

Ethical Aspects of Research

Ensuring that research is ethically sound is as important as ensuring that it is methodologically robust. One way to evaluate the ethics of a study, and to address any ethical conflicts that it raises, is to apply general ethical principles. These form the grounds for more specific ethical issues. For example, the need to seek informed consent can be seen as based on the principle of respect for autonomy. Four such ethical principles are often identified:

Principle	Associated requirement	Implications for specific ethical issues
Respect for autonomy	Protect (and possibly also enhance) the autonomy or self-determination of others	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gaining informed consent • Not deceiving participants • Not exploiting participants • Respecting confidentiality and privacy
Beneficence	Perform actions that are likely to promote the well-being of others	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The moral impetus for research – aiming for societal benefits • Dissemination and implementation of findings
Non-maleficence	Refrain from actions that are likely to bring harm to other people	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not to cause harm or distress • Not to breach confidentiality or anonymity • Not to raise unrealistic or unfulfillable expectations
Justice	Deal with others in a way that is fair – treating individuals differently only where there are morally relevant reasons to do so	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Researching vulnerable or disempowered populations • Ensuring that the benefits and burdens of research are distributed fairly • Ensuring that the credit for new knowledge is fairly attributed

These principles are not absolute. Rather, in the case of an ethical conflict or dilemma, they can be weighed against one another so as to determine, in the case in question, which requirement is the more pressing. For example, there might be a choice to be made between allowing individuals to make for themselves a decision that appears not to be the best available, or seeking to make a decision on their behalf on the basis of one's own view of their best interests. An evaluation of the relative weight to be attached to respect for autonomy and beneficence in such a situation may form a means of resolving this conflict.

There are, in addition, various codes of ethics related to research. These provide valuable guidelines, though they cannot take the place of critical ethical reflection on the part of the individual researcher.

Suggested reading

Beauchamp TL, Childress JF (2008) *Principles of Biomedical Ethics*. 6th edn. Oxford University Press, New York.

European Commission (2010) European Textbook on Ethics in Research.

https://ec.europa.eu/research/science-society/document_library/pdf_06/textbook-on-ethics-report_en.pdf

Foster C (2001) *The Ethics of Medical Research on Humans*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Homan R (1991) *The Ethics of Social Research*. Longman, London.

Sim J (2010) Addressing conflicts in research ethics: consent and risk of harm. *Physiotherapy Research International* 15(2): 80–87.