

RESEARCH ETHICS REVIEW AS ONE WAY TO PROTECT HUMAN SUBJECT AND NOT ONLY

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Ethics has gained much popularity and recognition in the field of research with the development of behavioral, medical and biomedical sciences resulting from unsuccessful studies involving human subjects which led to detrimental and lethal consequences (Sieber & Tolich, 2014). These instances of unethical research have led to the proposal of various codes of ethics, each aiming to protect human subjects from physical, emotional, and psychological harm. The Nuremberg Code of Ethics (1949), Helsinki Declaration (1964), and Belmont Report (1979) were introduced (Meltzoff, 2005). Today, at the institutional level, Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) or Institutional Research Ethics Committees (IREC) function to review research involving human subjects for maintenance of ethical considerations (McAreavey & Muir, 2011). These boards review research for ethics referring to the above-mentioned codes along with federal regulations and laws of the country.

With the increasing amount of research and increasing interest in social behavioral phenomena, IRBs have been gaining criticism of different character so far too. More and more IRBs are seen as preventive institutions rather than supportive, and IRBs have become known as “ethics police” (Gunsalus et al., 2006, p.1141). Some complaints about IRBs are related to the process itself, whereas others criticize the members of IRBs. Very common criticism about the process is its time-consuming nature along with the involvement of much paperwork that delays the data gathering process (Blunt, Savulescu, & Watson, 1998; Whitney et al., 2008; Israel & Hay, 2006). Moreover, some researchers believe that the regulations applied to review social and behavioral science research are checked against the regulations which are more suitable for reviewing medical or biomedical research (De Vrie, DeBruin & Goodgame, 2004; Sikes, 2013). Other scholars criticize members of IRBs, stating that the problem is not in the regulations but rather in its interpretations (Breckler, 2005). Also, researchers and faculty believe that they are being deprived of academic freedom by being questioned of epistemology and methodology of their proposed research (Sikes & Piper, 2010).

Despite all the criticism, the significant role of IRBs in protecting human subjects, at the first place, cannot be neglected. As history and literature shows, apart from harmful unethical studies of the mid 20th century, some unethical research with deception scandals continued to take place close to the end of the 1990's (McAreavey & Muir, 2011). It should be noted that not only do IRBs protect people's well-fare and their human rights, but also the review

process has some pedagogical and practical values for researchers and other stakeholders. This paper seeks to analyze literature on the institutionalized research ethics review process through the perspective of stakeholder analysis. According to Bryson (2007), stakeholder analysis is extremely vital in considering the ways to increase the efficiency of the policy or solving the policy problems because any policy, at the first place, serves for and entails people, groups, or organizations. Also, the theoretical framework will highlight the benefits of the process and stress on the significance of the educational policy of establishing institutionalized research ethics review boards. Moreover, reviewing literature using stakeholder theoretical framework will allow shedding light on the ways to increase the efficiency of the policy and suggest some recommendations for the improvement of the policy. The stakeholders who will be considered in this paper are human subjects involved in research, a university, and researchers or faculty.

Stakeholder Analysis

Research participants are the most interested parties (although they are not always aware of it) in the policy. As history shows, there were many studies and experiments conducted involving human subjects which ended with detrimental consequences for human participants. One of the most well-known examples is Nazi Medical Experiments in which prisoners were forced to be part of different medical experiments which ended for most of them either with death or untreated illnesses. Another known as the absolutely unethical study is Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment with African-American population. Some number of the participants in the study were intentionally infected with syphilis, whereas the rest part had already been infected and they were deceived that they would get treatment for syphilis (Meltzoff, 2005). Both of these studies were recognized several decades later as unethical studies contradicting all moral human norms. Also, these studies resulted in the creation of codes of research ethics such as Nuremberg Code (1964) and Belmont Report (1979). The Belmont Report (1979) is the foundational document the current U.S. human protection system adheres to (The National Commission, 1979). The report proposes the core three principles: respect for person, beneficence, and justice. These principles are considered in evaluating any research for the maintenance of ethical norms and regulations by IRBs (Ferraro, Szigeti, Dawes, & Pan, 1999; Sieber & Tolich, 2013).

According to Sieber and Tolich (2013), human subjects need a special approach in considering them as research participants because “all people are vulnerable in one way or another” (p. 13). However, there is a special group of people – vulnerable population, the population which needs not only a careful approach but they are also populations “whom society most needs to understand and serve” (p. 13). People with physical or psychological disorders, children under age of eighteen, pregnant women, prisoners, refugees etc. are considered as a vulnerable population who are not eligible to predict and evaluate the potential level of risk or harm they may encounter during a study (Levine, 1988). Thus, the role of IRBs as a committee responsible for foreseeing and preventing unethical research becomes significant in relation to research participants.

As for university, the establishment of IRB means more than protecting human subjects. University as an independent organization carries a double responsibility. At the first place, it aims to ensure that human participants are protected from research risks. The literature illustrated that the cases of the research proposal with psychological and emotional risks which were prevented and rejected by IRB exist (Ashcraft & Krause, 2007). This is an example of the efficiency of the boards in terms of protecting human subjects from minimal or more

than minimal risks. At the same time, this informs that university falls under risk of damaging its reputation by overlooking unethical research. Thus, IRBs not only protects human subjects but also it protects itself and university-affiliated researchers from lawsuits and bad press which eventually might affect the university ranking (Sieber & Tolich, 2014).

Not the last but the least interested party in the ethics review process is university faculty and researchers. Faculty complaints and dissatisfaction with IRB procedures depicted in the literature make them the least interested. Yet, some empirical studies highlighted that faculty recognizes the significance of the ethics review boards as one way to protect human subjects (Ashcraft & Krause, 2007; Ferraro, Szigeti, Dawes, & Pan, 1999). In reality, there are some other benefits and values faculty gains from having reviewed their research proposals by IRB. To our knowledge, the hallmark of academic progress within academia is faculty high-quality research and its later publication in peer-reviewed journals (Leberman, Eames, & Barnett, 2016). According to APA (2016), IRB provides faculty with “in-house experts” (p. 5) who may serve as “a resource of ethical wisdom” (Gunsalus et al., 2006, p. 1441) for faculty, in particular for novice researchers and graduate students. As Sikes (2013) noted, faculty might not always have sufficient prior knowledge of the risks their research might generate. This especially concerns the faculty who have recently joined university of the different context and culture with differing regulations and moral norms (Zhang, 2017). Therefore, the practical value of IRBs for researchers and faculty cannot be underemphasized. Moreover, the research proposals which have gone through a review of IRB makes them more eligible to win funding, because funding organizations are more likely to trust the university which has its own established system of ensuring the quality of research

In conclusion, it is important to note that all listed advantages of IRB from the stakeholder perspectives are important aspects which need to be considered at early stages of establishing IRBs and at later stages when they are functioning. In particular, it is very vital to disseminate among faculty and researchers more knowledge about listed benefits and values of the process both for human subjects, university, and researchers. The main focus should be informing researchers and faculty that ethics review process is more than a formality and that there are many rationales behind this educational policy. Consequently, all the complaints and dissatisfactions with the process from faculty and researchers' part will dissipate.

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