

# The importance of considering ethics in research

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Research—or the production of new knowledge—needs to be done ethically. Why is it important to factor ethics into the practice of producing new knowledge?

The word “ethics” refers to “moral principles that govern a person’s behavior or the conducting of an activity.”<sup>1</sup> Moral principles are “principles of right and wrong that are accepted by an individual or a social group.”<sup>2</sup> If we add

“research” into the term “ethics,” the phrase “research ethics” would now refer to the principles of right and wrong that govern a researcher’s behavior or the conducting of research. “Research ethics” is the principles of right and wrong in action, in practice, or in the actual implementation of knowledge production.

When we conduct human research, we produce new knowledge, often with development goals in mind, for instance—to be more efficient in work, to make clients more satisfied, to diagnose more accurately, to treat more effectively, to prevent illness, to predict outcomes, or to save lives. We ask questions and answer them to produce new knowledge, which we hope will eventually inform the actions that we take in order to meet our development goals. This is a very human pattern of behavior: question-answer-knowledge-action, to strive towards development.

It is human nature to work towards development—towards making existence a better experience. This is the reason why we have the propensity to marvel and to introspect, and then to question and look for answers to our questions. This is the most fundamental reason for generating more and more knowledge, for doing research. And this is good—the intention is noble because it benefits us, the people around us, and even those who will exist after us. Generating new knowledge is a conscious effort to do something that gives benefit to oneself and to others.

The problem with knowledge production is that it can cause harm, especially to research participants. Harm within the context of research can either be physical, psychological, economic, sociocultural, or legal. Many researches in the past have caused direct, indirect, intentional, or unintentional harm to the participants, or even to the public.<sup>3</sup> Asking questions, collecting and analyzing data to answer these questions,

and communicating findings and interpretations to others all involve harm.

That is why we have international and national guidelines, state laws, and research implementation standards that support human protection systems in research. In the Philippines, many mandates pertaining to health research order the establishment of research ethics committees, the review of all researches involving humans or human data by these committees, and the accreditation of these committees by the Philippine Health Research Ethics Board, the policy-making body in health research ethics in the country.<sup>4</sup> These mandates should guide academic and health institutions, as well as agencies that conduct researches involving humans or human data, in providing human protection in research.

Deciding to do research is an ethical act. If we decide to pursue knowledge, we affirm and celebrate the human features of introspection, examination of our actions, and pursuit of excellence in the things we do as a society. Actually doing research—i.e., asking questions, recruiting participants, giving interventions, gathering and analyzing data, to reporting findings—offers several opportunities for more ethical acts because, when we perform the tasks involved in research, we are presented with opportunities to do good for others, to prevent harm from coming their way, to show respect for and to acknowledge others as fellow humans, to actively participate in restoring or maintaining justice, and to practice professionalism, honesty, and integrity.

By properly applying ethical principles in doing research, and by ensuring that a system for the oversight and guidance of research implementation is in place, we can prevent harm, minimize the risk of harm, and avoid misconduct in research. From there on, we can pursue the ethical act of doing research and positively gain from seizing the opportunities that the act offers. That is why it is important to factor ethics into the practice of producing new knowledge.

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