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## Implementing Ethics in Research During Pandemic: A Qualitative Inquiry

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**How to cite this paper:** Guira, G.A, Aurelio, R.T., Ramos, W.C., Balarío, C.D., & Pagdilao, M.C. (2021). Implementing Ethics in Research During Pandemic: A Qualitative Inquiry

**Received:** September 21, 2021

**Accepted:** October 9, 2021

**Published:** December 30, 2021

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### Abstract

It is critical that ethical guidelines specified by ethics review committees be followed while doing research during a pandemic (Yeoh & Shah, 2021). Studies involving humans must be carried out in accordance with the highest ethical standard (International Development Research Center, 2021). The aim of the study is to explore and understand the meaning of participants' lived experiences in conducting research during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study's phenomenological approach uncovered participants' description of their lived experiences in the field of conducting research for the advancement of science. It selected twelve participants by purposive selection from the general population. A semi-structured interview guide was used to collect the narratives. Three major themes emerged from the research: Ethics as a Core of Research, Witnessing Ethics as a Synonym for Poor Quality, and Inviolable Protection from Harm. To maintain the consistency and excellence of all research performed during the pandemic, it is recommended that exemplary techniques be established to ensure that all research inquiries are subjected to strict ethical scrutiny.

### Keywords

Ethics in Research, College Professors, Lived Experiences, Major Themes, Research Study



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## Introduction

Undoubtedly, with or without the COVID-19 pandemic, ethics continues to be an important element in conducting research. When it comes to accelerating research that improves people's quality of life, the guiding principles of ethics must always be emphasized (Yeoh & Shah, 2020). Indeed, regardless of the circumstances, the position of ethics must continue to shine, as this will increase the quest for knowledge for a better world. Conducting empirical studies at this time can have unforeseen challenges (Buckle, 2021). The pandemic exacerbated the difficulties even more. However, regardless of the dangers posed by the pandemic, information creation through discoveries of treatments, prevention of diseases, and improved ways of living must (Solbakk et al., 2020) proceed in subservience to ethical principles. In short, constraints imposed by the pandemic provides no justification for lowering ethical standards in any field of inquiry.

In a pandemic, research inquiries are especially valuable for understanding and promoting health and well-being, and mitigating risks among populations. However, the implementation of research studies, as with any social research, demands careful planning and continuous evaluation. Researchers must be prepared for possible hazards and appropriate actions to ensure safe and ethical practices with study participants while promoting the value of research (Newman et al., 2021). Conformity to the necessary standards of scientific investigation is non-negotiable. Researchers must become familiar with various factors that may help them in navigating ethics review processes and making sure that the integrity of their work is not compromised.

There are many reasons why it is important to observe ethical standards in research. First, norms encourage research goals such as awareness, fact, and error avoidance. Prohibitions against fabricating, falsifying, or misrepresenting research results, for example, remind us of the importance of facts-checking in order to reduce errors (Resnik, 2020). Unlike researches performed under normal conditions, studies conducted during a pandemic have unique characteristics. First, most studies are focused on clinical care, and the goal is to provide relief to those affected by the pandemic rather than achieving universal results. Second, research is hampered by a critical shortage of resources and researchers, especially because frontline medical personnel and public health practitioners—who are expected to conduct research—are heavily responsible for patient care (Ma et al., 2020).

The aim of this phenomenological inquiry is to describe the lived experiences of college professors in Philippine higher education institutions who are implementing ethical considerations while conducting research since the COVID-19 pandemic began.



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## Methodology

The study employed the phenomenological approach developed by Edmund Husserl and expounded by Colaizzi. Phenomenology is qualitative research that focuses on the commonality of the lived experiences within a particular group (Creswell, 2013). The fundamental goal is to arrive at a description of the nature of a particular phenomenon. In this research, the phenomenon is the experiences of participants employing ethics in their research endeavors during the pandemic.

### Population and Sampling

The study recruited 12 study participants who were chosen through purposive sampling with the following inclusion criteria: (a) have published at least one research study, (b) doctorate degree holder, (c) with at least ten years of higher education experience, (d) are at least 40 years old, and (e) have signed the informed consent. These criteria were included because they provided the needed evidence to support the themes. At the end of the sampling process, 12 full-time college professors who are teaching in various HEIs in Region I were chosen as samples.

### Instrumentation

A semi-structured interview guide was used in the research. The validity index of 4.78 indicated that the instrument is reliable. Given the creative nature of interviewing and the study's purpose of learning as much as possible about the lived experiences of college professors in doing research with ethical care, interviews were well-matched to the study. The researchers were able to acquire information regarding how participants made sense of their life experiences by participating in open dialogues with them.

### Data Analysis

Thematic analysis, as explained by Wirihana et al. (2018), was used to present the lived experiences of college professors on implementing quality research amidst the threat of the COVID-19 pandemic. In the thematic analysis, various sub-themes or major themes emerged. The analysis process followed the 7 steps of Colaizzi: (1) reading transcription, (2) looking for significant statements, (3) identifying the meanings of the statements, (4) looking for the sub-themes, and (5) distilling the major themes from the narratives of the respondents, (6) member checking or validation, and (7) development of conceptual paradigm.



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## Ethical Consideration

The researchers provided complete information to the participants who are researchers, such as the purposes of the study, its benefits, and significance for them to make an intelligent decision before they participate. The researchers promoted comfort and ensured only the best for the respondents. Any form of harm and injury were carefully avoided. In conducting the data, the respondents were treated equally. The participants were also accorded courtesy and politeness. Moreover, the identity of the respondents was kept secret; their answers were not divulged in any circumstance.

## Results

Based on the stories of the participants, four major themes emerged: (1) Ethics as a Core of Research, (2) Witnessing Poor Research Quality, (3) Protection from Harm is Inviolable, and (4) The Value of Humans. These are presented with the corresponding sub-themes and significant statements, except the fourth. These major themes represent the concerns of the participants. They demonstrate that if not careful, researchers during the pandemic—in any field of inquiry—may compromise the integrity of their research when they cut corners and disregard ethical standards in order to produce a research output.

### Ethics as a Core of Research

The first major theme that emerged from the narrations of the participants pertains to ethics being a core of research. This emerged theme is supported by the sub-themes: (a) ethics as a way of life, (b) morality prevails over immorality, and (c) importance of ethics. These sub-themes have overarching commonalities that are categorized as the core of research.

**Ethics as a way of life.** Integrity in the conduct of research is an underlying value of professional life, especially for a nurse. It is a virtue that is part of the fabric of society and is imbedded in the role of a nurse on any research inquiry (Tsoukas, 2017). In Table 1, these are manifested in the verbalization of participants 1, 4, and 5. Participant 1 considers ethics as part of their considerations, even in the midst of the challenges brought by the pandemic. It would seem that environment and upbringing are key factors, which Participant 4's response insinuate. Because ethical standards and values have been an integral part of our education—both at home and at school—Filipinos have strong ethical foundations built into our psyche. In addition, as Participant 5 added, because ethical standards are expected to be evident in every facet of life, from family life to the workplace and in society, it is not surprising that high ethical standards are also expected in ventures such as in academic pursuits.



*Table 1. Excerpts from the Narrations of the Participants*

Major Themes	Sub Themes	Participant Code	Sample Significant Statements
ETHICS AS A CORE OF RESEARCH	Ethics is a way of life	1, 4, 5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ It is basically part of my role as a professor who conducts research regardless of the worldwide phenomenon</li> <li>▪ Ethics has been engrained since primary years of education, so it is not difficult to implement</li> <li>▪ The life of research always involved ethics, so it not difficult to implement</li> </ul>
	Morality prevails over immorality	2, 4, 9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ It is better to work through the morality of research rather than not doing it.</li> <li>▪ Like I said, through ethics, my conscience is clear that I am doing the right things</li> <li>▪ What prevails is moral than immoral and I will continue to advocate it in all my research.</li> </ul>
	Importance of ethics is emphasized	3, 6, 10	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ In all our faculty meeting, there is always an agenda on ethics, so this concept continues to linger even if there is a pandemic.</li> <li>▪ Administration continues to put focus on the use of ethics in research</li> <li>▪ Professional development courses during webinars are always tackled, so it is important and relevant issue.</li> </ul>
WITNESSING POOR RESEARCH QUALITY	Fabrication	1, 4, 5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Just to submit papers for review, researchers engage in fabrication</li> <li>▪ It is easy to produce data, anyway, no one can evaluate and observe, there is a need to focus on this behavior.</li> <li>▪ Faculty research can be produced but data may not be real.</li> </ul>
	Plagiarism	3, 4, 5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Through the internet, discussions are copied without citation.</li> <li>▪ It is rampant, it is easy to copy ideas of authors.</li> <li>▪ No turning back, most that I see are intellectual theft of ideas.</li> </ul>
	Conflict of Interest	1, 2, 5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Advisers are also panelists; this is conflict of interest. One faculty would make research for another faculty for a professional fee</li> <li>▪ Faculty members wanted to be part of the study of another one who did not participate</li> </ul>




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<p>PROTECTION FROM HARM IS INVIOABLE</p>	<p>Humans are respected and cared for</p>	<p>2, 7, 9</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ One of the primary issues that need to be handled with extra care are the study participants</li> <li>▪ Participants are significant part of research; thus, they must be always protected.</li> <li>▪ Study participants are humans, so at all possible times, they must be protected from any form of harm</li> <li>▪ The researcher must be certain that possible risks are minimized if not totally eradicated</li> </ul>
	<p>Ethical principles are advocated</p>	<p>3, 4, 6, 9</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ The informed consent serves as protection to safeguard client’s physical, personal, and social integrity. Participative enough to involve the respondent</li> <li>▪ As a researcher I must make sure that I should not do any harm to the participant of my study, and it is my responsibility to avoid possible risks upon the subjects of my study.</li> <li>▪ Anonymity and confidentiality are both an important step to protect their identity and this must be followed all the time.</li> </ul>

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**Morality prevails over immorality.** The second sub-theme that supports the major theme pertains to the dominance of morality over immorality. The participants are painfully aware that even scientists belonging to the highest level of the academic echelon are associated with some forms of unethical behaviors in research (Rutjens & Heine, 2016). This is why serious efforts must be done in order to avoid such culpable shortcomings. Although Participant 2 recognizes the relevance of being ethical in conducting research, the temptation to disregard moral considerations is high especially when research outputs are expected within a given period of time. The respondents are unanimous in hoping that immoral research behaviors are avoided. After all, the preference of morality over immorality in the conduct of research is a dominant factor for a productive and progressive society (Melnikoff & Bailey, 2018). Participant 9 is vocal that, at all cost, ethical principles in all phases of the research process must be observed. How this ideal may be achieved, however, is easier said than done. Participant 4 naively asserts the important role of conscience to prevent research maladies. However, as sociologists and cultural anthropologies argue, conscience itself is influenced by the prevailing environment. In short, conscience is a product of the community and the *Zeitgeist*.

**Importance of ethics is always emphasized.** Participants 3 and 10 stressed that ethics is a topic of debate in all academic meetings, including during virtual meetings. This underscores the indubitable fact that professors in Philippine educational institutions are concerned about ethical considerations in all aspects of life, including teaching and research. It is easy to guess



that this might be a lingering impact of the pervasive Christian values among Filipinos, who typically exhibit high moral expectations in all endeavors.

### **Witnessing Poor Research Quality**

The second major theme that emerged from the narrations of the selected participants is their painful observation of poor-quality researches being published in various media, including academic channels. For Dobler (2020), there are many examples of poor-quality research. In laboratory researches, these include numerous trials on different drug interventions with poor study design, drawing conclusions about the effectiveness of interventions based on non-randomized studies, and the early publication of large numbers of poorly designed studies, with poor editing, poor phrasing, and grammatical errors. The list may go on, but in particular, the participants were more interested in three perennial issues: (1) fabrication of data, (2) plagiarism, and (3) conflict of interest.

**Fabrication.** Unfortunately, fabrication in research remains a problem even in the midst of the great revolution in information technology. The participants specifically aired their concern over this. According to Ford (2018), fabrication refers to the manipulation of research materials or processes, or changing or omitting data such that the research is not accurately presented in the research records. Three participants recounted their observations with regard to this research misconduct. It would be interesting to pursue another research that would identify the reasons why researchers employ fabrication, even when they are aware of its unethicalness and detrimental effect on the researchers' reputation. In a study conducted with Sub-Saharan participants, the result concluded that "fabrications were motivated by irreconcilable moral concerns, faltering morale resulting from poor management, and inadequate institutional support" (Kingori & Gerrets, 2016). It would be interesting if such a research is replicated in the Philippine context to see if the results would be the same.

**Plagiarism.** Plagiarism also emerged among one of the chief ethical concerns of the participants. Plagiarism is the act of taking the writings or ideas of another person and passing them off as one's own (Dhammi & Haq, 2016). This is clearly unethical conduct. The participants indicated that the availability of information on the internet makes it easy to copy and paste ideas. Moreover, there may be cultural factors at play. While Western ideology emphasizes intellectual property rights, copyrights, and other related rights related to ownership of ideas, Asian mentality is not as individualistic. For instance, in Asian nations where respect to the elderly is a cultural value of the highest order, younger scholars and students are actually expected to borrow, quote, and adopt the ideas of other people. Doing these are considered as valuable acts of self-humility and honoring others. In short, copying other people's ideas are encouraged by cultural mores (Bloch, 2008, 219-230).



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**Conflict of interest.** According to Romain (2015), conflicts of interest represent circumstances in which professional judgments or actions regarding a primary interest, such as the responsibilities of a researcher, may be at risk of being unduly influenced by a secondary interest, such as financial gain or career advancement. The ideal of detached research as a prerequisite of objectivity is as old as the Enlightenment, and although this ideal has already been rendered obsolete by the postmodern turn, the mesmerizing concept of objectivity lingers in academic circles. The possibility of conducting research that is completely devoid of personal attachments and subjectivities remains suspect in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and in the foreseeable future. There is an increasing consensus that detached objectivity is a myth. So when we resign to the reality that our personal subjectivities unavoidably affect our research activities and outputs, what may be done? So far, no remedy has yet been found. The temporary solution, which most reputable journals employ, is that researchers must reveal whatever conflict of interest may have influenced their research. This means that the requirement is not to avoid conflicts of interest; what is required is mere acknowledgment of these.

### **Protection from Harm is Inviolable**

The third major theme that emerged from the narrations of the participants pertains to protection from harm being inviolable. This major theme was supported by two sub-themes, namely: (1) humans are respected and cared for, and (2) ethical principles are advocated.

**Humans are respected and cared for.** Research is completed because there are courageous individuals who possess the integrity to share their opinions and viewpoints regarding a particular research subject. Recognizing that all individuals possess value and worth is an important step towards their safety and protection. In fact, they must be recognized for their intellect and potentials by always ensuring their safety and protection in the conduct of research because their contribution to the success of any research is important. Participants 2, 7, and 9 asserted that research respondents must be handled with utmost care. The underlying principle of participation must be upheld, i.e., research subjects have the right to choose their level of involvement and to withdraw anytime from the study. These must be observed. Their dignity must be protected, which entails confidentiality, good data management, and responsible interpretation of data. In short, research subjects must be treated as partners, not objects from which data are irresponsibly and callously squeezed from.

**Ethical principles are advocated.** In the study, four ethical principles were employed by researchers in their study, namely: autonomy, beneficence and non-maleficence, anonymity, and confidentiality. The participants in the study affirmed the importance of these four principles in order “to safeguard client’s physical, personal, and social integrity.”



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## Discussion

As emphasized by Agunloye (2019), there are intrinsic and situational ethical tenets that must be observed in any research and scholarship effort intended for dissemination. To guarantee prudence and trustworthiness, the conditions unique to research or scholarship should be evaluated in the context of their ethical standards. This phenomenological investigation sought to capture the lived experiences of college professors in Philippine higher education institutions who have been adopting ethical considerations while doing research since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Given the importance of ethics for the conduct of research, it should come as no surprise that many different professional associations, government agencies, and colleges, and universities have adopted specific codes, rules, and policies relating to research ethics. Clearly, it is important to strive for honesty in all scientific communications. Researchers must honestly report data, results, methods and procedures, and publication status. They must not fabricate, falsify, or misrepresent data, in order to deceive colleagues, research sponsors, or the public. Moreover, researchers must strive to avoid bias in experimental design, data analysis, data interpretation, peer review, personnel decisions, grant writing, expert testimony, and other aspects of research where objectivity is expected or required. Every good writer must avoid or minimize bias or self-deception, and disclose personal or financial interests that may affect the results of their research.

There should also be an element of transparency. Data, outcomes, ideas, tools, and resources should all be shared. Everyone must be receptive to fresh ideas and criticism. Protection of private communications like papers or grants that have been submitted for publication, employee records, commercial or military secrets, and patient records must be kept as a priority. More crucially, publications must have as its goal the enhancement of scholarship, not just one's personal career.

Scientific fraud is to be blamed for bad research. Scientific fraud happens, as indicated in this study, through fabrication, plagiarism, and conflicts of interest. The constraints of our contemporary circumstances must not become licenses to lowering research standards (Kimmelman & London., 2020). Sadly, a good number of published medical researches appear to be erroneous, cannot be reproduced, and/or has minimal or no usefulness (ESHRE Capri Workshop Group, 2018). Appropriate research topics, bad study design, incorrect execution, irrelevant endpoints, inadequate reporting, and/or nonpublication are estimated to squander 85% of all research money (MacLeod, et al., 2014). Vigilant and careful evaluation of the quality of research practice remains an important practice, which must be implemented in all domains. Higher education institutions must work together, and hard, to achieve our desired research ethics standards (Martensson et al., 2016).



It is paramount for researchers to ensure research respondents are always protected. This was voiced by the participants in this study. For instance, according to Constantin (2018), incidents like oxygen studies on preterm newborns without their parents' agreement are a breach of human rights and ethical principles. Furthermore, the danger of mild strain must be weighed against the research's societal benefit as well as the value to the volunteers. Researchers must provide as much details as possible to justify such usefulness and value to all parties involved. Researchers should also make sure that everyone who has been a part of the study receives competent follow-up to address any issues that may have developed because of their involvement (Research Ethics Committees, 2019).

Furthermore, researchers should be cognizant of any unexpected repercussions of their work, such as other members of a group feeling overly exposed. Third-party stress should be evaluated against the important role of research and truth-seeking (Al Tajir, 2018). More importantly, there should be models of consultancy, and shared responsibility between investigators, data owners, and review boards should be implemented to ensure better protection of research participants (Favaretto et al., 2020).

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

College professors involved in research experience firsthand how research inquiries are made during the COVID-19 epidemic while preserving ethics as the foundation of their academic breakthroughs in the background. Maintaining the highest ethical standards in research is very difficult and time-consuming. When taking all of these into consideration, researchers who adhere to the greatest ethical standards are required to cooperate in order to further knowledge growth, especially during times of turmoil.

Research must be done in compliance with ethical guidelines. To make this possible, the study strongly suggests that all sponsored researches be subjected to peer review prior to publication. Experienced scholars who are competent in the management and tracking of research in research organizations are also required for researchers to collaborate with. More significantly, both inexperienced and expert researchers must be given the opportunity to engage in the most rigorous testing processes to ensure that the highest degree of ethical standards are met. Finally, university ethical review committees must set high criteria to guarantee that ethical principles are followed at all times, regardless of the severity of the pandemic.

### **Conflict of Interest**

The researchers received no funding that may affect the findings and conclusions of this study.



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