Ethics Protocols and Research Ethics Committees: Successfully Obtaining Approval for your Academic Research
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Review by Peter Norrington

This is a purposefully small book, written in a style which should be accessible at any university student’s level. As a small book, it cannot cover every aspect of ethics and research, certainly not in depth, and perhaps not in breadth. So, rather than reading this inappropriately as a contribution to academic discussion on research ethics, the questions I am interested in for reviewing this book are ‘who is this for?’ and ‘will it meet their needs?’
Ethics is, as the authors acknowledge, a complex area, and one that is here to stay. They also state that it is an area with which universities have only engaged in the past ten to fifteen years, outside of medicine where the original need arose, and which universities do not yet have embedded in researcher training.

Broadly following the chapter headings, the book covers ethics protocols (what they are and what they are for); what research is; how research ethics evolved; research ethics committees (RECs); the outline of the submission process, amending a protocol; data protection legislation; cross-culture, class and language research, REC processes and decisions, and how to respond; a case study; advice to researchers, and some end notes on related issues such as intellectual property rights, plagiarism, outsourcing aspects of research, and relationships.

The back cover marketing explicitly and only mentions ‘research degree candidates’ and ‘faculty’. The Preface opens with ‘Masters, Doctoral and other Research [sic]’, and closes with, ‘research students and degree candidates’.

Meanwhile, the ‘How to use this book’ page opens with a ‘… guide to researchers who have to obtain approval for an Ethics Protocol… also be useful to members of university faculties who are involved in advising students about ethics approval’. Then the Prologue (making three ‘sections’ before the book gets started) opens with ‘in the field of business and management studies’ and then talks variously about researchers, academic researchers, doctors and research masters degrees. The authors use such phrases throughout the book as if they are always interchangeable.

Worryingly, I claim, the early distinction, in chapter 2, between teaching (and we would co-emphasise learning in this university) and research activities could mean that ‘non-research’ students could leave with no understanding of any ethical requirements or implications (REC, legal, personal, or otherwise) of the sources or applications of what they have learnt. This is a gap in explanation, notwithstanding the intended audience of research students submitting to a REC, as undergraduate student research requiring REC approval is mentioned explicitly in chapter 10.

If you acquired the book regardless of the field you research in, you will find the content tailored towards business and management studies. However, you would have to skip to chapter 10 to find examples of REC decisions relevant to this field, having been provided earlier with examples from medicine–health. By this time, I suggest, someone new to ethics may have lost engagement. These examples and some field-related scandals (again rather than medicine–health as given) would make this a live topic which a student (or faculty) could then own as significant and important.

The inclusion of much of the medicine–health – and indeed the other historical background material – is interesting and important in its own right, and should perhaps be part of researcher/student knowledge, but in the context of this particular book it would be better cut down or removed, and the examples and scandals made more relevant to one discipline or drawn from a wider range. It is only when you reach the single case study, of research that involved a field REC and an NHS REC, that the medical background becomes relevant. The requirements of NHS research are too important and resource-intensive to be condensed into a generalist book, where they override the needs of everyone else.

In general, if you acquired the book as a research student at any level, you would not find it in it any distinction between the needs of these levels, nor any between a research student and someone who researches, whether or not they have already obtained a research degree. Perhaps there should be no differences on the line that ethics is ethics; but this is not stated. Working the other way, taught postgraduates and undergraduate students (even at third year dissertation) needs are not addressed, despite the fact – at least in our University – that they are often expected to engage in research of kinds beyond literature reviews, some of which easily include submission to a REC, or that ethical dimensions should be included in their curriculum.

Moving from the ‘who’ to the ‘what’, the Preface finishes with, ‘[t]his book provides advice in dealing with the REC which increasingly research students and degree candidates need to address’. The REC focus strikes me as making the REC process worse for the student – or at least not improving it – because of the presentation, rather than as an approach.

According to ‘How to use this book’ it is ‘not a ‘how-to’ book’; I am unclear as to how a book can provide advice without any how-to. Particularly, if the ethics protocol submitted is intended as an
intelligent approach to ethical research (rather than an unconsidered tick list) such a book must engage – as this one does – with how to address the issues a REC will expect, and some commentary on how perceptions can affect researchers and REC members’ views.

If understanding the REC’s motivations and processes is so important to supporting the student, then those motivations and processes could be used to structure the book radically. What we have is a rather traditional ‘ethics is – research is – protocol is’ approach, with the REC being dealt with in Chapter 8 and advice on how to move through the REC’s processes in chapter 11. Any sense of the student researcher being involved in a (Wengerian) community of practice is too remote, if present at all, to avoid the sense of distance implied by the student ‘dealing with the REC’ or ‘coping’ with its decisions, or that supervisors have ‘superficial’ ethical knowledge (which is deeply troubling in its own right), while at the same time claiming – rightly – that ethics should be a part of the research, not a burden on top of it. Any sense that the REC is part of the student’s intellectual, cultural, emotional and physical protection and development is lost; and considerations that perhaps many students will not yet be aware of are mislaid, such as institutions’ legal duties.

There are other flaws in the book, of varying severity, such as: expanding NIH incorrectly as National Institute [singular, sic] of Health; the incorrect definition of a university (in the UK at least); no definitions for confidentiality or privacy to compare with anonymity; no consideration of models of, for example, disability and how this changes the location and content of ethical issues the focal word does not capture; no mention of the non-UK student and how their ethical position is complex, and more complex when they conduct research outside the UK. And an odd error in a book on ethics, connecting ethics to a society’s code of moral conduct or mores without explicitly noting that ethics are argued and structured in ways which morals and mores are not.

So, does it meet anyone’s needs? If you already have good resources on ethics in your field, or if your research field does not have a social science aspect: no. If you don’t have a short, accessible introduction to ethics in social science: a limited yes, but you will require materials related to the specifics of your field. If you are in business and management: you may well find this a useful place to start, unless there are other accessible texts you know of already, but one shared copy should be enough, and you will need to remember that this is an introductory book at the start of, or even before, a research project. If you are faculty staff (academic, research school, research office), you may well be better off with a well-written research ethics guide (and training sessions) for your institution, with specifics relevant to the disciplines your institution teaches and researches in.