Mapping a Path for Responsible Research: Promoting Ethical Practices among NWU Postgraduate Students

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Overview

- What is ethics and why do we need it?
- Moral theories
- Ethical codes
- Ethical norms and standards
- Ethics at the NWU
- Conclusion

What is ethics and why do we need it?

- High quality research is needed
  - Numerous examples of unethical research
- World War II led to research going global
  - Also led to a proliferation of unethical research
- Examples of unethical research
  - Experiments by the Nazis
  - Stanford prison experiment
  - Milgram's conformity experiment
  - Tuskagee syphilis experiment

What is ethics and why do we need it?

- World Medical Association defines ethics as:

"Ethics is the study of morality – a careful and systematic reflection on and analysis of moral decisions and behaviour, whether past, present or future"

What is ethics and why do we need it?

- Ethics
  - "Theory or a system of moral values"
  - Philosophical discipline that reflects on the question of:
    - Right or wrong
    - Good and bad
  - Reflects on what is acceptable
  - Makes a moral assessment
  - It is an internal intellectual process

Moral theories

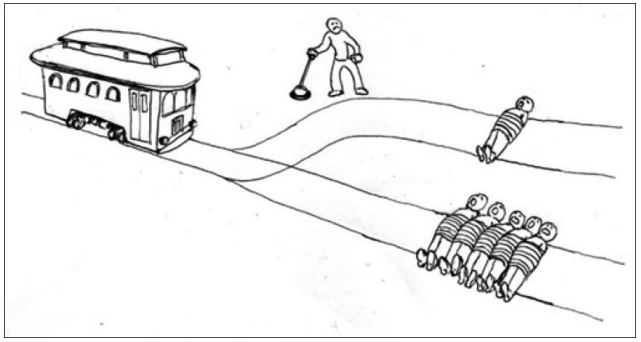
- How do we go about moral dilemmas?
  - By drawing on moral or ethics theories
  - 4 main theories
    - Utilitarianism
    - Kantian deontology
    - Virtue ethics
    - Principlism
  - Individual vs combined

Utilitarianism

- Actions are to be judged right or wrong
  - Based solely on their consequences
- The only thing that matters
  - The amount of happiness or unhappiness that results from a specific action
  - Everything else is irrelevant
  - Each person's happiness counts the same
- Action to be chosen is that which creates the greatest balance of
  - Happiness vs unhappiness

Utilitarianism

- Are happiness and consequences the only issues of moral importance?
  - Values of justice and human rights contradicts utilitarianism e.g. COVID-19 pandemic
  - Utilitarianism does not care about the past as it focuses on future consequences
  - Does not take the inherent morality of the action into account e.g. Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings



Kantian Deontology

- Immanuel Kant (1724 – 1804)
- Actions have inherent moral worth
  - Stealing, lying, cheating and murder are wrong even if the outcome is positive
- Moral reason holds for all of humanity
  - All people should be treated equally
  - “Do your duty, even if the heaven falls”

Kantian Deontology

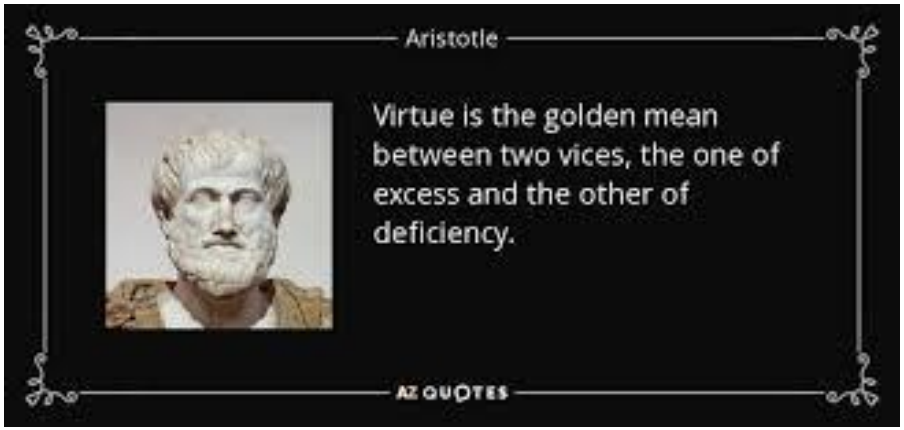
- Problems with Kantian deontology
  - Difficult to translate into practice
  - Practical guidelines developed from this theory can be extremely inflexible
  - As moral actors, we are only compelled to act according to the requirements of duty
    - Cannot take into account family relationships, friendship or love

Virtue Ethics

- Focuses on the character traits of people
  - Not on the qualities or consequences of the acts
- The moral status of an action is conferred due to the character traits of a person
  - If the actor is a “good person” then everything they do will be morally correct
- The person can make moral decisions based on their relationship to others

Virtue Ethics

- Problems
  - Depends on the perceived integrity of a person
  - Being a researcher does not mean you are virtuous
  - A person may currently be virtuous but there are numerous pressures which could result in them not acting virtuously in future
    - Increased workload, unexpected illness, mental illness etc.



Principlism

- Tom Beauchamp and James Childress
- Moral dilemma can be overcome by applying one of the 3 “moral principles”:
  - Respect for autonomy
  - Beneficence and Non-maleficence
  - Justice

Principlism

- Principles
  - High level of abstraction
- More easily implemented into practice
  - Principlism allows for a trade-off between the moral theories
  - Autonomy vs justice
- All principles should be addressed
  - Weighting of importance of each must however be undertaken

Principlism

- Problems
  - Based on intuitions of basic moral duties
  - How do we know how to apply which principle?
  - Are all principles always applicable to any moral dilemma?
  - What happens if the application of different principles leads to moral conflict?

Ethical codes

- Research ethics
  - Application of the aforementioned principles to ensure ethical practice during research
  - Has an impact on
    - Participants
    - Researchers
    - Students
    - Research institutions
    - Scientific field
  - Creation of research ethics codes

Ethical codes

- Origin of important ethical guidelines
  - Nuremberg code
    - Developed in 1947
    - Trial where 22 Dr’s were found guilty
    - Origin of informed consent
    - Benefit must outweigh risks
    - Protect against death, disability or suffering
    - Scientifically qualified
    - Voluntary participation

Ethical codes

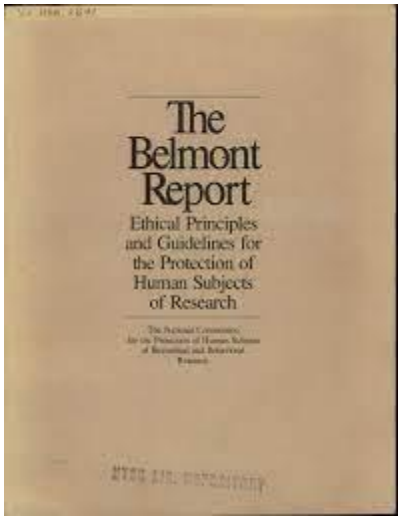
- Origin of important ethical guidelines
  - Declaration of Helsinki
    - World Medical Association in 1964
    - Latest amended version in 2013
    - 35 principles
    - SA REC must adhere to these principles

Ethical codes

- Origin of important ethical guidelines
  - Declaration of Helsinki
    - Protocol reviewed by Ethics Committee
    - Informed consent critical
    - Minors and mental incapacity
    - Scientifically qualified researchers
    - Benefits>risks
    - Privacy/confidentiality
    - Publication/dissemination of results

Ethical codes

- Origin of important ethical guidelines
  - Belmont report
    - Originated directly from principlism
    - Published in 1979
    - Relevant to the US
      - Respect for autonomy
      - Beneficence and non-maleficence
      - Justice



Ethical codes

- Legal framework in South Africa
  - Section 73 of the NHA
  - All institutions performing health research
    - Has to establish or have access to a REC/AEC
    - Registered with the NHREC
    - Follows document set up by DoH
      - Ethics in Health Research: Principle, processes and structures
  - Provides guidance in terms of research ethics in any field for both research involving humans and animals
  - **NB! No retrospective approval of applications**

Ethics norms and standards

- Research involving humans
- Identify and protect interest of participants
  - Collaborative partnerships
  - Social value
  - Scientific validity
  - Fair selection of study participants
  - Informed consent
  - Respect for recruited participants and study
  - Favourable risk-benefit ratio
  - Research competence

Ethics norms and standards

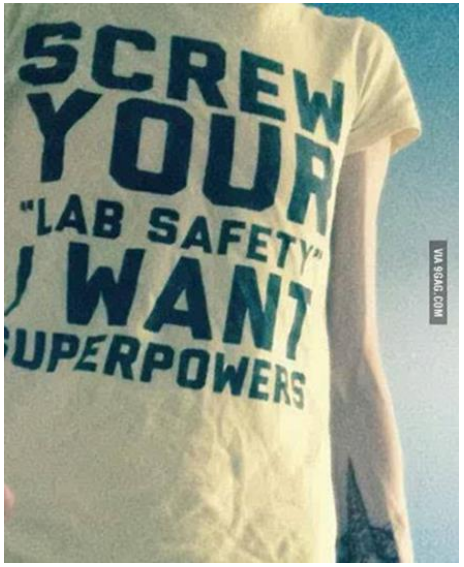
- Collaborative partnerships
  - Engage key role players throughout
    - Developing the research question
    - Developing the research study
    - Disseminating research findings
    - Capacity development
  - Increase acceptability to role players
  - Offset power differentials

Ethics norms and standards

- Social value
  - Relevant and responsive
  - Needs of South Africa
  - Improve living standards and well-being
  - Contribution
    - Knowledge distribution
    - Products
    - Interventions
    - Processes or services

Ethics norms and standards

- Scientific validity
  - Unscientific = unethical
  - Sound design = valid and reliable data
  - Poor methodology
    - Unnecessary risks
    - Increased burden
    - Little or no benefit
  - Scientific committee
    - Review is subject specific
    - Focused on scientific quality
  - Ethics committee
    - Focused on ethical impact of the methodology



Ethics norms and standards

- Fair selection of study participants
  - Just and fair procedures
    - Recruitment
    - Selection
    - Inclusion and exclusion criteria
  - Cannot be excluded unfairly based on
    - race, age, sex, sexual orientation, disability, education, religious belief, pregnancy, marital status, ethnic or social origin, conscience, belief or language
  - Cannot unfairly target people

Ethics norms and standards

- Informed consent
  - 4 principles
    - Capacity
    - Disclosure
    - Understanding
    - Voluntary assumption of risk
  - Independent and unbiased
    - Coercion
    - Undue inducement
    - Therapeutic misconception
    - Deception

Ethics norms and standards

- Respect for recruited participants and study communities
  - Privacy
    - What procedures are in place to protect participants during data collection?
  - Confidentiality
    - What procedures are in place to protect data once it is collected?
  - Protection of Personal Information Act 4 of 2013

Ethics norms and standards

- Favourable risk-benefit ratio
  - Benefit > risk
  - Benefits
    - Direct (to participant)
    - Indirect (to knowledge base)
  - Risk
    - Assess magnitude and likelihood
    - Indicate precautions

Ethics norms and standards

- Researcher competence
  - Do the researchers have the necessary experience?
  - Present evidence for the skills
  - CV’s
    - Academic qualifications
    - Credentials
    - Scientific and technical competence

Ethics norms and standards

- Research involving animals
  - Key guidance in SA given by the SANS 10386:2008
    - "The care and use of animals for scientific purposes"
  - Ensure ethical and humane care of animals used for scientific purposes, as well as for teaching activities.
    - Responsibilities of researchers, teachers, institutions
    - Ensure that welfare of animals is always considered
    - Justified animal use via AECs

Ethics norms and standards

- Research involving animals
  - Based in adherence to 4Rs
    - **Replacement** of animals with alternatives
    - **Reduction** in the number of animals used
    - **Refinement** of techniques to reduce impact on animal wellbeing
    - **Responsibility** towards the animals

Ethics at the NWU

- Research Support Office
  - http://services.nwu.ac.za/research-support/ethics
- All ethics committees at NWU must adhere to
  - Research Ethics Policy
  - Terms of Reference for the management of research ethics at the North-West University
- Contact person
  - Ms Feziwe Mseleni
  - 016 910 3446/Feziwe.Mseleni@nwu.ac.za

Ethics at the NWU

- Scope of RECs at NWU
  - Faculty research ethics committees (RECs)
    - Review no-risk and low or minimal risk studies
    - Every faculty must have at least on except FoHS
  - NHREC–registered RECs
    - Review medium and high risk studies
    - Studies involving vulnerable populations

Ethics at the NWU

- Scope of RECs at NWU
  - NHREC–registered RECs
    - 2 RECs reviewing research with animals
      - NWU-AnimCareREC – human, animal and environmental health
      - NWU-AnimProdREC – animal production and breeding
    - 3 RECs reviewing research with humans
      - NWU-HREC – health and health related research
      - NWU-HSSREC – humanities and social science research
      - NWU-EMELTENREC – All other types of research

Conclusion

- Ethics is critical in research
  - To protect participant and researcher alike
  - Needs support from university, staff and students

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Questions