

# Turning the moral compass towards transformative research ethics: An inflection point for humanised pedagogy in higher education

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Ethical guidance in research is underpinned by the need to show respect for study participants by upholding autonomy in participant decision-making, and confidentiality and protection of individual rights, privacy and interests, yet decision-making could also be influenced by the participant's sociocultural and belief systems. This calls for a more Africanised approach to research ethics where these values and beliefs are upheld. While national and international ethics guidelines do exist, there is little evidence that such a paradigm shift in research ethics is adequately interrogated in the teaching and learning curricula in higher education, where research skills are developed and nurtured. Critical reflection is used to highlight opportunities to stimulate learning and debates underpinned by humanised pedagogy in higher education.

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The value of scholarship in teaching and learning in research and the need for institutional accountability to support and drive such agendas are well documented.<sup>[1,2]</sup> Other authors have examined the nature of the research supervision process in higher education, and point out that the supervision relationship could be based on a one-one interaction to a hybrid model that allows for more supervisory input, but also that these interactions are influenced by ideologies and personal experiences in the student-supervisor(s) relationship.<sup>[3,4]</sup> This importation of researchers', students' and research supervisors' personal beliefs, worldviews and experiences into the learning environment is an important consideration for learning, yet in the area of research ethics and learning in higher education, this remains an almost silent and underexplored area.

Ethics in research is underpinned by the need to ensure that a proposed study has benefits, that any associated or foreseeable risks are identified and that measures are put in place to mitigate these risks, that research participants are able to make an independent decision on whether to participate in research and that there is distributive justice in how study participants are selected into a proposed study.<sup>[5,6]</sup> These principles and standards in research ethics have largely emerged against the backdrop of a global response to past exploitative practices against individuals and communities where the rights, interests and dignity of the affected people were not upheld. Some examples would be the Nazi experiments done on people in concentration camps during World War 2,<sup>[7]</sup> and the Tuskegee syphilis experiment,<sup>[8]</sup> to name a few, but there is a growing body of literature that highlights the limitations of some of these identified ethical standards and their applicability to the African as well as the current context of research.<sup>[9,10]</sup> Some of the challenges with the existing paradigm in research ethics are the noted dependence on Western moral systems, as well as the application of individual autonomy and

'abstract theories' to the African setting without adequate recognition of and engagement with local cultures, values and belief systems.<sup>[10]</sup> This calls for a paradigm shift in our understanding and thinking of research ethics and the need to contextualise research practices within an African context so that solutions to ethical dilemmas and challenges in research can emerge from these local settings. This article emanates from an inaugural lecture presented by the author, which highlighted the need to contextualise research ethics practices within an African setting, while simultaneously looking at learning approaches in research ethics at higher education institutions.

The African epistemology highlights the role of the community in individual decision-making, and the *Hunhu/Ubuntu* philosophy collectively illustrates the influence of family members, the community and even ancestral spirits on these decisions.<sup>[11-14]</sup> This article aims to bring together the domains of applied research ethics and education in research, through the use of humanised pedagogy, to illustrate the value of adopting a human-caring approach in ensuring that students, researchers and research supervisors are able to engage constructively in research ethics issues. It is through the human caring lens that this article highlights the need for researchers to explore how research participants and communities understand and engage with research. Such an understanding of these various influences on ethical standards, such as respect for research participants and human dignity, are important considerations for research ethics, yet the current guidelines on informed consent for research purposes continue to highlight the importance of autonomy and individual decision-making in research.<sup>[15,16]</sup> The value of relational autonomy and the interdependence of individuals for decision-making remain largely unexplored in teaching and learning in higher education, hence the renewed call for transformation in research ethics.

Likewise, a human caring lens is used to outline the value of exploring student-centred learning related to research ethics. Applying the ethics of care (that is, caring, ensuring emotional ties and fostering relationships) to not only the research environment, but also to the student who is learning to become a researcher, becomes more relevant in a setting underpinned by culture, social values and belief systems. Essentially, learning in this context becomes more aligned with the lived real-world experiences of students. Ultimately, this article strives to raise awareness among researchers, students, academics and other stakeholders of these multidimensional aspects that shape and influence the research agenda.

### Differing perspectives on research

It is noteworthy that ethics is not first learned at university, but rather cultivated and nurtured in the home environment.<sup>[17,18]</sup> Researchers' attitudes and worldviews on research are influenced by their social upbringing and shaped by their cultural and religious belief systems. Thus, researchers, students, research supervisors, and all other stakeholders come into the research environment with varying preconceived (moral) perceptions and attitudes that ultimately impact on their research behaviours. At the same time, it is also important to consider how research participants and communities are positioned within this very complex setting and how their belief systems and sociocultural practices could influence the research process.<sup>[15,19]</sup> Coming back to the ethics of care, researchers must understand the cultural nuances and how these might differ or even clash with their own belief systems. Researchers should show respect for cultural and social diversity, and the following examples illustrate the possible tensions that can arise because of these differing worldviews. The cultural interpretation of the body varies across societies in both South Africa (SA) and in other parts of Africa. Many African cultures, as well as other first nations and indigenous communities across different settings, have very specific interpretations of the human body and the transition between life and the afterlife.<sup>[20-22]</sup> Bodily fluids, especially blood, are seen as sacred, and are capable of maintaining a spiritual connection to the host, even when these fluids are extracted and stored away from the affected person.<sup>[22]</sup> These cultural beliefs and the spiritual link between bodily fluids and the affected person can differ significantly from those held in Eurocentric and North American settings.<sup>[23]</sup> This observation is further supported by Singh and Moodley,<sup>[24]</sup> who point out that 'researchers or technicians working with only the blood sample in the biobank might find it difficult to connect the sample back to the person who provided this material'. This disconnect can be amplified if the researcher/technician does not subscribe to the same cultural or belief systems as the person who provided the biosample.<sup>[24]</sup> Applied to the learning environment, this means that students, researchers, and research supervisors, must be made aware of how their worldviews could influence and even shape research decision-making.

Collectively, this points to a reiteration of the researcher's responsibility to ensure a better understanding of the context in which research is conducted. However, when we look at the obligations of the researcher from a research integrity perspective, the focus appears to be on virtue ethics, that is, character-based ethics. This means that a person who is honest, fair, and good should not engage in research misconduct,<sup>[25]</sup> yet we know that sometimes good researchers with

good characters and attributes engage in questionable research behaviour. Research integrity is seen as a commitment by researchers to the actual practice of ethics, that is, researchers conduct research with honesty, truthfulness, transparency and consistency, through adherence and compliance with the set ethicolegal standards, yet the learning in this area appears to occur implicitly. While virtue ethics is the dominant ethical approach, it must be pointed out that this is not the only approach adopted in research.

### The challenges with learning research ethics at university level

Despite this very complex setting for research and the implications for ethical research practice, the current context of research ethics exposure in higher education is characterised by the need for researchers, including students, to show evidence of having completed an assessed research ethics training course, which is part of the prerequisites for ethical clearance for an a particular study.<sup>[26]</sup> The challenge is that these available training courses are generic, with a general focus on historical perspectives, principles and concepts (mainly those imported from Eurocentric settings).<sup>[27]</sup>

There are very few research ethics educational courses that are specifically designed for the SA context.<sup>[27]</sup> At the same time, research ethics education appears to focus on content-driven curricula, meaning that the focus is on the information provided and not on the learner's ability to interact with the learning material. The challenge with this approach is that knowledge acquisition could occur mainly through the completion of short online courses, and that this is a once-off event, yet the challenges with ethical dilemmas in the research process are multifold and could occur at different stages of the research cycle.

In my experience, as an ethics reviewer and past chair of two research ethics committees, it is not only students who struggle to engage with research ethics, but also research supervisors, and this points to a deeper systemic issue in how research ethics is taught and sustained through the undergraduate and postgraduate training programmes. If the goal of postgraduate education, specifically in the research component, is for students to engage with the process of learning to eventually become independent researchers, then this highlighted gap in the learning process cannot be ignored. However, the focus of the research component appears to be skewed towards research outputs, such as publications and student throughput. All of these issues point out that ethical practice and research integrity are seen as being implicitly embedded in higher education, that is, there is a presumption that this learning is in place because the student has provided a certificate illustrating a completed ethics training course.

Collectively, this points to dehumanised learning. This means that learning does not take into account the need for an interactive approach to students' learning, the value and influence of the student-educator relationship, the peculiarities of the learning environment, and the context-specific challenges that can emerge from diverse learning needs.<sup>[28]</sup> Applied to research ethics, this highlights the gaps in the student-educator relationship where the platform for interaction, debate and discourse remains largely unaddressed in higher education. Therefore, we are not focusing on how students are learning research ethics, yet we expect compliance in terms of the set standards for ethical practice and research integrity.

## The need for a paradigm shift in engaging with research ethics in higher education

One practical way to move from dehumanised to humanised learning would be through the adoption of a humanist perspective, where the emphasis is on student-centred learning, that is, students, their learning experiences, and their relationships – simply put, a caring approach to teaching and learning in research ethics.<sup>[29,30]</sup> This means that learning must take into account the lived experiences of students, their worldviews, beliefs and practices, their understanding and engagement with the research process, and their positioning and role in society, again noting that students can be both researchers and the researched. This should also include students' understanding of their dual roles in research and how these roles can impact on their responsibilities.

This calls for multiple platforms in learning where students and educators have opportunities to engage in debates and discourses around research ethics, where a co-creation of knowledge and skills that are grounded in real-life experiences is explored. A shared platform for learning and debating research ethics-related issues could contribute to a better understanding of research ethics, ethical practice, and the need for research integrity.

Learning could focus on the need to create a culture of researcher responsibilities and accountabilities in pursuit of research excellence that would ultimately promote public confidence, as opposed to simply demonstrating the need for researcher compliance with ethicolegal requirements and adherence to research integrity. Students and facilitators would need to consider the broader societal implications of the research conducted, as well as the importance of public engagement, where applicable, as part of the research process. It is about 'seeing the bigger picture' as opposed to seeing research as a means to obtaining a qualification. Learning activities could include tasks that are contextualised in the lived experiences that students and facilitators encounter, as well as the actual research setting that students will be involved in. Hence, learning becomes relevant and applicable to the actual research environment. Such activities could include role-playing the research setting, journaling for self-reflection and introspection, and student peer review of research proposals and reports, to name a few.<sup>[31]</sup> Additionally, from a learning perspective, it is important to consider the hidden curriculum (where student attitudes, beliefs and behaviours impact on learning). Here, role-modelling among research supervisors, researchers and facilitators is important so that students can emulate good research practices.<sup>[31]</sup> From an informal curriculum perspective, there could be ethics debriefing sessions with students, guest lecture presentations on ethics, seminars, discussion forums, and conferences.<sup>[31]</sup> This is not an exhaustive list. Curriculum developers can explore other innovative ways of facilitating the co-creation of research knowledge and skills, using a shared platform for learning.

## Conclusion

This article highlights two important considerations related to research ethics for higher education. Firstly, there is a need to contextualise our understanding of research ethics within lived experiences and diverse settings, and to recognise how culture, religion, and belief systems could impact research decision-making, both from a researcher perspective as well as a community perspective. This requires a re-look at our worldviews and how these

could impact our interactions with communities as well as with students. Secondly, teaching and learning in research ethics need to be far more explicitly expressed in curricula, not as added modules or credit points but rather infused into the general teaching and research supervision processes. Such an approach must be built on pedagogies that highlight the need for sustained interaction between the student and the educator, hence a humanised way of learning. In this way, the integration of transformative research ethics within the related learning opportunities in higher education could contribute to producing graduates who are better prepared for conducting research in local settings.

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