Reporting the Ethical Compliance in Current Research: A Rapid Literature Review

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the ethical compliance of the papers submitted to two conferences, namely the 10th International Scholars' Conference and the 6th International Research Forum held in the Philippines. Using a rapid literature review, 169 papers were identified, out of which 53 were excluded. The remaining 116 studies were scanned for ethical elements such as the declaration of observance to confidentiality, anonymity, the use of informed consent, and the right to withdraw at any time. Also noted were studies that underwent ethical review by institutional review boards (IRBs) or research ethics committees (RECs). Findings reveal that there were more than 10,000 participants in the papers included in the review. Of the 116 studies, 66% reported adhering to the confidentiality requirement, 54% gave out informed consent, 51% observed voluntary participation, 34% promised anonymity, and only 22% advised that participants may withdraw from the study at any time. More than half, or 53%, of these studies were cleared by their IRBs or RECs. These results capture the status of compliance with the elements of ethical research when compared with current practice. This moderate level of compliance to a key indicator of reliability in research points to the need for more vigilance toward ethical practice not only in higher educational institutions but also to research in general.

Keywords: research ethics, rapid literature review, ethical considerations

INTRODUCTION

The researcher's most important obligation is the ethical treatment of human subjects, where these subjects experience no adverse effects for having participated in the study (Cooper, 2016). Although avoiding all risk associated with any study is practically unrealistic, it is within the researcher's responsibility to balance the risk of harm against all potential benefits that can be derived from the study (Iphofen & Tolich, 2018).

One way to achieve such safeguards is for all studies to be certified by research ethics committees (RECs) that oversee all research activities within research institutions (Cooper, 2016). With members carefully chosen and following review protocols from regulatory bodies, RECs monitor ethical issues in research programs through peer reviews of research designs and proposals, ensuring that these address relevant ethical issues (Oliver, 2003). Universities and research institutions therefore require the research proposals be submitted to RECs who, in turn, require researchers to submit documents according to a set of criteria that are usually strictly

enforced (Bos, 2020). In return, researchers can expect from ethics boards extra insights towards anticipating issues that might have been overlooked.

According to the New Brunswick Declaration, an international cooperation to advocate the protection of research participants and researchers, even without the benefit of a formal ethics review, all research should be characterized by a respect for persons, not doing harm, and benefit that outweighs the risks. There should be mutual respect, where the burden of producing good research lies on the researchers (Iphofen, 2020).

Ethics in research is, therefore, not just a consideration but a requirement. It then becomes obvious that research, especially those sanctioned by educational institutions, must reflect the basic tenets of ethics in their papers as evidence not just of scholarly work but of research integrity, without which any work should not deserve any attention at all.

Every year, colleges and universities generate hundreds of theses and dissertations. Many of these find their way into research conferences which are then more broadly disseminated in journals and publications. Thesis panels serve as the last gateway before any paper makes its way outside academia. With functional institutional review boards (IRBs) or RECs in colleges and universities, academic research would have passed the rigors of ethical review before obtaining approval from the respective thesis panels. This accomplishment is significant and important enough that ethical clearance must be present in each manuscript. Together with this achievement is the declaration that the study observed due diligence in complying with ethical principles, explicitly stated in the discussion of methodologies or the study's results. However, this practice of declaring the elements of ethical practice in research is inconsistent, as evidenced by the papers submitted to the recent international research conferences. This rapid review of literature (i.e., research manuscripts) aims to scan papers submitted to the 10th International Scholars' Conference and the 6th International Research Forum, both held in the academic year 2023-2024. The paper aims to answer the question,

How compliant are manuscripts submitted in the 10th ISC and the 6th IRF
with the required elements of ethical considerations?

The purpose is not to undertake a systematic literature review, although some of the methodologies borrow from it. Findings include the result of the analysis indicating the degree of compliance of current research with ethical practice as stated in the manuscript. At the very least, the results should highlight the gaps in current practice and point the direction in which future research should move.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This review of literature discusses the beginnings of research ethics, tells its role in current research, describes the responsibilities of the ethics committees and institutional review boards, lists the elements of research ethics implemented in a study, and answers the question as to why researchers must provide the details of the study's ethical undertakings.

While for many, the basic tenets of ethical research trace their long history to 1947 after the Nuremberg Trials, Iphofen (2020) reports that codes of ethics have been observed in medical sciences before the Second World War. Nevertheless, the Nuremberg Code outlines certain elements of ethics that are foundational to today's ethical standards. These are voluntary

participation, informed consent, the option to withdraw participation, research that benefits society, avoidance of harm, and qualified researcher (Manton et al., 2014). The World Medical Association (WMA) upholds the Declaration of Helsinki as a guide for everyone involved in research involving human subjects. Although the Declaration is intended for medical research, its principles parallel the earlier ethical norms before it, such as giving importance to the subjects' privacy and keeping confidentiality with the personal information provided by the participants; anticipating and minimizing harm; the health and rights of the participants taking precedence over generating new knowledge; and conducting research with trained and qualified researchers (World Medical Association, 2022).

Research ethics differs from professional ethics in that the former deals with norms, values, and practices related to collecting, analyzing, and disseminating research findings. The latter, professional ethics, also deals with norms, values, and behaviors, but only as far as the practitioner's work is concerned (Bos, 2020). Research ethics is a practice. It reflects the actions that one takes (or does not take). It is a sustained responsibility in which opting out is not an option (Farrimond, 2013; Fujii, 2012). This means that responsibility and accountability exist whether the researcher followed good ethical decisions or bad.

Creswell and Creswell (2018) advise that during the conceptualization of the research proposal, ethical issues must already be anticipated by the researcher. Among the possible ethical issues include respecting privacy and maintaining confidentiality, properly obtaining informed consent forms, identifying vulnerable populations, ensuring voluntary participation, seeking approval from IRBs, and providing proof of compliance with these ethical issues.

According to Whitney (2016), the IRB system was spread from the National Institutes of Health to every health research organization in 1966. Backed by government policies, IRBs and RECs help accomplish ethical goals as regulatory agencies. While there are indications that traditional research ethics may have focused too much on protecting human subjects from harm, Whitney argues for balance, saying that there is also the consideration of the role of reliable scientific research in helping alleviate the suffering in society. In other words, IRBs and RECs should not only be concerned with the safety of the participants but also with promoting research that benefits the less privileged members of the community.

The institutionalization of research principles through IRBs and RECs allowed for ethical review to have its place in research timelines and whose clearances are required by gatekeepers and thesis panels alike. In other words, "ethical review has become both a moral and institutional requirement" (Farrimond, 2013, p. 6). Because of its necessity, it is something that clearly must be documented and reflected in the finished manuscript.

Plano Clark and Creswell (2015) observe that in disseminating either quantitative or qualitative research, one method by which audiences and readers assess the quality of the study is when the paper provides complete information about what was done in the study. Reporting the use of ethical procedures assures readers that participants were treated with respect.

One element in research ethics that researchers must report is how confidentiality in the information provided to them is observed. According to Bos (2020), confidentiality does not equate to merely hiding someone's identity but to knowing what personal data may be made available to whom and under what circumstances. It also includes the participants' rights to

understand the extent of their participation, to be properly invited to take part in the study and to reserve some control over the data that they provide.

Consent is also an element that must be carefully considered in research ethics. Not all research participants are able to appreciate the implications of their participation. Minors may not be old enough to understand the research process, requiring discussions with guardians or teachers. In certain situations, adults may not have sufficient formal education or second language competencies to appreciate the research process (Oliver, 2010). In these scenarios, it is within the researchers' responsibility to detail how informed consent was obtained in their study.

Encouraging people to voluntarily participate may not be as simple as it sounds. Individuals must be made aware of their option to *not* participate if they wish to do so without having to explain their decision. Voluntary participation is different from informed consent in that an individual may voluntarily participate but does not understand to what extent that participation actually involves. The right to withdraw from this participation without negative consequences is also important and closely relates to voluntary participation. Researchers should declare how these two elements of research ethics were implemented in the study.

Anonymity has always been a condition for participation for many of the human participants. This is based on the assumption that all participants in every research study wish to remain anonymous. According to Oliver (2010), some participants prefer being identified in the study to push their advocacy or even to discuss a new educational theory. However, the main benefit of anonymity is that the researchers can explore sensitive issues while protecting their respondents. Methods available to the researchers include not collecting their respondents' names and other identifiable information, coding their names, or properly hiding them behind pseudonyms.

One element of research ethics that is not considered as much as the others but is of significant importance is the terminology used to refer to human research samples. Oliver (2010) rightly argues that reference to the persons providing the data bears ethical implications because it reveals how they are viewed by the researchers. Oliver (2010) discussed that the three main terminologies appear to be *subjects*, *respondents*, or *participants*. These terms are here briefly discussed, as well as other alternatives used by a minority of the studies.

When researchers in the sciences call their data providers *subjects*, there is an implied role of passivity—that these persons agreed to be tested as part of the research and have little to no role other than be the source of data. There is no substantial interaction with researchers other than to provide data. This term tends to depersonalize and reduce the human participant to a lower, subservient role which loses their dignity and suggests a lack of mutual respect for those involved.

A *respondent* is someone who may or may not choose to respond to a request. There is an element of using one's free will where one might withdraw participation if conditions are unsatisfactory. This level of autonomy places the person in a more active role and is a more satisfactory term than being a mere subject.

The term *participant* is a more democratic terminology, given to someone who is fully involved in the research and whose role is more than to provide data but also input in decision-making as far as he or she is affected. The term is mostly associated with qualitative studies where the contribution of the individual is more emphasized.

Alternative terminologies are also used to refer to members of the research sample. An *interviewee* hints at the type of data collection the researchers used. The use of more descriptive terms, such as *teachers* or *students,* when carefully chosen, reflects the categories of those involved. Whatever terminology is used, Oliver (2010) advises that the researchers be sensitive to potential implications associated with the term. It must be value-neutral, treating all those involved in the research as equals.

In summary, while the elements discussed did not include all the possible considerations in any given ethical research, the ones discussed were the most relevant ones based on the type of studies this systematic literature review deals with. Ethical research today has a wider scope than when it first started, taking a crucial role in the integrity of research itself. Local regulatory bodies in the form of IRBs and RECs help institutions and researchers navigate these ethical considerations and protect not just the research participants but also the society and the community of researchers. These rigorous requirements must become evident in all published manuscripts, categorically declaring how ethical practices were a pillar in the studies conducted.

METHODS

A rapid review is "an assessment of what is already known about a policy or a practice issue by using systematic review methods to search and critically appraise existing research" (Grant & Booth, 2009, p. 95). It is a type of review that is rigorous but limits features found in a full systematic review. A rapid review identifies legitimate techniques that allow for shorter timescales, including a focused research question, less sophisticated search strategies, and restricting variables, resulting in a simpler quality appraisal. Table 1 highlights the differences between a rapid review and a systematic review.

Table 1
Comparison Between Rapid Review and Systematic Review

	Rapid review	**Systematic review**
Timeframe	1 to 6 months	At least 1 year
Resources	Excludes certain literature	Comprehensive
Searches	Limited to a set criteria, e.g., time period.	Comprehensive
Synthesis	Descriptive summary	Descriptive summary that can include a meta-analysis.

Note: From Rapid Review Protocol - Research Guides at Virginia Commonwealth University. https://guides.library.vcu.edu/rapidreview

In formulating the focused research question, reviews often utilize one of several frameworks that include, among others, PICO, PEO, SPIDER, SPICE, and ECLIPSE (Medical University of South Carolina Libraries, n.d.). These acronyms represent the different strategies that can be used to construct research questions (Santos et al., 2007). For this review, the SPIDER tool is used. It is a framework focusing on the samples of the study. SPIDER stands for sample, phenomenon of interest, design, evaluation, and research type. Table 2 presents the definitions of each tool and their application in the rapid review.

Table 2

The SPIDER Tool as Applied in the Review

Tool	Definition	Application
S - Sample	Who/what is the sample being studied?	Manuscripts submitted for presentation in the 10th International Scholars' Conference (10ISC) and the 6th International Research Forum (6IRF).
PI – Phenomenon of Interest	What is being investigated?	Elements of ethical consideration used in research studies.
D- Design (which research method or framework is being used?)	How the results were collected (interview, survey, etc.)?	Rapid literature review
E – Evaluation (What outcomes are they investigating?)	What is the outcome being impacted?	ethical compliance of current research
R – Research Type	The type of research included (qualitative or mixed methods)?	Quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-method studies.
Research question: How compliant are manuscripts submitted in the 10th ISC and the 6th IRF with the required elements of ethical considerations?		

Sampling

The SPIDER Tool, while it helped in defining the research question, also identified the sample for this review. The manuscripts submitted for presentation and publication in the two international conferences are from several Philippine and international higher education institutions. The papers received encompass various types of study that involve human and non-human participants. The 10th International Scholar's Conference was held in October 2023, and the 6th International Research Forum, held in April 2024, were both hosted by a private university in the Philippines. The review decided on several inclusion and exclusion criteria, as presented in Table 3.

Table 3

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria for the Selection of Literature

Criteria	Decision
Studies that involve human subjects.	inclusion
Papers in IMRAD format	inclusion
Product development studies	exclusion
Experimental studies	inclusion
Correlation, regression, factor analysis, and descriptive studies	inclusion
Feasibility studies	exclusion
Qualitative studies	inclusion

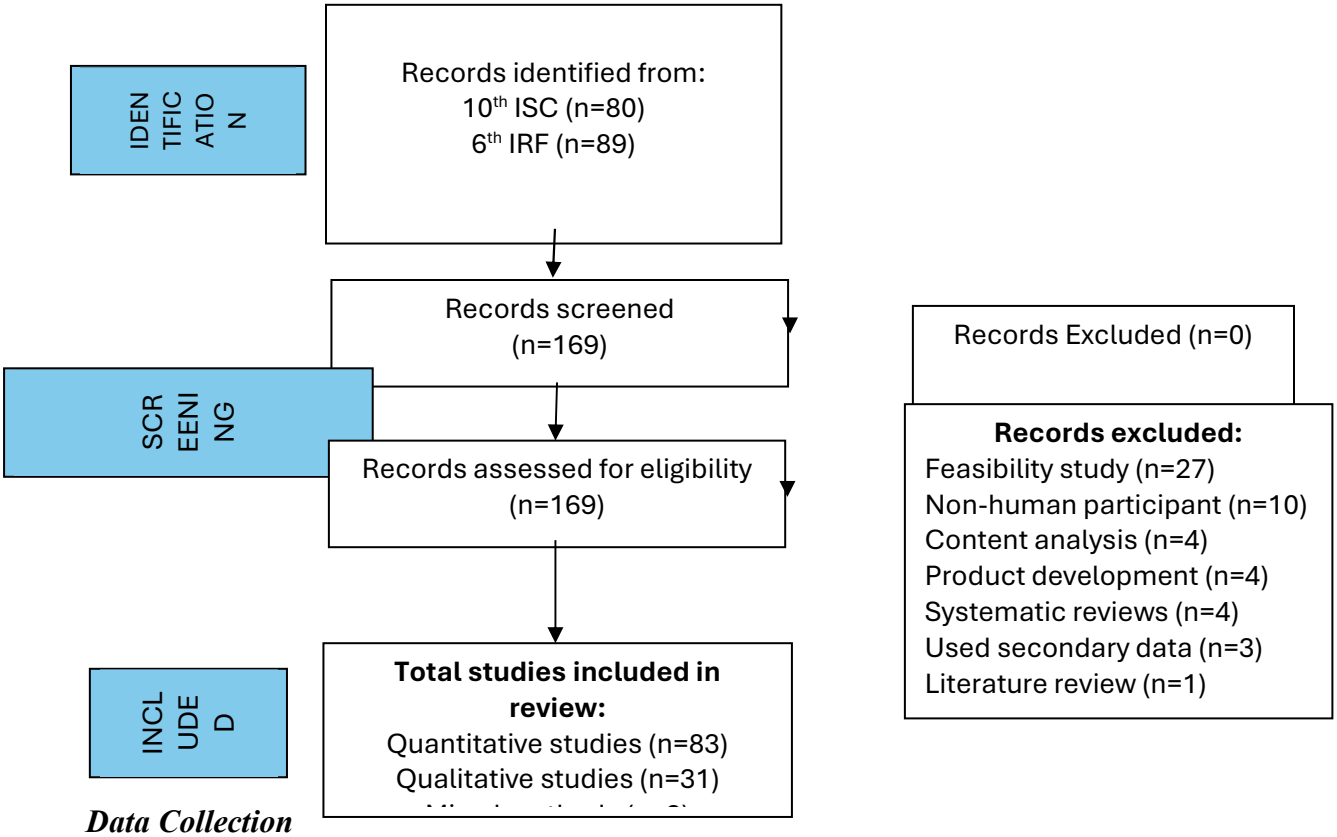
Systematic reviews	exclusion
Studies based on secondary data	exclusion

The inclusion and exclusion criteria guided the process of narrowing down all the manuscripts into the qualified literature whose content was analyzed. The initial process was identifying the sources for the records (manuscripts), followed by screening where certain papers were excluded according to the criteria. Manuscripts that were included in the review are indicated in the final inclusion process. These steps are illustrated in the flow diagram (Figure 1).

During the screening process, the first papers that were excluded were those that did not involve human participants or used secondary data, such as those from the natural sciences whose samples either come from plants and inorganic substances or are mathematical and philosophical studies. Also excluded were content analysis studies that are based on prose and poetry and systematic literature reviews that used existing literature as samples. Product development and feasibility studies belong to the category of consumer acceptability tests and are excluded on the basis that they are generally exempted from ethical review according to Philippine regulations (Philippine Health Research Ethics Board, 2022).

Figure 1

Flow Diagram for the Literature Search



Data Collection

After identifying the records that were qualified for the rapid review, the manuscripts were subjected to a review matrix where the papers were categorized. The review matrix was done on a

spreadsheet containing information about the manuscripts, such as research design, study type, the number of participants, and the elements of research ethics the researchers declared. Information on whether the study was submitted to an IRB or REC for ethical review is also recorded. All this information enables comparison between papers and highlights differences and similarities in each paper.

A summary of the research designs and study types is presented in Table 4. The majority of the 116 studies included in the review are quantitative in design (83), with correlation and experimental studies taking up 87%. Qualitative studies total only 31, mostly phenomenologies and case studies, the two most popular approaches to qualitative studies. There were only two mixed-method studies that were presented.

Table 4

Summary of the Manuscripts from the Different Research Designs

Quantitative Studies		Qualitative Studies		Mixed Method Studies
Correlation	38	Phenomenology	15	2
Experimental	34	Case studies	15	
Quanti-descriptive	8	Appreciative Inquiry	1	
Regression	2			
Factor analysis	1			
Totals	83		31	2

Each manuscript was assigned a code to hide the discipline and the conference in which the study was presented. This is to preserve the identities and origins of the researchers and presenters. The review matrix contains 117 rows and 11 columns. Due to the size of the matrix, only a portion is presented in Table 6 to show the format and display sample content.

The content of the matrix is summarized in Table 5, where the following information is presented: the terminologies used to refer to the human samples, the number of ethical elements declared in the paper, and whether IRB or REC clearance has been obtained.

Table 5

The Summary of the Contents of the Review Matrix

Combined Number of Participants	Terminology for the Sample		Declared Ethical Elements		IRB/REC Clearance
10,306	Participants	70	Confidentiality	77	61 studies (out of 116) declared that they have been ethically cleared by their respective RECs and IRBs.
(studies which did not specify the number of participants = 5)	Respondents	35	Informed consent	63	
	Informants	3	Voluntary participation	60	
	Subjects	2	Anonymity	40	
	Students	2	Right to withdraw	26	
	Nurses	1			
	Pupils	1			
	Teachers	1			
	Auditors	1			

Table 6
A Portion of the Review Matrix

Assigned Code	Research Design*	Study Type	No. of Partici-pants	Terminology for Sample	Ethical Element					IRB/REC Clearance
					1	2	3	4	5	
AHC095	QL	Case Study	5	participants				confidentiality		
AHC096	QN	Correlation	121	respondents	right to withdraw	informed consent	voluntary participation	confidentiality		ethically cleared
AHC097	QN	Correlation	150	participants	right to withdraw	informed consent		confidentiality		ethically cleared
AHC098	QN	Correlation	248	respondents		informed consent		confidentiality	anonymity	ethically cleared
AHC099	QN	Correlation	125	respondents		informed consent	voluntary participation	confidentiality		ethically cleared
AHC100	QL	Phenomenology	7	participants	right to withdraw			confidentiality		
AHC101	QL	Phenomenology	12	participants	right to withdraw	informed consent	voluntary participation	confidentiality		ethically cleared
AHC102	QL	Phenomenology	10	informants	right to withdraw	informed consent	voluntary participation	confidentiality	anonymity	
AHC103	QN	Experimental	30	subjects		informed consent				ethically cleared
AHC104	QN	Correlation	1252	respondents		informed consent		confidentiality		
AHC105	QN	Quanti-descriptive	61	respondents			voluntary participation	confidentiality		ethically cleared
AHC106	QN	Correlation	101	respondents		informed consent	voluntary participation	confidentiality	anonymity	ethically cleared
AHC107	QN	Correlation	74	respondents		informed consent		confidentiality		ethically cleared
AHC109	QL	Phenomenology	8	respondents	right to withdraw	informed consent	voluntary participation	confidentiality		ethically cleared
AHC110	QN	Correlation	47	respondents		informed consent	voluntary participation			ethically cleared
AHC111	QL	Phenomenology	not specified	informants	right to withdraw	informed consent	voluntary participation	confidentiality	anonymity	ethically cleared

*Note: *QN=Quantitative Research; QL=Qualitative Research*

Data Analysis

Quantitative data from literature reviews were analyzed in a thematic way, following the guidelines by Popenoe et al., (2021). This method takes advantage of how data is already grouped. In this rapid review, data analysis is performed according to the natural groupings according to the contents in the review matrix such as the terminologies used to represent the sample, the ethical elements declared in the papers, and whether IRB or REC clearance was sought.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The number of participants from the 116 studies was at least 10,306, considering five papers that did not specify how many individuals participated. Seventy of the total studies (60%) called their samples *participants*, while 35 (30%) referred to them as *respondents*. The other 10% called their samples *informants*, *subjects*, *students*, *nurses*, *pupils*, *teachers*, and *auditors*, which is a preferred alternative to others.

Of the required ethical elements that must be included, only 77 studies (66%) reported adhering to confidentiality in their data processing. Sixty-three (54%) indicated they obtained informed consent, while 60 (51%) claimed they submitted to voluntary participation. Only 40 studies (34%) promised anonymity to their participants, while only 26 (22%) told their samples that they could withdraw participation anytime. Surprisingly, only 61 (53%) reported having been cleared by their respective IRBs or RECs. When quantitative and qualitative research designs are compared, there is a higher ratio of ethical elements declared for every qualitative research (2.9:1) than in quantitative research (2.76:1). This implies that researchers doing qualitative research are more likely to report observing ethical considerations than do quantitative researchers.

What appears to be an incomplete reporting of the ethical elements in papers submitted to the 10th International Scholars' Conference and the 6th International Research Forum may not be fully attributed to the disregard of principles of research ethics by the investigators. While it is reasonable to conclude that some researchers simply overlooked the declaration of the ethical processes they observed in their study, the oversight may indicate how researchers perceive its importance. Similarly, while the low figures pertaining to compliance with the aspect of ethical review by IRBs and RECs may reflect the same tendencies by researchers, the report may also indicate the absence of ethics committees in the institutions where the studies originated. Nevertheless, despite the careful analysis of the hard information provided by the papers reviewed, these findings and interpretations are cautiously attributed to all the limitations that are inherent in a rapid review.

Considering that there were more than 10,000 participants in the papers scanned, the results of this rapid review may serve to direct the attention of research advisers, thesis panels, and researchers alike to the significance of committing to ethical principles in all research undertakings.

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