Research ethics beyond the IRB

Discussion starters for the Friedman School doctoral seminar
28 February 2019

Warning!
These slides ask for instant feedback via anonymous survey at pollev.com/foodecon
You can point your browser there, or use the app: polleverywhere.com/app

Based loosely on a paper in progress by Anna Josephson, Jeffrey Michler & Will Masters, from an AAEA invited session on research ethics at the American Economics Association annual meetings: https://www.aeaweb.org/conference/2019/preliminary/873
Motivation

• Ethics training and enforcement is a big part of life at Tufts and elsewhere
  – Protection of human subjects, requiring permission before research is done
    • CITI training for all students and researchers, IRB approval for all projects
  – Protection of students and staff, through sanctions when violations are found
    • Standards are changing rapidly, e.g. Tufts policy on consensual relations
  – Protection of research integrity, through disclosure of financial interests
    • Different audiences have different standards, e.g. mandatory first slide in many nutrition talks
  – Compliance with Federal regulations
    • Institutions face difficult choices, e.g. contrast in enforcement of immigration status vs export controls

• We face many other ethical questions
  – Focus here on research ethics encountered in PhD programs, to spark discussion
  – Students have expressed special interest in co-authorship rules
  – Lots of concern about p-hacking and replicability, even in RCTs (e.g. Brian Wansink)
  – Research in food & nutrition research faces particular challenges (e.g. John Ioannidis)
Life cycle of research projects

Ethical concerns could arise at all stages of research.

Selection bias from the start?

Disparities and inequities in doing research?

Confirmation bias in findings?

Biased dissemination of research results?

Project selection → Pay & working conditions → Validity of data

Research design → Project funding → Data collection → Data analysis

Abstracts & presentations → Journal publications → Peer review → Replicability → Interpretation

Scientific community (media & social) → Decision-makers in organizations

SciNet impact → Societal impact

• citations
• data
• methods & code
• gov’t. agencies
• nonprofit orgs.
• companies
• individuals

Tufts PR → Decision-makers in organizations

Scientific community (media & social)

Concise content:

- Life cycle of research projects
- Ethical concerns at all stages
- Selection bias, disparities, confirmation bias, biased dissemination

Research design:
- Aims
- Methods
- Size & scope

Pay & working conditions:
- Personnel
- Budgets
- Activities

Validity of data:
- New observations
- Proprietary data
- Public data

Abstracts & presentations:
- Abstracts
- Posters & slides
- Scientific reports

Journal publications:
- Gated (subscriber pays)
- Open access (author pays)
- Sponsored (funder pays)

Peer review:
- Open access
- Open data
- COPE (publicationethics.org)

Replicability:
- Transparency (bitss.org)
- Preregistration (aspredicted.org)

Interpretation:
- Preprints (nutrixiv.org)
- Repositories (re3data.org)
- Conflicts of interest
- Should we take sides, or remain impartial?

Examples of recent efforts:
- Climate-smart science (flyingless.org)
- Unionization (seiu509.org)
- Transparency (bitss.org)
- Preregistration (aspredicted.org)
- Preprints (nutrixiv.org)
- Repositories (re3data.org)
- ASN’s effort: nutrition.org/ensuringtrust
In your experience so far…

Anonymous survey ahead, at https://pollev.com/foodecon:
Which actions have you found to be of most ethical concern?
Please point to the actions which you have found to be of most ethical concern