



Can a Human Research Ethics Committee be a focus of relationality? Research ethics education at Victoria University.

Professor Deborah Zion

7 December 2025

Concurrent Session A

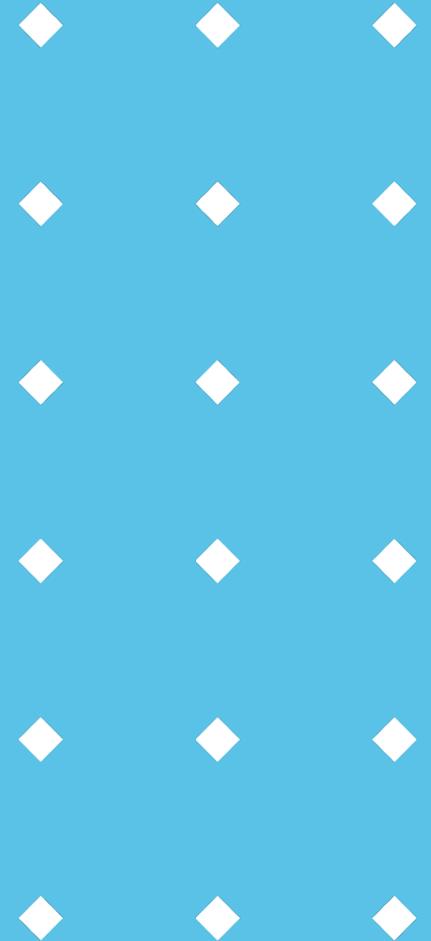
Research Ethics and Regulation

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Victoria University

Victoria University is a small university in the west of Melbourne, Australia. It is known as a “first in family” university, with a strong culture of CALD students. It does not have a medical school, although it does have nursing, midwifery, exercise physiology and education, as well as a strong Indigenous research unit.



Human Research Ethics Unit



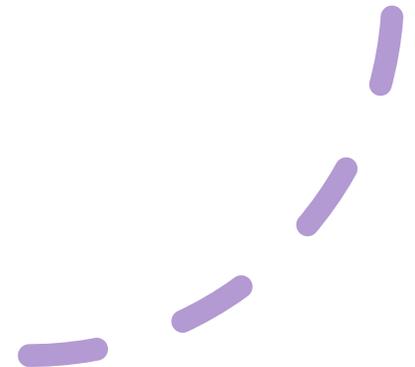
Megan Garratt and Elizabeth Hill

The Chair (DZ) .7 Chair's role

.3 teaching Research ethics and Integrity, one semester unit, compulsory for all higher degree research students.

Why relational ethics.....

The process of human research ethics review has long been accused of being a tick box exercise, with little understanding of the nuances of research in the field.



Why relational ethics.....

Relational ethics in research is an ethical framework that emphasizes the moral responsibility embedded in research relationships, moving beyond formal rules by considering the context and interdependence between researchers and participants. It requires researchers to be attentive to power dynamics and to take responsibility for the impact of their actions on relationships, often drawing on principles from feminist ethics of care.



Why relational ethics.....

An ethics of care, or relational ethics, therefore has at its core the idea that “individual autonomy is socially dependent: that is, the capacity and opportunity for autonomous action is dependent on our particular social relationships and the power structures in which we are embedded. (MacDonald)



The valley of the dry bones..... Ezekiel, verse 37....

We need the bones AND the spirit...for proper research ethics culture.



How do we do it....

- Higher than low risk committee, (HREC), composed in accordance with the National Statement for the Ethical Conduct of Research.
- This committee conducts ethical review. Members also take an educative role.
- We run a call in service pre submission, and a discussion forum with the two primary reviewers and myself for all withheld applications.
- Members of the Low Risk review panel also perform these functions.
- As often as possible, we encourage conversations with a community of scholars to discuss ethical issues related to applications, suggesting ways forward consistent with the National Statement, but highly context driven.
- Any researcher can also come and observe a committee meeting, after signing a privacy declaration and with consent from those whose applications are being reviewed.

PhD and Research Master's Unit on Research Ethics and Integrity

·A single semester program covering core issues in *The National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research, The Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research* and

·*AIATSIS Code of Ethics for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Research 2020*,

·*Ethical conduct in research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities: Guidelines for researchers and stakeholders 2018*

·*Keeping research on track II 2018*.

Ethics committee members and research office staff contribute to teaching.

PhD and Research Masters Unit on Research Ethics and Integrity

Assessment.

One case study to ensure that students have read the Code, and the National Statement

An essay based upon integrity or ethics issues from their own research. For human research, this maps directly onto the HREC application.

A poster that focusses on one or two of these issues displayed at the PhD conference, held twice a year.

PhD and Research Masters Unit on Research Ethics and Integrity

Ageing & Muscular Health - Data Management Strategies to Protect Privacy and Confidentiality

Sebastian Paul

Supervised by Prof. Dr. David J. Bishop and Dr. Dale Taylor

Theoretical Background

- The demographic change (Fig. 1) poses serious challenges to healthcare systems and personal quality of life [1]
- Mitochondria and physical exercise play central roles in the process of healthy aging [2,3]
- Existing literature often neglects habitual physical activity when examining ageing [4]
- Therefore, it is the aim of this project to delineate the respective effects of physical inactivity and age on mitochondrial markers of health, to inform future countermeasures

Data Management - Ethical Considerations

To ensure the ethical [5,6] and legal [7] conduct of research, the following strategies will be employed to protect participant's privacy:

Ethical Principle	Employed Strategy
Privacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pseudonymisation of collected data • Secure storage of data with solely authorized access • Anonymisation of data prior to dissemination
Confidentiality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All collected data is treated as confidential • Secure storage of data with solely authorized access
Rigour, Honesty, Transparency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Secure data storage for 5 years after last publication • Code & (anonymised) data availability

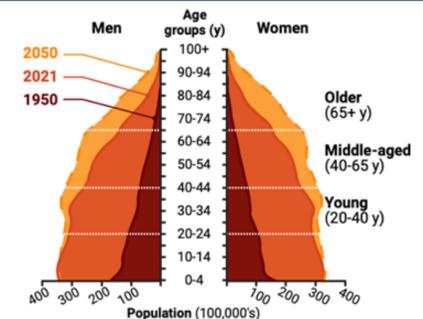


Figure 1: Projection of global life-expectancy [1]

Conclusion

- For ethical and legal reasons, it is obligatory to protect participant's **privacy**.
- Employed data management strategies mitigate existing risks of data re-identification and breaches of **confidentiality**, while simultaneously adhering to the principle of **transparency**.



“Ethics case of the month”

- **An open call for all researchers at Victoria University, members of the HRECs, and now researchers and HREC members from other universities and the Victorian Ethics Network to present. 90 mins via ZOOM every month.**
- **Twenty to thirty minute presentation, and then an hour of discussion and feedback.**
- **Attendance usually twenty plus, including members of the HREC.**
- **Discussion feeds back into general HREC discussion.**

Ethics case of the month

Getting caught in the maelstrom – researching in an area as it encounters crisis.

Professor Mary-Rose McLaren

Back in March-April, a few members of the early childhood team at VU were part of designing an international research project entitled where children like to play. The international partners are all members of the Special Interest Group for Early Childhood from the Nordic Education Research Association (NERA) and come from Norway, Sweden, Finland, Iceland, China and Japan as well as the VU team. The project is meant to be interesting and valuable, but simple to achieve. It involves each partner spending a few hours in an early learning centre asking children to take photos of their favourite place to play at the centre and talking with them about it. The aim is to understand what children value in playspaces. Some of the data would be used for analysis comparison, but mostly each country would analyse their own data and then compare results, rather than sharing the data sets.

Ethics case of the month

Getting caught in the maelstrom – researching in an area as it encounters crisis.

The value of this project:

1. Involve children in the shaping of their environments
2. Create environments for (and with) children that acknowledge what children like to do, where and how
3. Reduce the number of adult assumptions about what children like and what is 'good for them' when it comes to playspaces and play activities
4. Produce evidence that can be used to advocate for playspaces that are child-led
5. Increase opportunities for creativity and imagination in playspaces for children.

Ethics case of the month

Getting caught in the maelstrom – researching in an area as it encounters crisis.

Speaking with children and entering into their spaces is always a high-risk ethics application. The project itself doesn't involve much risk – but can children give informed consent, what are parents' perceptions of what is happening when researchers enter a centre, does this research impact the teacher in the centre, how is it perceived by outsiders, what is the level of social trust in researchers? So these are the sorts of questions that send it to high risk in Australia. However, our ethics application went to the high risk committee in the days following the arrest and media coverage of Joshua Brown's alleged predatory behaviour in a number of early learning centres in Melbourne (<https://www.vic.gov.au/childcare-centres-investigation>). This experience highlighted for us the ethical nuances we needed to consider, and the challenges of communicating research work in heightened environments.

Ethics case of the month

Getting caught in the maelstrom – researching in an area as it encounters crisis.

A truly wonderful session.

Including:

Why do people trust or distrust researchers in different countries?

What is the value of research?

Consent and young children

How do interact quickly with ongoing public debate on emotional issues?

How can we feed back these issues into HREC review?

**Can these
bones
live?**

- **Yes, of course they can.**



<END SLIDE ONLY>

Thank you
Questions?



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