# How and why ethical principles are changing

## Transcript

Full resource: <https://www.ncrm.ac.uk/resources/online/all/?id=20809>

Because ‘research ethics’ is a topic for teaching and writing, it can be viewed as static and fixed. However, ethics are mutable, changing over time as societies and people’s ideas change and develop. In the Euro-Western research paradigm, in recent decades, research ethics has been managed in a largely regulatory fashion, with research ethics committees and institutional review boards working to ensure ethical compliance. This has focused heavily on participant wellbeing and data storage, which are important aspects of research ethics but not the whole story.

There is an increasing understanding that research ethics is not only about protecting participants, but is needed throughout the research process. When we are designing research we need to think through the ethical difficulties we might face at different stages of the project. When we are setting our research into context, such as through a literature review or document analysis, we need to consider whether our search strategy is ethical and what we might be excluding. When we gather data, we need to think about other people as well as participants: perhaps participants’ families and communities, gatekeepers, other people who have a stake in the research. When we analyse data we need to ensure that we treat our data fairly and represent our participants accurately. When we report our research we need to be clear about which story we are telling and which stories we are not telling, and why. When we present our findings to people, we need to make that as engaging as we can for our audiences. When we disseminate our research we need to know who will be interested in our work and how we can best reach those people. Then there is aftercare, for people, data, and findings, which is another ethical consideration, as is the researcher’s well-being. And there are many more; this is just an overview.

People now realise that researchers need to be able to think and act ethically throughout the research process. Therefore we are seeing a move away from regulation and towards education: through texts, discussions, videos like this one, workshops, seminars, and conferences. Alongside this we are seeing a shift from a theory-based approach to ethics, with concepts such as deontologicalism and consequentialism, to a more value-based approach. The EU-funded TRUST project, led by researchers from UCLAN here in the UK, talked to researchers around the world about what they thought was important, and identified four key values that came up again and again: respect, care, honesty and fairness. If we focus on those, we won’t go far wrong.

In this context, we are seeing changes to some specific ethical principles. For example, vulnerability. Conventionally this was an attribute assigned to groups by other groups in a paternalistic way. Now there is a more nuanced approach: sometimes everyone is vulnerable, such as at the start of the Covid19 pandemic, and individual levels of vulnerability often shift and change.

Another example is informed consent, a principle that came from medicine. In the early 20th century, some surgeons took it upon themselves to make interventions on behalf of patients, during a surgical procedure, which those patients had not consented to. Patients were understandably upset about this and the principle of informed consent was born. This principle made its way into research in the 1950s, long before anyone had thought of the internet, data repositories, re-use of data and so on. It is now pretty much impossible to give informed consent for a lot of research, because we cannot predict how that research will be publicised and used online, or how future researchers might re-use the data. Therefore we are beginning to see a move towards supporting participants to make their own assessments of the risks they might face as a result of taking part in our research.

Participant remuneration is a third example. Conventionally, people were expected to take part in research for nothing, to benefit an imagined future group of people. Researchers are increasingly realising we need to pay participants for their time and input, though not necessarily always with money.

A fourth example is voice. Around the turn of the century researchers talked about ‘giving participants a voice’, which was regarded as ethical. Now we understand that participants have perfectly good voices of their own which are not for researchers to bestow, although we can help to amplify participants’ voices.

These participant-focused changes are welcome, as is the move from regulation to education. However, there is a lot more work to do to help people understand the importance of research ethics throughout the research process, whatever kind of research is being done. This is the key principle which is not so likely to change. Research and ethics are inextricably linked and will always be so. Therefore, as researchers, we need a good understanding of ethics, both in theory and in practice.

National Centre for Research Methods (NCRM)  
Social Sciences  
Murray Building (Bldg 58)  
University of Southampton  
Southampton SO17 1BJ  
United Kingdom

**Web** www.ncrm.ac.uk   
**Email** info@ncrm.ac.uk  
**Tel** +44 23 8059 4539  
**Twitter** @NCRMUK