Research Ethics

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Learning outcomes

• Basic understanding of research ethics and why it is important
• Knowledge about the norms in research (and their justification)
• Knowledge about the notion of research (mis)conduct
• Being able to identify and critically engage with ethical issues in your own field of study
• Being able to critically discuss the value of humanities
How do we achieve the aims?

• Two lectures (today and next Monday)
• Group discussions/exercises
• Individual work and study of the course material
• Individual home assignment (examination part)
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A case

The graves of the Rounala cemetery in northern Sweden were excavated in 1915. A number of craniums and other remains of Sami individuals, some dating to the 13th century, were brought to Uppsala University, but were later moved to The Historical Museum in Stockholm.

It has been argued by researchers that the remains should stay in Stockholm, as they could give researchers knowledge of the living conditions of middle age northern Sweden. However, Sametinget has petitioned for the return and proper burial of the remains (which has also been granted).

Was it the morally right decision to return and rebury the remains? Why? Why not?
Was it the morally right decision to return and rebury the remains?

• Depends on whether the excavated was ethical to begin with:
  • Did it violate anyones rights? Did it harm anyone? Is it wrongful to dig up graves even if noones is directly harmed thereby?

• Depends on how we weight the importance of the knowledge that researchers might gain from studying the remains against the interests of the sami people:
  • How important is the knowledge that can be gained? How strong are the interests of the sami people? How do we compare them? Can we even compare them?
What is Ethics?
Ethics and morality

• **Morals**: the actual moral judgments we do have.

• **Ethics**: a branch of *philosophy* which involves systematic and critical analysis of norms, moral dispositions, moral judgments, actions and perception of what sort of life we ought to live.
Ethical questions

• Ethics: arises from *choices*
• *Why do B rather than A?*
• Values, priorities, duties, restrictions
• Doing ethics is reasoning in a thoughtful way around such matters (as opposed to automatically defending status quo or your individual interest).
When do ethical issues arise?

• Every situation where an agent (individual or some more complex body) faces a choice between two or more options, and where someone else besides the agent is affected by the agents choice, there is a potential ethical issue.

• This holds for research as well as in our everyday lives!
Can we reason about ethics?

• What are the best arguments for and against the death penalty?
  • In such a debate, is one position right and the other wrong?
  • Is it possible to establish by rational methods the reasonableness of some moral judgment or principle over others?
The is-ought-gap

• Scientific knowledge is factual, it tells us how the world is.
• Moral principles tell us how things *ought* to be.
• Because of this dichotomy, no scientific theory or fact could directly imply or be incompatible with moral principles.
Research Ethics
What is research ethics?

• An academic discipline where ethical principles and rational argumentation is applied to questions concerning research and the research community.

• Laws and regulations concerning ethical conduct in research (including researchers legal obligations)
  • Swedish ethical review act
  • Nuremberg code

• Policy’s and guidelines concerning good scientific practice

• Critical reflection concerning laws and regulations.
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What makes research (un)ethical?

• Handling of relations between researchers
  • Provide appropriate credit (don’t steal others ideas!)
  • Make fair assessment of others work
• Handling of research subjects
  • Avoid harm
  • Respecting research subjects
• Handling of research
  • Honesty and transparency in collecting, analyzing and sharing data/results
• Handling of the consequences of research
  • Researchers responsibilities for their results and their role and responsibilities in the wider society.
Two levels of research ethics

• **Internal assessment**: Concerns the goals “internal” to science, i.e. reducing ignorance, establishing truths, developing techniques and products.

• **External assessment**: Concerns assessments “external” to the goals of science, i.e. general ethical concerns, such as the researchers responsibility for the social consequences of research on wider society (harm-avoidance, justice, research dual use, questions of allocation, priority etc.).
Internal vs. external assessment

• A particular research endeavor might be in order from internal point of view while at the same time questionable from an external point of view.
Is this an ethical experiment? Why? Why not?
Was it ethical?

• Deceptive
• Research subjects suffered serious and persistent psychological harm
• Better ways of studying obedience to authority?
• Important scientific insights were gained?
• The only way of getting reliable research results?
Internal vs. external assessment

• A particular research endeavor might be in order from internal point of view while at the same time questionable from an external point of view.
  • Research may be of sufficient quality but (i) might be used for immoral purposes, or (ii) it might be either harmful or disrespectful towards the research subjects (or both).
• Research that fails from an internal point of view is unethical per default.
The Piltdown man
The Piltdown man

• In 1910-1912 amateur geologist Charles Dawson found what appeared to be the fossilized fragments of a cranium, a jawbone, and other specimens close to Sussex in England.

• The claim was made that the fossils represented a previously unknown species of extinct hominin (*Eoanthropus dawsoni*) that could be the missing evolutionary link between apes and early humans.

• The fossil remains were later proved to be fraudulent. However, the fossils of the Piltdown man were sufficiently convincing to generate a scholarly controversy lasting more than 40 years.
Three forms of Scientific Misconduct

• **Fabrication:** Making up data or results

• **Falsification:** ”cooking data or results”, manipulating, changing, omitting data or results in such a way that the researcher gets the results he or she wants/or that it no longer represents what actually occurred

• **Plagiarism:** The appropriation of another person’s ideas, processes, results, or words without giving appropriate and proper credit
What is the problem with misconduct in research?

• Threatens the reliability of research results
• Risk that research resources are wasted (which could be used for something else!)
• Threatens the general public’s trust in research
• Might have harmful consequences (most obviously so in medicine or natural science)
• In short, it is potentially wrong both on an internal and an external assessment.
Norms in research

• **Honesty**: Scientists should not fabricate, falsify, or misrepresent data or results. They should be objective, unbiased, and truthful in all aspects of the research process.

• **Carefulness**: Scientists should avoid errors in research, especially in presenting results. They should minimize experimental, methodological, and human errors and avoid self-deception, bias, and conflicts of interest.

• **Openness**: Scientists should share data, results, methods, ideas, techniques, and tools. They should allow other scientists to review their work and be open to criticism and new ideas.

• **Freedom**: Scientists should be free to conduct research on any problem or hypothesis. They should be allowed to pursue new ideas and criticize old ones.
• **Credit**: Credit should be given where credit is due but not where it is not due.

• **Education**: Scientists should educate prospective scientists and insure that they learn how to conduct good science. Scientists should educate and inform the public about science.

• **Social Responsibility**: Scientists should avoid causing harms to society and they should attempt to produce social benefits. Scientists should be responsible for the consequences of their research and they should inform the public about those consequences.

• **Legality**: In the process of research, scientists should obey the laws pertaining to their work.
• **Opportunity**: Scientists should not be unfairly denied the opportunity to use scientific resources or advance in the scientific profession.

• **Mutual Respect**: Scientists should treat colleagues with respect.

• **Efficiency**: Scientists should use resources efficiently.

• **Respect for Subjects**: Scientists should not violate rights or dignity when using human subjects in experiments. Scientists should treat non-human animal subjects with appropriate respect and care when using them in experiments.
Discuss

- Consider a historian studying the circumstances surrounding the deportation of Hungarian Jews to the Nazi extermination camps during WW2. She is at this point the only one with access to two recently opened archives in Budapest. Before too long, many others will start studying what’s in these Budapest archives, but as of now she is the only one with access. She has already noticed that a significant number of Jews were cooperating with the communist groups loyal to the Soviet regime. These findings are scientifically interesting, and publishing them would mean a career boost for her. But she hesitates because of a fear that the findings will be used by Jobbik’s anti-Semitic rhetoric, which in turn may once again jeopardize the life and safety of the Jewish minority in Hungary.

- Should she publish her findings regardless of these risks? Or should she refrain, perhaps even bury the results so that no one else will publish them either?
Conflict between different norms?

• **Freedom**: Scientists should be free to conduct research on any problem or hypothesis. They should be allowed to pursue new ideas and criticize old ones.

• **Social Responsibility**: Scientists should avoid causing harms to society and they should attempt to produce social benefits. Scientists should be responsible for the consequences of their research and they should inform the public about those consequences.
How do we justify these norms?

• From within the research community: adherence to the norms furthers the goals of science and research.

• From outside the research community: by appealing to moral considerations.
Furthering the goals of science.

Achieving new knowledge (making it possible for others to build on it and so on)
Reducing ignorance
Solving practical problems
Retaining trust among researchers and public trust
+ All of the reasons for which research misconduct is bad
Moral considerations

• There are more general *moral principles* which in turn explain why these norm are justified; acceptance of them is important not just because we would otherwise not achieve the internal goals of science.

• But which are these more general moral principles?
Three types of Ethical Theory
Utilitarianism

• An act is morally right if and only if it is among the set of possible acts, the act which promote the greatest amount of good/utility for the greatest number of people.
Core assumptions

1. Focus on *utility*; i.e. wellbeing, happiness, preferences-satisfaction
2. It is only the *consequences* that matters for whether an act is right or wrong, not what kind of act
3. *Maximization*
4. *Impartiality*
Utilitarian justification of the norms

- Research is an important part of and a helpful tool for increasing peoples’ welfare. Yet, research can only do so if individual researchers are honest and careful. They will also do the most good if they are efficient and when they avoid causing harms to society and when they succeed in producing social benefits (social responsibility).
Utilitarian justification of the norms

• Research is an important part of and a helpful tool for increasing peoples’ welfare. Yet, research can only do so if individual researchers are **honest** and **careful**. They will also do the most good if they are **efficient** and when they **avoid causing harms** to society and when they succeed in producing social benefits (**social responsibility**).
Duty-based ethics

• An action is morally right, if and only if the action is in accordance with a set of rules, rather than based on the consequences of the action.

• These rules define what is morally permissible, obligatory or prohibited (impermissible).
  • It is morally permissible to give priority to one’s own children
  • It is morally obligatory to help a drowning child
  • It is morally prohibited to deliberately kill innocent human beings
Kant’s duty ethics

• **Universality Principle**: Act only according to that maxim whereby you can, at the same time, will that it should become a universal law.

• **Humanity Principle**: Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of another, always at the same time as an end and never merely as a means.
Kant’s duty ethics

• I wish to borrow money and promise to repay my debts, even though I know that I won’t be able to do so.

• My maxim is: ”If I can recieve something from a false promise, I ought to do so”

• This maxim can’t be universalized because if it was nobody could trust anybodys promises, and it would be impossible to gain anything from false promises.

• Therefore, never give false promises!
Kantian duty ethics and research ethics

• Don’t tell lies: forbids scientific misconduct; encourage compliance with the norms of **honesty** and **carefulness**, among others

• Don’t use others as mere means: don’t do research without people’s explicit **consent** (i.e. don’t deceive them)
Virtue Ethics

• Aristotle (384-322 B.C)

• Focuses more on what sort of person I should be rather one acts.

• Virtues (loyalty, honesty, benevolence etc.)

• Virtues are acquired through practice.

• Ties well with professional ethics (e.g., How should I be as an engineer or as a lawyer?)
Virtue Ethics

• Is my act compatible with how a virtuous agent (i.e., a person who has acquired the virtues) would act in a similar situation?

• Is this particular policy or practice undermining or fostering the ability and conditions needed for fostering a virtues character?
Virtue ethics for researchers

• **Honesty** is typically a moral virtue and so is **benevolence**
  • Research misconduct is dishonest
  • Good research can promote wellbeing
  • Bad research is maleficienct
Next time

• More about research ethics
• The value of knowledge
• Respect for research participants
• Critical analysis of how to weigh value of research against other moral concerns, such as the protection of research participants
• Group work
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Scientific knowledge

• From The Swedish Research Council:
  • Scientific knowledge has a value not only as an instrument, in other words as a means of achieving something else we value. Knowledge is also worth something in its own right –has its own value –regardless of how it might be used.

- Good Research Practice, p. 19 (2017)
Value of scientific knowledge

• Intrinsic (or final) value

• Extrinsic (or instrumental) value
  • Increasing wellbeing of human and non-human animals
  • Problem solving: informing political issues; improve education etc
Research ethical principles in humanities

• If research can do good – for individuals as well as society as a whole – then we also have a strong moral reason to conduct research.

• But, we also have more general moral obligations towards individuals, such that we shouldn’t harm them or interfere with their privacy.

• How are these requirements compatible?
Respect for research participants

• Avoid harm
  • Physical?
  • Psychological?
  • Integrity (privacy)?

• Informed consent
What is informed consent?

• Provision of information
• Voluntary participation
• Decision-making capacity
Provision of information

• Research subjects should have access to information about:
  • Purpose of the study
  • Research design and methodology
  • Expected outcomes
  • Risks and benefits involved
  • Funding
  • Etc.

• Information must be understandable.
Possible problems?

• What does it mean to fully understand the information? Can lay persons ever fully understand scientific research? What level of understanding is required?

• What if providing information is counter-productive to research? (e.g. etnology/antropology)
Voluntary participation

• There must be an option to decline or opt of the study
• There must be no undue inducements or coercion – real or perceived
  • Coercive threats
  • Coercive offers: payment?
Possible problems?

• In some studies there is no clear option to opt out.
  • Field studies?
• When is participation involuntary?
Decision-Making Capacity

• People have decision-making capacity (DMC) if they have the ability to make sound decisions for themselves.

• Lacking in DMC: small children, mentally impaired persons, unconscious people, people suffering from dementia, etc.

• Surrogate decision-makers?

• Important principle: The greater the risk and complexity associated with the decision, the greater amount of DMC is required
Weighing ethical considerations?

• Ethical considerations in research presuppose that other interests are balanced against the scientific value of the research and its expected results.

• But what is the value of research?
  • In general?
  • In a specific cases?

• And how do we compare it to other values?
Group exercise

• Divided into groups, you’ll all be handed a case which you should critically examine.

• Around 40 min for discussion and prepare a short presentation for the class.
What have we done?

• We have discussed research ethics, what is is and why it is important
• We have talked about the norms in research, their content but also the ways in which they might be justified
  • Internal justification
  • External justification
• We have had a look at research misconduct
  • Fabrication (Piltdown man)
  • Falsification
  • Plagarism
• In group work and in peer-discussion we have identified and critically engaged with ethical issues in different fields of humanities
• We have engaged in critical discussion about the value of humanities