

This is the first of three videocasts on research ethics. We're going to look at ethical theories in this videocast, the next two will look at ethical principles and ethical practice.

People think of research ethics often as quite a dry dull boring topic. I don't think it is dry and dull, I think it's incredibly interesting, and it's very complex, and some of its interest comes from its complexity. People also sometimes talk about research ethics as though it exists in some kind of a bubble on its own but it doesn't. It's linked into other forms of ethics – individual ethics, institutional ethics, political and societal ethics – and it's also linked into big issues in our world like social injustice, social inequalities, imbalances of power. Because of the complexity of research ethics there are not always right answers to be found to ethical dilemmas, there's not always an ideal solution or a way to give everybody the same level of priority.

There are however definitely some wrong ways of acting, some unethical ways of acting, and we will be looking at some of those as we go through these videocasts. But to begin with we need to look at ethical theories because these provide a context for the ethical principles and the ethical work we do in our research practice. This is a very broad overview of some of the ethical theories from both the Euro-Western and the Indigenous research paradigms.

So the first one we're looking at is deontology. Don't be put off by the long words because the concepts behind them are really quite straightforward. In deontology the priority is given to someone's actions, and whether the action that someone takes is ethical, whether it's a good action or a bad action in itself. No attention is paid to the potential or actual consequences of that act. So for example people who follow a deontological code of ethics would say that it is bad to kill someone even in self-defence. It's bad to tell a lie even if by doing so you may help someone when they're miserable.

Deontological ethics focus on rules and laws, and people who follow deontological ethics will look for rules and laws to guide their actions, and will regard it as entirely possible to formulate a universal code that will guide you towards ethical research practice in any situation that you might come across. I have a bit of trouble with this because I don't think it is possible for any code to cover every single eventuality that could occur, particularly when you're doing research ethics perhaps at the frontiers of maybe research using social media, or research using big data. These kinds of things are throwing up ethical dilemmas that we could never have

foreseen that I don't really think any universal code could cover. There are those who would disagree with me on this. Then the next long word theory is consequentialism which is kind of a flip side of deontological ethics. Here the people who follow this code, which sits again firmly within the Euro-Western paradigm, will be looking at the consequences of an act and saying that it's the consequences that are important, the effect, the impact of someone's actions – it doesn't matter if you tell lies as long as those lies improve life for someone rather than making life worse for someone. So rather than looking at rules, laws, and universal codes, people who follow consequential ethics look at the morality, look at the context, look at the particular unique setting in which they're trying to make an ethical decision, and try to work out what the impact of their decision will be, what the consequences will be, and what the implications of those consequences will be. The problem of course is this is about predicting the future which is a very uncertain way of going about things. There is always difficulty in trying to predict what's going to happen when it hasn't happened yet, and it's really not always possible, never mind easy, to foresee all consequences and all the implications of the consequences of an act you may or may not take.

Then there is virtue ethics, again in the Euro-Western paradigm, I'm very much focusing on whether someone is a good person, a virtuous person. The argument is that if you're a virtuous person you will do virtuous things so if you're a good person you will be a good researcher. This kind of links with the whole neoliberal philosophy, it's placing emphasis on responsibilities, very much on individuals, to ensure that society works okay, that everybody's welfare is taken care of. It's a difficult one this because I'm sure we all do try to live up to whatever standards we see fit. but I know from my own experience that that's not always easy, sometimes it's not possible, sometimes we fail to live up to the standards that we set for ourselves. Then it may be worth trying – I think it's probably always worth trying – to live up to high standards, but we do need to acknowledge that sometimes we need to set the bar a little lower for ourselves in the interest of self-care which is also an ethical position to take as we will see in a later videocast.

The fourth and final ethical theory that I'm going to give an overview of here is value ethics, again in the Euro-Western paradigm. And this is about shared values, this is more of a collectivist than an individual approach, and it's looking up people's moral priorities and ethical action stemming from those priorities. This can be useful if you're researching cooperatively, it

can be useful to establish a shared value system within your research team, or with your participants if they're not part of your team as such. Then you have a value base to go back to if you come up against a difficult ethical dilemma, or when you're planning the research, when you're looking at what ethical dilemmas might lie ahead.

All of these theories have some value to them particularly in thinking through, raising your awareness of how research ethics does work or how it might work or how you would like it to work, but in practice in the Euro-Western research we mostly draw on a combination of those depending on the context, depending on the problem, depending on what you're trying to achieve. We're also going to look at the Indigenous research paradigm which comes from the southern part of the world and this is rather different from any of the Euro-Western ethical theories. It's very much about community, consensus, and relationship. It's about working together, it's about not looking at anyone as an expert over anyone else, or another way of putting that is everyone's an expert. People have their own bodies of expertise that they can contribute to an investigation to find out new knowledge or to solve problems.

Relationships are key within the Indigenous research ethical theory. Everything stems from relationships. Everyone's accountable for relationships with each other, with the research, with communities, and so on. The primary values here, respect is a really key value, respect for people, respect for the environment, respect for society and community and connectivity, how people are connected, how people are connected with each other, with research, with the land, with knowledge, with academia – all of these kinds of connections are highly valued. And also reciprocity, so relationships should be mutually reciprocal. It's not seen as ethical in the Indigenous paradigm for a researcher to come into a community, take data away, and use that data to benefit their career or some other people or communities. And one of the key things about research in Indigenous terms is that it is explicitly linked with social justice, so we're moving away from the ethical basis of do no harm which is inherited from biomedical research in the Euro-Western paradigm, and we're moving towards research explicitly being a means of doing good and making positive change in society.

So there is an interesting quote here now from Bagele Chilisa who's a professor in Botswana and she says that post-colonial Indigenous ethical theory defines research as respectful when it benefits the participants. Benefiting research participants is generally speaking not a priority in Euro-

Western research. Participants may be more or less involved in research or not involved at all but really seeking to benefit them, that's pretty rare, almost non-existent in Euro-Western research. So I'm going to leave you with a question to consider before we move to the next videocast on ethical principles and the one after that unethical practice.

"Why is it do you think that Euro-Western ethical theory does not include this perspective of benefiting participants?"