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of Higher Education

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April 4, 2010

The Virtuous Researcher

By Bruce Macfarlane

We all know how to get our research proposal past a research-ethics committee, don't we? Everything participants say will be kept confidential; their anonymity is assured. "Informed" consent will be obtained, and all data will be securely stored. The benefits of carrying out the study will far outweigh any risks, of course. And there is no need for the university to worry. There is no risk of litigation or to the university's reputation. Everyone's in the clear. Honestly!

Such is the game that goes on. Research ethics has become another example of political correctness: the spouting of scripted communication designed to imply commitment to a set of sacred principles, whether one believes in them or not. We are encouraged to idly assert many of the same mantras in the methodology sections of our academic papers or doctoral theses. It is inauthentic, scripted communication—to satisfy the demands of a surveillance society—that only scratches the surface of real research ethics. We must broaden our concept of research ethics to consider the fundamental virtues that underlie what we, as individual researchers, actually do.

A historical perspective helps us to understand how we have got into this position. Despite the atrocities of Nazi human experimentation and the resulting Nuremberg Code, it took a series of postwar scientific scandals before research ethics was taken seriously. The ill-fated testing of the thalidomide drug during the 1960s and the four-decade-long Tuskegee syphilis study were probably the most influential. In the Tuskegee case, syphilitic black men were systematically misled and exploited for decades.

Today, academics around the world face bureaucratic approval processes every time they want to do research. These are largely

based on the principles of biomedical ethics, first outlined in the early 1970s, in the wake of the Tuskegee scandal, by the newly formed National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research. The principles established by this commission— respect for persons, beneficence, non-maleficence, and justice—are the basis of most codes of research ethics we have today, regardless of discipline. A respect for persons should be the cornerstone of any piece of research involving human participants. Research should also be designed to ensure that it has the potential to do more good than harm. But there are problems with relying so heavily on those four moral pillars, which have collectively become known as "principalism."

It is hard to argue with the importance of "respect for persons" or "balancing costs and benefits." Taken together, however, those principles collide. They can lead to contradictory versions of right and wrong. For example, the benefits of finding an effective treatment for Alzheimer's disease would be enormous, but research subjects are unlikely to be able to give their informed consent. Moreover, the universal principles do not connect with the values of the researcher or the cultures of different disciplines or societies. Principles can be cherry-picked to justify almost any predetermined course of action that conveniently fits with the research design.

Universities have adopted bioethical principles as part of a front-end, litigation-conscious version of research ethics. That has limited relevance to researchers in the arts, humanities, and social sciences, particularly those using certain qualitative methods. Not all research involves human subjects, as academics in disciplines as disparate as fine art and mathematics know.

What we need is an alternative way to think about and discuss research ethics. It is vital to reconnect with the values of the researcher rather than impose a set of decontextualized principles of limited use when making decisions in practice. The extreme alternative to principalism is particularism. A particularist would argue that all moral positions are dependent on context and would allow researchers to use the excuse of "culture" to justify actions—an alternative that runs the risk of turning research ethics into a morality-free zone.

A better alternative to principalism is to think of research ethics in

terms of the virtues that make someone a good researcher. Virtues are excellences of character, such as courage or (proper) pride. A virtue-based approach to ethics focuses on being rather than doing. In other words, it is important to think about what we mean by a "good" person rather than try to predetermine how someone should act without heed to culture, context, or the beliefs and personality of the researcher. A number of virtues are central to being a "good" researcher. Those include courage, respectfulness, resoluteness, sincerity, humility, and reflexivity. How are they important?

Courage, for one, may be applied or interpreted in a variety of ways. The chosen method of research may be radically different from standard practice in the discipline. A research question may be audacious, challenging received wisdom. Or the researcher may have decided to tackle an unpopular or taboo subject, like suicide or pedophilia. The fact that there might be public disapproval and little financial support for such research must be faced. Such a decision, while courageous, might represent taking a significant career risk. More fundamentally, a really courageous researcher is prepared to ask questions that challenge his or her own previous research findings or assumptions. The results of research can prove to be so controversial that the researcher may, in extreme cases, risk professional and sometimes public vilification. Such a dilemma most famously confronted Charles Darwin in the much delayed publication of *On the Origin of Species*.

Every virtue is linked to, and comes under pressure from, twin vices, which represent a lack or excess of a particular disposition. Courage is linked to cowardice and recklessness. Human emotions such as love, ambition, greed, boredom, and laziness play a big part in the research process, as they do in any other life activity. They can have positive as well as negative consequences. A cowardly researcher might shrink from the challenge of pursuing a difficult or taboo topic that might go against the grain of current academic fashion. A reckless researcher might take on the challenge of a demanding research theme or question without engaging in sufficient preparation through reading the relevant literature. What is needed, in other words, is a balance, which lends itself toward the middle state of courage. This is what a virtue is.

Other virtues of relevance might include respectfulness not just

toward research participants but also toward wider communities (such as indigenous peoples) and the physical environment. There is also a need for resoluteness in the pursuit of a research question despite challenges connected with the time-consuming nature of a project, its scope, or difficulties in collecting or interpreting data. It is tempting to cut corners and compromise original intentions. Researchers must convert hard-won data or other materials and ideas into meaningful "results." In practice, this is about producing some kind of interpretation, critique, model, theory, design, or artifact.

There are many temptations to be avoided during this creative phase of research, including trimming results that do not fit the researcher's, or even a sponsor's, own favored beliefs or preferred outcome. Here the virtue of sincerity is critical in avoiding the twin vices of concealment and exaggeration. While the results of anyone's research may be shown to be flawed, what is vital is that the researcher presents only what he or she believes to be true at the time.

Research is about the pursuit of truth. Anything other than that is a perversion of the entire process. In subsequently presenting what one might believe to be true, humility is important in respecting the priority of others in coming up with ideas or discoveries. Finally, throughout the research process, or at least at its conclusion, it is important to be reflexive—that is, to think through the extent to which the purposes or questions posed at the outset have been answered, to evaluate your own skills and performance as a researcher, and to be flexible rather than dogmatic about using a methodology that may not have worked well.

Those examples just skim the surface of a virtue approach to research ethics. What this approach demonstrates is that research ethics connects to a much broader range of real issues throughout the life cycle of a piece of research. Crucially, virtue theory provides a way of connecting research ethics with one's own lived experience as a researcher. Virtue theory provides no formulas or step-by-step recipes. It brings responsibility down to the level of each individual researcher and demands an authentic, rather than formulaic, consideration of research ethics.

Being ethical is about developing a deep, personal understanding of

our own values rather than trying to substitute individual responsibility with the mantras of bioethics. Getting better at handling ethical issues comes only with practice, experience, and learning from the good or bad examples of others. Being an ethical researcher requires an authentic engagement with our own beliefs and the values of our disciplines. Ethics is a bit like jazz, in that it is about more than simply following the notes on the page. It demands an ability to improvise and to think for ourselves. No research-ethics committee can do that for us.

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The Chronicle of Higher Education 1255 Twenty-Third St, N.W. Washington, D.C. 20037