

Journal of Empirical Research on Human Research Ethics

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Call for Contributions

The *Journal of Empirical Research on Human Research Ethics (JERHRE)* invites contributions to a forthcoming special issue on **Research ethics in empirical ethics studies: Case studies and commentaries**. Dr Sabine Wöhlke and Prof Dr Silke Schicktanz (both from University Medical Centre, Göttingen) will serve as Guest Editors for the special issue.

Empirical studies on aspects of medicine and health care enjoy a long scientific tradition. Out of this tradition, many specialties have emerged in researching aspects of health-related research, such as medical sociology or medical anthropology. However, questions focussing on research ethics are a more recent phenomenon in human research. The last decade has seen an exponential increase in empirical-ethical studies in bioethics more broadly and research ethics specifically.

The term 'empirical ethics' refers to a more-or-less systematic combination of qualitative or quantitative social studies and applied normative ethics. Empirical ethics advances bioethics, *inter alia*, by enlarging contextual frameworks, enhancing problem sensitivity, increasing realism of bioethics analysis, and providing an empirical component to ethics problem-solving in health-related research.

While 'traditionally' research ethics has focussed on biomedical research, many issues raised in research ethics may also arise in empirical-ethical studies. Both qualitative and quantitative studies can raise issues such as autonomy and informed consent, confidentiality, data security, risk/benefit determinations, scientific validity, social value, community engagement, research with incompetent or vulnerable participants, issues with local ethics review and legal systems, conflicts of interest or even research misconduct. However, these might be overlooked by empirical ethics researchers, either because the physical risks for research participants are seen as low or because the researchers prioritize the well-being and respect for the autonomy of their research participants over other more subtle ethical issues.

While many guidelines for research ethics and excellent handbooks on empirical methodologies exist, critical ethical self-reflection on concrete cases is often absent or superficial.

Against this background, it is our pleasure to invite international scholars from the social sciences, empirical bioethics and related areas to contribute to this JERHRE special issue by providing, firstly, an anonymized case study of an empirical ethics study, and, secondly, providing ethical reflection on issues arising in the case provided. The special issue will thus comprise a selection of anonymized case presentations and at least two focused ethics commentaries on each case.

Papers will be selected in the following two-stage manner:

First, scholars (as collectives) are invited to submit an **extended abstract** (max. 1000 words). The abstract should summarize the practical case, using a standard format (see below) stating why it poses an important research ethical issue in empirical ethics. The methodological context must be clearly outlined (e.g., whether it is a qualitative interview study or focus group study with lay persons, patients, members of review boards/RECs, children, vulnerable persons, experts etc., participatory/non-participatory observation studies in the health care system, clinical setting, home care or expert system or surveys with lay persons, patients, experts, stakeholders, etc.).

The case should be paradigmatic for the field. Cases can cover *all kinds of fields* in health-related social science and health-related empirical research ethics (e.g. reproductive medicine, end of life, dementia, genetics, stem cell research, nursing care, health care allocation, transplantation medicine, disability studies, oncology, epidemics or infectious diseases. We prefer a focus on research issues in these fields, but this is not meant to be exclusive). Nevertheless, cases should ideally focus on *one method/topical issue*.

Research ethics issues we are interested in may include one of the following topics:

- *Informed consent with various populations*
- *Autonomy issues during data collection*
- *Community engagement*
- *Social value of research*
- *Scientific validity of research*
- *Risk/benefit issues*
- *Ethics review and approval*
- *Data access and data sharing*
- *Participatory or epistemic justice*
- *Conflict of interests*
- *Vulnerability of participants*
- *Fair selection of participants*
- *Transparency of research aims during data collection and analysis*
- *Stigmatization or discrimination*
- *Fairness towards co-researchers or participants*
- *Research integrity and responsible conduct of research*

Second, the abstract should briefly outline one or two potential **commentaries** on the case. Commentaries should be written by different authors and cover different perspectives. A short bio of each contributing author (max. 100 words per person) should be added.

We plan to publish a broad international selection covering various ethical issues related to different methodologies used in empirical studies of ethical issues. The JERHRE special issue hopes to promote self-reflection by all related disciplines to enrich and inform the teaching and practice of research ethics and methodology globally. The special issue will contain an endpaper reviewing the issues raised and solutions proposed with a view to informing best practices, training, a research agenda and suggestions for normative guidance.

Editors will select abstracts according to originality, thoroughness and variety. The abstract should be structured as follows:

- Proposed Title
- Authors (and authors' affiliations and contact details)
- Country context (including health features)
- Description of the study/research/situation in which the ethical issues arose
- Case vignette
- Ethical issues arising
- Conclusions
- Suggestions for commentary topics 1 and 2
- Suggested commentators and contact details

After editorial review of the abstracts, selected authors will then be invited to submit a full version consisting of:

a) fully anonymized case vignette structured as above; focusing on the story line of the core problem (max. 1500 words) and

b) one or two draft commentaries (each max. 2000 words) by different authors reflecting on the case from different perspectives. Examples of leading questions for the commentaries could be:

- a) What is/are the core ethical question(s) in this case and why did it/they occur? Or critically: Is this really a research ethics issue?
- b) How does the research context (cultural context, social relationship, ethical/legal specificities) define key research ethics sensitivities?
- c) How could the ethical problem be resolved? How could such problems be prevented or avoided in future?
- d) Who is responsible for what?
- e) What are the practical or methodological aspects that need to be considered?
- f) What are the institutional dimensions of the case and what changes or developments are indicated?

All invited full submissions will be independently peer reviewed. Invitation to submit a paper does not guarantee acceptance.

In the case of authors providing only one, or no, suitable case commentary, the editors of the special issue will invite external commentaries.

Timeline:

Abstract submission: March 30, 2018 to the following address:

sabine.woehlke@medizin.uni-goettingen.de

Notification of invited authors: 2nd week of May 2018

Submission of full manuscripts (case plus one or two commentaries): August 15, 2018

Peer review process of manuscripts will take place until November 2018.

Target publication date: Early spring 2019.

Please send queries or expressions of interest to Dr. Sabine Woehlke

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