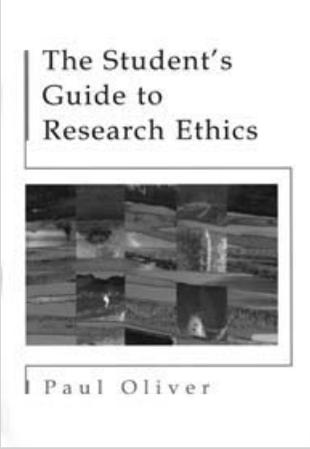


Review: The Student's Guide to Research Ethics

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	Reviewed by:	Marc de Vries, Eindhoven University, Netherlands.
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Many contemporary students in educational research find that the course of their work will involve objects of study that, rather than being inanimate, are usually human, and as such command a greater degree of respect. The Student's Guide to Research Ethics is a good practical guide for students dealing with the ethical issues that accompany this.

The book has two main parts. In part one, the ethical issues present in consecutive stages of the research process are discussed. In part two, specific issues such as privacy, funding and sponsorship and dissemination of results are dealt with.

Part one takes the reader through the whole process of conducting a research study and thus explores the various ethical issues that researchers have to take into account in the course of that process. This often commences even before the actual research study has started. The mere justification of the research study can be a matter of ethical reflection: is it a good thing indeed that we want to know what we are looking for in the proposed research study? Then comes the whole issue of identifying, recruiting and informing respondents. Here we are faced with questions

like: 'What information should we provide for respondents?' On the one hand we ought to give them a fair view on what we expect from them, but if this means that they will enter the process with new biases, we would rather not give that information. Here we are faced with an ethical dilemma: on the one hand it is our moral duty as researchers to work with unbiased respondents, while on the other hand we ought not to deprive respondents of information that could be vital for their decision whether or not to be prepared to co-operate. Ethical dilemma is one of the topics that reappears throughout the book, and justly so because often it forms the heart of a moral decision, in which analysing the nature of the ethical dilemma is a crucial step. Of course, when vulnerable respondent groups such as young children are at stake, we have to be more careful in the way that we act. Then there is the ethics of recording data: how threatening can a tape recorder be for respondents? In presenting the results to participants ethical issues also play a part. Results ought to be presented in such a way that they do not have negative effects on participants. The situation becomes more complicated when the participant remains in the research context, perhaps as a colleague or a pupil.

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In part two some of the same issues re-appear, but are now arranged according to themes rather than stages in the research process. The privacy issue is perhaps the most obvious ethical issue in educational research. How can the researcher find the proper balance between collecting and revealing information about people, while at the same time safeguarding their privacy interests? That can be a delicate matter and it requires careful ethical considerations. Similarly delicate can be the issue of funding and sponsorship of research. To what extent does the researcher make himself or herself dependant and biased when accepting funding from, for instance, commercial sponsors? The author takes a balanced position here and does not object all kinds of sponsored research for the sake of independency of the researchers. A third important ethical theme is related to publication and dissemination. We probably all know cases where authorship was decided about based on authority rather than real contributions to the text (for example the professor who forces the student to add his or her name to the list of authors). Also the procedure of reviewing articles by editorial boards can be a matter of unethical behaviour when there is a too close relationship between authors and reviewers. The chapter on differences in the research context (e.g. differences between respondents of ethnic subcultures) would seem to me to be more about proper research methodology than about ethical issues. Of course that is important too, but I sometimes wondered if perhaps this chapter was not in the wrong book. Nevertheless valuable remarks are made about this theme.

The book has no part or chapter that explains in a systematic way the theory of ethics in a more general sense. Ethical theory is scattered throughout the book in small boxes that contain references to broader ethical theories. This suggests that the author is rather eclectic in his use of theories and approaches: there is no consistent choice for a virtue approach, a consequentialist approach (such as a utilitarian approach) or a deontic approach, to mention three of the dominant approaches in ethical theory. Various bits and pieces of ethical theory pop up in the boxes and then disappear as quickly as they came. That can be seen as a weakness of the book, but on the other hand, the more pragmatic approach of the author fits well with the practical needs of researchers in education. Still, it would have been nice when the author would have been more explicit and systematic about his own ethical point of view.

Some months ago I served as a reviewer for research proposals that had been submitted to the European Committee in the context of the Sixth Framework Programme. I still remember that for each research proposal possible ethical issues had to be considered by the reviewers. The fact that such issues are now a standard element in the EC research funding procedures indicates the importance for researchers of taking into account the sort of topics and issues that are discussed in the book that I reviewed here. The practical nature of this book certainly makes it a valuable resource for those who are involved in doing educational research.