulated the News Feed of almost 700,000 users to study emotional contagion, i.e., how emotions spread among individuals online. The users were not informed about the study, and their emotional responses were analyzed without consent, raising concerns about privacy and confidentiality.

Ethical Issues:

- Lack of informed consent: Participants were not informed that their data would be used for research.
- Violation of privacy: Personal and sensitive information was used without permission, causing a breach of privacy.

Application Area:

- Social Science Research: Research involving online platforms, social media, and big data must consider the ethical implications of privacy and confidentiality. Researchers must seek informed consent when collecting data and ensure that personal information is protected. This is especially important when dealing with sensitive data from vulnerable populations.

3. Conflict of Interest in Medical Research

Case Study: The Andrew Wakefield Vaccine Controversy (1998) Andrew Wakefield published a fraudulent study in *The Lancet* that falsely linked the MMR (measles, mumps, rubella) vaccine to autism. It was later revealed that Wakefield had undisclosed financial interests in alternative vaccine therapies. This conflict of interest led to widespread fear and a decline in vaccination rates.

Ethical Issues:

- Conflict of interest: Wakefield had financial ties to companies selling alternative vaccine therapies.
- Data fabrication: The study was later found to have fabricated data, putting public health at risk.

Application Area:

- Medical Research: This case highlights the importance of disclosing conflicts of interest in research. Researchers, especially in the medical and pharmaceutical fields, must disclose any financial or personal interests that could influence their

research findings. Ethical research practices require that conflicts of interest are managed to avoid bias and to maintain trust in the findings.

4. Protection of Vulnerable Populations in Psychological Research

Case Study: The Stanford Prison Experiment (1971) In the Stanford Prison Experiment, participants were assigned to play either guards or prisoners in a simulated prison. The study quickly escalated, and participants began showing signs of emotional distress. The researchers failed to stop the experiment in time, leading to psychological harm.

Ethical Issues:

- Lack of oversight: The researchers did not intervene in time to prevent harm to participants.
- Psychological harm: Participants suffered from emotional distress, violating the principle of non-maleficence (do no harm).

Application Area:

- Psychological Research: The Stanford Prison Experiment highlights the need for careful oversight and protection of vulnerable participants. In psychology, special care must be taken to ensure that the participants' psychological well-being is safeguarded. Ethical guidelines require that any potential harm to participants is minimized and that they can withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

5. Academic Integrity in Scientific Publishing

CaseStudy: TheHwang Woo-suk Cloning Scandal (2004-2006) Hwang Woo-suk, a South Korean scientist, falsely claimed to have successfully cloned human embryos. His work was published in prestigious journals and led to widespread media attention. Later, it was discovered that Hwang had fabricated his data and used research funds improperly.

Ethical Issues:

- Data fabrication: Hwang manipulated data to support his claims.
- Violation of academic integrity: Falsification of research undermines the credibility of the scientific community.

Application Area:

- Scientific Publishing: This case highlights the importance of academic integrity in research. Researchers must ensure that all data is accurate, and results are reported honestly. Ethical publishing standards require that researchers provide honest, reproducible results and disclose any potential conflicts of interest or errors.

Key Ethical Principles in Research:

1. Respect for Persons: Ensuring informed consent and protecting vulnerable populations.
2. Beneficence: Maximizing benefits and minimizing harm to participants.
3. Justice: Ensuring that research benefits and burdens are equitably distributed.