

Book Review: Ethical Decision-Making in Social Research

by Blog Admin

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Offering support and guidance throughout the research process – from designing research proposals and submitting them for ethical scrutiny to anticipating ethical dilemmas that might arise whilst research is being planned, conducted, and reported – Ron Iphofen’s book is an accessible and thoughtful companion for professional researchers navigating the growing demands for ethical practice, finds Cole Armstrong.

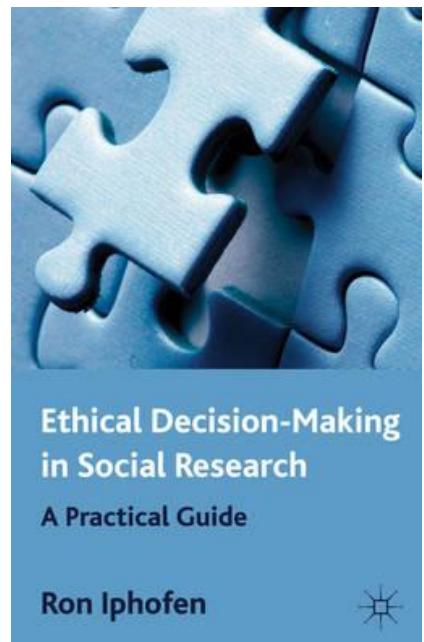


Ethical Decision-Making in Social Research. Ron Iphofen. Palgrave Macmillan. June 2011.

Find this book:

Ethics can make for interesting, if at times uncomfortable, reading whether discussing the ethics of bankers and their role in the current financial crisis, the ethics of government leaders in places such as Syria, or the ethics of cutting public services to society’s needy. But what about research ethics? Where does a social researcher turn to if they want to get a better grasp of the ethical considerations that are seen to be cornerstones of responsible research? Thankfully Ron Iphofen’s *Ethical Decision-Making in Social Research* makes for an accessible read, and explains the principles upon which a sound research ethics framework is based.

Well written and illustrated with interesting examples, it guides the reader beyond just a list of ethical rules (“Yes, I did take written consent...”), and actually explains why these principles are important. Based upon the author’s experience of providing ethical advice to a number of British and European research units, the book is an inherently practical book as opposed to a more theoretical description of the topic. As such it allows the reader to consider the topics as they might relate to their own work, and does this through the liberal use of interesting cases from the research literature, and from more mainstream literature such as the popular *Freakonomics*.



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The book begins with a thoughtful discussion of the role of ethics in society, through recent events which have called into question societal ethics, such as the [Enron scandal](#). Discussing social research ethics in this context, the author rightly points out that the lack of recent major scandals in social research does not suggest that ethics isn’t a major issue. Incidents of ethical concern, where discovered, are more often dealt with quietly and within the realms of ethical review boards.

Of particular interest in the context of more exacting institutional review processes is the author’s stated desire to address the problem of “how to permit free scientific enquiry while ensuring such freedoms are not abused”. For any researcher who has had the displeasure of dealing with an overly bureaucratic ethical review process these are welcome words. And indeed, the biggest chapter in the book deals with role of ethical review boards.

This is a particularly thoughtful chapter, which discusses the pressures from project funders (e.g. the ESRC) that are increasingly driving the need for institutional ethical review boards, and the impact this has on research. The author discusses the concerns that many researchers express about the growth of the ethical review process and the frustrations this brings about, and distinguishes between ethical governance

designed to with managerial risk aversion, and independent ethical review which is designed with the genuine desire to support ethical research. It provides examples of where the review process can both aid and hinder good quality research.

Finishing with a theme that has been built upon throughout the book, the author concludes that the most important aspect to conducting ethical research is an ethical researcher, and that a formal ethical review process should support this not replace it. Importantly the case is clearly made that behaving ethically needs to extend to all aspects of a person's life, whether personal or professional.

One of the most interesting sections of the book addresses the issue of dealing with participants' vulnerability. While sections of the population are often perceived to be particularly vulnerable and therefore requiring particular concern, for example children or those with mental health issues, this is an unfair simplification. Vulnerability may differ according to culture and local values, with females seen to be more vulnerable in some cultures than others, and this may not be readily apparent to a researcher. The author thus provides sound advice regarding the need to make allowances for the emergence of vulnerability. However this does not detract from many of the obvious vulnerabilities that are likely to be encountered in certain populations such as prisoners, children, and the elderly, and the author provides an interesting summary of some of the main issues that need to be considered with these groups.

My only criticism is the slightly truculent tone that the author at times takes. For example, commenting that a previous reviewer had reported that his work on research ethics had come across as too medically-focussed, the author shrugged it off by saying that he couldn't account for readers' bias. Given that there have been comments in the past related to the historical influence of medical ethics on social research ethics this seems like a poor dismissal of a very valid point.

However this is a small point. Overall this is an extremely well written book that provides a useful and highly practical addition to the literature on research ethics. It would be beneficial for researchers of all levels of experience, whether a student researcher wishing to understand a bit more than is covered in a typical ethics lecture, or by more experienced researchers wishing to deepen their understanding of the topic.

Cole Armstrong recently completed an MSc in Social Research Methods at the [Department of Methodology](#) at LSE, with a dissertation that looked at ethnic segregation in New Zealand schools. Cole is currently a Research Manager at an international NGO that utilises the mass media for development purposes. His research interests focus around evaluation methodologies and the use of communication techniques for development aims. [Read more reviews by Cole](#).