RESEARCH ARTICLE

NAVIGATING THE ETHICAL LANDSCAPE OF RESEARCH: AN EXPLORATION OF REFLECTIVE PRACTICE IN BALANCING ETHICAL DILEMMAS

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Abstract

Research ethics is a critical component of any academic or scientific discipline. The ethical dilemmas that arise in research can be complex and require researchers to consider multiple perspectives and theories. Reflective practice is an important tool that can help researchers to navigate these challenges. In this paper, I explore the intersection of reflective practice, research ethics, ethical dilemmas, and research ethics theories. I begin by discussing the importance of doing ethical research and the role of reflective practice in promoting ethical behavior among researchers. Next, I examine some common ethical dilemmas that researchers may encounter and consider how reflective practice can be used to address them. Finally, I consider the role of research ethics theories in shaping both research practice and ethical decision making. Overall, the paper suggests that a reflective approach to research can help researchers to navigate complex ethical issues and make informed decisions. The paper further suggests the Ethics Reflection Model through which ethical dilemmas can be managed.

Keywords: Ethical dilemmas, Ethics Reflection Model, reflective practice, research ethics.

Introduction

Ethical research is crucial for several reasons. Firstly, through ethical research the participants' rights, welfare and dignity are protected. Therefore, any potential risks associated with their participation are explicitly communicated and managed. Secondly, the building of trust with stakeholders is very critical. This means that ethical research enhances the reputation and credibility of researchers and institutions. In addition, it fosters trust between researchers and research participants, funders, and regulatory bodies. Thirdly, as many of the research projects are subject to legal and regulatory requirements, ethical research ensures compliance with these requirements and therefore reduce the risk of litigation or other legal issues. Lastly, society has high expectations from ethical research and upholding these expectations is crucial. Consequently, conducting research in an ethically responsible manner is integral to maintaining the social license to undertake research and the trust of the public and society at large. Similarly, conducting ethical research is essential for ensuring that research is conducted according to the highest standards and has a positive impact on society. It ensures that research is conducted in a transparent, credible and trustworthy manner, enhancing the reputation and credibility of researchers and institutions.

This conceptual paper explores how the concept of reflective practice can be used in research ethics. The paper is written against the background that there appears to be a paucity of publications that explore reflective practice to improve our research ethics and thereby improve our research conduct. Against this background, reflective practice is critically discussed in the context of research ethics. The paper argues the use of reflective practice to research ethics as a way to contribute to knowledge in the field of research ethics. The paper argues that through our own reflection we can see the difference between right and wrong and therefore do the right thing when doing research. The paper argues that a reflective approach can provide researchers with the essential knowledge of how to conduct research responsibly. Firstly, I discuss the concept reflective practice in relation to research

ethics. Secondly, I discuss the definition of research ethics and examples of research ethics. Thirdly, I discuss the three theories of ethics namely consequentialism, virtue ethics and deontology. Fourthly, I critically discuss the ethical dilemmas. Lastly, I recommend the ethics reflection model and discuss how it can be used as reflection tool. This paper contributes to the existing literature by identifying how an understanding of ethics theories and a reflection on our ethical practice can enrich our understanding of research ethics and thereby improving our research practice.

Reflective practice

Several studies have been done on reflective practice. In every one of the studies done, researchers focus on different aspects of reflective practice. For example, the study by McDonough and Brandenburg (2019) used dialogic reflection to explore an ethical moment that occurred in one of their research projects. Their research presented a dialogic reflective conversation to explore the ethical issues associated with data ownership. In principle, McDonough and Brandenburg (2019) argue that reflective practice can enable researchers to be alert of the unfolding of the ethical moments and therefore can consider how they can respond to them. Ghaye (2007) authored a paper titled "Is reflective practice ethical?". In this paper, the author emphasized that an important 'intention' of reflective practice is to improve what we do and an ethical analysis might lead to even better ethical action. The study used reflective portfolios to represent the recorded experiences. Ghaye (2007) raised the question of the ethicality of reflective practice and the argument was that the emotionality involved in the practice of reflection must not be underestimated. This is because reflective practices can also generate emotions. Depending on the nature of what is reflected about, a painful truth might emerge about it. Therefore, the person reflecting might be emotionally disturbed. The researcher reflecting on the current, future or past experiences where ethical considerations were not followed might experience emotional harm. However, I argue that the researcher can learn from this experience and improve his or her practice in the future studies. Similarly, in the study by Strumm (2022) on the experiences of social workers, reflective practice was deemed as an important and influential component and a contributing factor to professional development, experiential learning, and practice growth. Therefore, the use of reflective practice is deemed to bring about positive changes to the practice and thereby improve overall professional practice. In the research by Van Seggelen–Damen and Westerveld (2020), an exploration was done on the role of intuition in ethical reflection and the authors examined whether intuition and reflection can be separated both conceptually and empirically. Their research indicated that reflection-on-action can provide the opportunity to learn from own experiences and to gain insight into one's own actions and therefore facilitate sensemaking and reflection-in-action in future situations. The study by Chang and Gray (2013) documented reflective practice by two academic developers in relation to ethical issues they encountered, considered and addressed in eight case studies, which were part of a larger multi-university Australian study into learning and teaching with Web 2.0. Their study concluded that the human research ethics approval process needs to be understood as a series of measures that are important to protect not only the students but also the teacher-researchers and their institutions when doing learning and teaching research with Web 2.0. Reflection and reflective practice has been widely discussed in various contexts in the literature. Literature interchangeably use reflective, reflection, critical reflection and reflexivity to mean different things, however the meaning associated to all these terms can be summarized to mean self-examination (Bozalek & Zembylas, 2016). Therefore, the context of this paper is based on self-examination. Like looking at yourself in the mirror. The concept reflection is defined by Dewey "as action based on the active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it" (cited in Akbari, 2007, p.194). Literature equates the term reflection to mirror images and the act of deep thinking wherein we look into the mirror to see ourself and our practice more clearly and giving it some serious thought and consideration on what we see (Bassot, 2023). Similarly, reflection as a personal or social endeavor involves stepping back, introspecting on the experiences, feelings or events (Ramlal & Augustin, 2020).

In research practice, therefore, researchers must take a moment and look at their practice and ask themselves critical questions such as, did I collect the data ethically, did I seek consent from the participants before collecting the data, did I report the data accurately in the research journal. Answers to such questions can assist researchers to take a step forward in correcting their practice. Reflection can be done on the researchers' past experiences, that is reflection on action. This means that researchers can reflect on the research that has been done in past and probably published. Researchers can ask themselves the good and bad things that happened in the entire process from conceptualizing the paper to the publication of the paper. I argue that being critical to yourself as a researcher in terms of the good and bad things that happened can assist in improving our practice as researchers.

We can think about things and do something at the same time to adjust our approach, that is reflection in action. Researchers can reflect and think about a research project and simultaneously adjust the research

approach with the aim of adjusting the practice. These means that while in the process of designing the research project researchers can reflect on the good and bad things that might happen and immediately work towards adjusting the plans to correct them.

Lastly, we can reflect and think about the future so that we can plan the best outcomes, that is reflection for action. I argue that a reflection of our past experiences of doing research is critical and can assist researchers to improve their practice especially the ethically aspects of the research. Researchers' past research experiences in relation to ethics whether good or bad can help enormously. I argue that as we reflect and think deeply about research ethics, we can do something to adjust our approach. In fact, a deep thinking on what we understand by research ethics will go a long way in assisting us adjust our practice. I argue that we can successfully plan for the future especially by looking ahead in terms of what can happen if our research actions are unethical. Through reflection for action, we are able to foresee the risks associated with our actions and plan for the best outcomes.

Definition of research ethics

Research ethics is defined using different terminologies across literature. However, of critical importance is that research ethics can be regarded as the conduct of doing research. By implication, the conduct of doing research can be guided by the policy direction of the research entity. The conduct of doing research is documented in policies and guidelines to direct and guide researchers on the expectations of doing research. Policy makers often incorporate research ethics principles in the research ethics policies. The concept of principles is used interchangeably with norms and therefore for others they refer to these principles as norms of research ethics. Similarly, the main aim of research ethics is to determine the standards of doing research and these standards are documented in the form of a policy.

Similarly, the phrase research ethics can be equated to morals as researchers such as Steneck (2006) associate research ethics with morals and therefore define research ethics as the critical study of the moral problems associated with or that arise in the course of pursuing research. Such a stance means that researchers must constantly be trained on morals and therefore the need for research ethics education (Olesen, Amin & Mahadi, 2019) with specific focus on researchers and what they should and should not do in order to conduct research ethically and responsibly. Similarly, just like morals, research ethics should become an integral part of the life of researchers (Eisen & Berry, 2002). Therefore, in line with the argument by Hair, Akdevelioglu and Clark (2023) moral theories attempt to provide systematic answers to moral questions such as what makes an act right or wrong or what makes an individual morally good or bad. Interestedly, literature document moral theories and ethical theories as synonymous. By implication suggesting that the two terms morals and ethics are synonymous. It is the contention of this paper that ethics is concerned with the good and bad of society and individuals. Therefore, I argue that research ethics refers to the good or bad things researchers do.

Examples of research ethics

Research ethics in practice involves informed consent, privacy and confidentiality, preventing harm and discomfort, benefits and compensation, transparency, truthful reporting of findings and adhering to codes of conduct.

Informed consent is a process of getting participants agreeing to participate in the research through signing an informed consent letter. Signing such a letter means that they are consenting to be participants because they understand what the research is about, they understand the research methods, the aim of the research as well as the objectives of the research.

On the other hand, privacy and confidentiality imply that, as the researcher you agree to keeping the participants information private and therefore, you will not disclose their personal information to anyone, which means that the data and personal information will be kept confidential. In principle their information will be anonymized throughout the research process until the research is published.

Preventing harm and discomfort imply that the researchers will do everything possible to protect the participants from being harmed or feeling uncomfortable. This means that the researchers will minimize the risks associated with causing harm to participants. Actions required include arranging for counselling where possible, making sure that the participants can withdraw at any time when they feel uncomfortable. Such actions are meant to protect participants during the entire research process.

Research participants need to enjoy the benefits in terms of participating in the research. Therefore, when participants agree to participate in the research, they need to consent knowing very well what is it that they will benefit. Similarly, if there is compensation, the researcher must be upfront to inform the participants about the compensation. Although compensation can be regarded as bribing the participants, the researcher must be very clear in terms of such compensation.

Transparency in research involve being open about everything during the research process. Openness in research assist in making sure that readers of your researchers are not left asking questions about your research. Therefore, the process involves being open about how the data was collected and how the data was analyzed. These include how the researcher gained entry to the data collection site, clear information about the population and sampling procedure.

Truthful reporting of the findings is very critical in the research process and therefore researchers must not fabricate data. Data obtained need to be reported and analyzed truthfully and therefore it must not be altered at any stage to the research process.

Therefore, the researcher must at all times adhere to the codes of conduct of doing research. Research policies for example, provides guidelines regarding ethical research and therefore, researchers must read the policies on research ethics and research in general so that they can follow the codes of conduct as stipulated in these policies. Codes of conduct normally relate to acceptable ways of doing research, these includes the dos and don'ts.

Theories of research ethics

I reflect on the ethical theories as they are important and critical in helping us understand and make an informed judgement on the ethical dilemmas (Osmo & Landau, 2006). A reflection on these theories is important because researchers must be aware of and apply ethical theories in their research practice as they face diverse challenges and ethical dilemmas. A thorough reflection on the research practices can better our understanding of ethical standards, policies, and issues, and improve ethical judgement and decision-making. Many of the deviations that occur in research may happen because researchers simply do not know, or have never thought seriously, about some of the ethical norms of research (Olesen, Amin & Mahadi, 2019). Literature postulates a number of theories for ethics however this paper will focus on consequential ethics, or consequentialism, virtue ethics and deontology.

Consequential ethics falls under normative ethics which focus on whether the actions of individuals are right or wrong (Mohn, 2022). Therefore, normative ethics Mohn (2022) is a branch of ethics that tries to determine the best way for people to live. In principle, in accordance with consequentialism an action is either morally right or wrong depending on its outcome or outcomes. Therefore, the action that provides the most positive outcome for most people is the right action. While the theory on consequentialism dictates that the action with the best outcome should be followed, it does not indicate which outcomes are good or bad. In other words, researchers who believe in this theory may disagree about the ethics of certain actions because they have different ideas about what constitutes a good and bad outcome.

Deontology is another branch of normative ethics. Deontology just like consequentialism focuses on actions but not the agents performing the actions. The theory was developed by Immanuel Kant who was an 18th century German philosopher who considered ethics an essential component of human life (Christie, Groarke and Sweet, 2008). Deontology focuses on the inherent rightness of a behavior and determines the set of rules to live by whereas utilitarianism emphasizes the amount of good and bad caused by the consequences of the action undertaken (Hair, Akdevelioglu & Clark, 2023).

The difference between consequentialism and deontology is that the theory on deontology claims that an action can be morally right or wrong based on a particular set of rules. It does not consider the consequences of an action. Deontological ethics maintains that the moral worth of one's actions has nothing to do with the consequences of those actions but is determined by the intention of the actors (Christie, et. al. 2008). Therefore, ethics is primarily concerned with doing the right thing because it is the right thing to do, not because it is in the agent's self-interest, or because it will produce good consequences. The two theories are opposites in that deontologists believe that some actions are neither ethical nor unethical, but consequentialists do not think these types of actions exist.

On the other hand, virtue ethics is associated with Aristotle and has enjoyed resurgence in contemporary moral philosophy as an alternative to the narrowness of the Deontological–Consequentialist dichotomy (Christie, et. al. 2008). Similarly, virtue ethics does not focus on isolated acts but on the character of the agent, for example honesty, loyalty, courage, compassion, kindness, fairness, etc. Therefore, Aristotle does not separate morality from politics. According to Aristotle the point of politics is to have a good society populated with citizens of good moral character. Aristotle insists that morality depends on a number of contextual factors and therefore we need to do the right thing, to the right people, at the right time, in the right way, for the right reasons. Thus, a virtue ethics model takes account of context and consequences, without reducing ethics to simple matters of promoting pleasure, avoiding pain, or doing one's duty.

Ethical dilemmas

In the research realm, ethical dilemmas are changing daily and in some cases they become complicated. Therefore, ethical decision making becomes important and everchanging. Consequently, reporting on ethical considerations may have benefits in terms of preventing harm and maintaining the scientific credibility of researchers as well as participants and the community at large.

Researchers face different challenges in their pursuit of doing research. They encounter situations whereby there are competing moral principles and values. These competing moral principles and values make it difficult for them to decide which course of action to take. In many of these situations, their complex nature is such that there is no clear right or wrong answer. It sometimes involves choices between several course of actions, each with its own potential consequence. Therefore, ethical dilemmas are not always easy to resolve and require careful consideration of all the circumstances involved as well as principles and values that underpin them. The paper argues that with the ethics principles in mind, researchers can reflect on the ethical dilemma they face and therefore try and resolve the dilemma in line with the ethics principles. For example, one of the ethical dilemmas researchers face involve data manipulation, plagiarism, and conflict of interest. Data manipulation is an act by researchers where data is misrepresented. Researchers can for example manipulate the data to suit the research being reported. This normally happens when they realize that the data collected cannot answer their research questions. In using reflective practice, researchers can reflect on their actions and the consequences thereof. The reflection can be done with principles of research ethics in mind. Issues that researchers can ponder upon include how their actions can affect the integrity of the research they are doing. Taking a moment to reflect on these type of actions can assist in rethinking of the actions and thereby take corrective steps. A similar reflective approach can be taken regarding ethical dilemmas such as plagiarism and conflict of interest. Plagiarism is punishable in many institutions and researchers faced with this ethical dilemma need to reflect deeply about plagiarism and the consequences thereof. In simple terms, plagiarism involves the use of someone's work as if it is your own work without proper referencing and acknowledgment. Similarly, the definition by Stern (2007) encompasses the use of words, ideas, inventions, illustrations (published or unpublished) with the main designation (appellation) without the consent of the original author. Unethical practices related to plagiarism are increasing daily. The infinite amount of information in the internet environment (Filipec, 2021) imply that researchers can easily obtain information from the internet thus save and "cut and paste" with ease, compared to the information gathered from textbooks, journals or magazines. Many researchers are involved in this practice because of pressures related to publishing and promotion. The notion known as publish or perish has caused unnecessary pressure on researchers. Similarly, many of the students are pressured to complete their studies and therefore cut and paste from the internet. These actions result in plagiarism, however with the necessary reflective action by researchers, dilemmas like this can be avoided. Examples of reflective actions researchers can do are thinking and rethinking through every sentence and paragraph they are writing to make sure that they are not plagiarizing anyone's work. Such reflective actions will go a long way in averting plagiarism and thus improve our ways of doing things. Therefore, reflecting on plagiarism as concepts itself should assist in making corrective steps to correct actions related to plagiarism. The easier way to introspect on plagiarism is to upload research work into the plagiarism detection software. The report obtained after uploading the research work can be used as baseline for reflective thinking with the aim to resolve all plagiarism related issues.

Another ethical dilemma researchers encounter is the conflict of interest in research, and this occurs when researchers has financial, personal or professional interest that may influence their research and therefore have bias in the research. The conflict of interest has the potential to undermine the credibility and objectivity in reporting the research results. For example, the researcher may be tempted to skew the findings in favor of their financial or personal interest, or they may be tempted to suppress unfavorable results to protect their financial or professional interests. Examples of conflict of interest include situations where the research is funded by a company that produces the product being studied. Another example includes a situation where researchers stand to benefit professionally if the study produces favorable results. Lastly, a conflict can happen when the research has personal relations with participants. A thorough reflection on the dilemma such as conflict of interest can assist in repositioning and avoiding the potential of being conflicted. In this regard the role of ethics committee play a crucial role because in their review of the ethics applications, they must evaluate the application being submitted for ethical clearance to determine if there is a potential conflict of interest. In fact, there must be section in the application for ethical clearance where the applicant must reflect on issues related to conflict of interest.

Ethics Reflection Model

In view of the literature review and arguments put forward in this paper. I developed the model below as a recommendation to reflect on research ethics. I named the model; the Ethics Reflection Model and I decided on

this type of model because the concepts in the model are interrelated and therefore a reflection on each one them must not be done in isolation. However, a linear application of the model makes sense, and it proceeds as steps discussed in the paragraphs below. Their convergence to the concept reflection means that researcher can reflect on each concept in relation to the other concept. On the other hand, researchers can reflect holistically on each of the concepts. The following paragraphs discusses the concepts contained in the model. These are, purpose of research, scope of research, literature review, colleagues and experts, ethical framework as well implement and monitor.
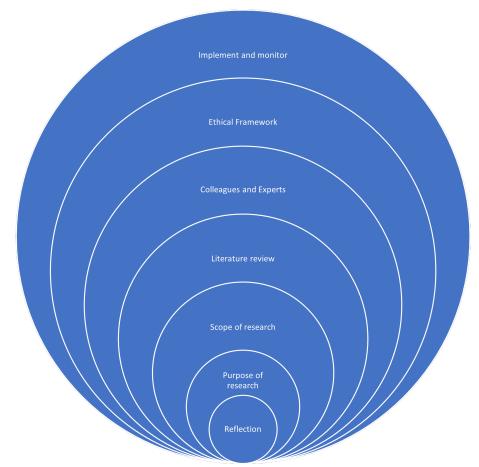

Figure1: Ethics Reflection Model

Firstly, researchers must determine the purpose of their research. The purpose of their research will guide ethical considerations. For example, if the research involves human participants, the researcher will have to ensure that the research is conducted in a way that minimizes the risk to participants.

Secondly, the researcher must determine the scope of the research. The scope of the research will determine the type of ethical considerations to be addressed. For example, research that involves vulnerable populations will require additional considerations.

Thirdly, a thorough literature review must be conducted. A literature review will help identify the ethical considerations associated with the research topic. This will help the researcher to adopt and develop an informed approach to the research topic.

Fourthly, consultation with colleagues and experts is critical. It is important to get feedback and advice from colleagues and experts in the field to ensure that the approach to ethical considerations is appropriate.

Fifthly, researchers need to develop an ethical framework based on the purpose of the research, scope of research, literature review and advises from the colleagues and experts. Such an ethical framework will outline the principles and procedures that will be followed throughout the research.

Lastly, researchers will have to monitor and implement the ethical framework. This means that in the process of conducting the research, it is important to continuously monitor and evaluate the implementation of the ethical framework, this will help to identify any issues and areas that require improvement.

The suggested ethics reflection model provides a comprehensive framework for ensuring ethical research practices. Through acknowledging the purpose and scope of research, conducting a thorough literature review, consulting with colleagues and experts and developing an ethical framework, researchers can navigate complex ethical dilemmas with confidence and integrity. By regularly monitoring and reviewing ethical practices within the ethical framework, researchers can ensure that their work remains aligned with ethical principles and societal expectations. Ultimately, adopting a robust approach to ethics in research is essential for maintaining the trust of stakeholders, protecting the welfare of research participants, and advancing knowledge in a responsible and sustainable manner. Ongoing literature review, as well as a discourse with colleagues, peers, as well as experts can assist researchers to deal with ethical dilemmas.

Conclusion

In conclusion, reflective practice is a vital component of the academic and scientific realm, and ethical dilemmas that researchers face demand careful consideration. Reflective practice provides an essential tool for effectively navigating ethical dilemmas in research, promoting ethical behavior and decision making throughout the research process. A deeper understanding of the intersection of research practice, reflective practice, research ethics, ethical dilemmas and research ethics theories is critical for promoting ethical research practice and fostering a culture of responsible and accountable research. Reflection is critical and reflecting on research ethics specifically forms an important part of research as it adds to the rigor in scientific research. Research ethics is about adhering to the principles and guidelines which are fundamental to the scientific integrity of any research. Similarly, a reflection on research ethics can assist in ensuring that researchers produce valid and reliable results and, in the process, protecting the rights and wellbeing of the participants. By adopting a reflective approach to research, researchers can contribute to promoting responsible and ethical practices, fostering trust, transparency, and accountability in the research community as a whole.

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