

Editorial

Ethical considerations in vocational and work-based research: a scoping review

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Abstract

Workplace-based research (WBR) becomes a vital aspect for trainees to learn through inquiry within their professional settings. However, WBR presents unique ethical challenges due to several contextual factors. This study explores the ethical principles and dilemmas involved in WBR, focusing on informed consent, confidentiality, autonomy, and power dynamics in the workplace. Using desk-based research, the study identified conceptual background for ethical practice in WBR. It argues that ethics in WBR must go beyond standard protocols, adopting a context-sensitive approach that protects both researcher and participant welfare. While the study is theoretical in scope, it recommends an operational ethical frameworks for future empirical research in vocational and workplace-based research.

Keywords

Work-based research, vocational research, research ethics, informed consent, ethical practice.

Introduction

Vocational and workplace-based research clearly effects how trainees learn and apply their learning at workplace. The workplace-based research (WBR) creates an environment to develop skills based on research-based learning. In this context, the workplace assumes a triple role, functioning simultaneously as a site of learning, employment, and research. As a result, this raises complex ethical concerns, especially about informed consent, confidentiality and potential impact of research findings for participants.

Ethics principles provide a starting point for consolidating ethics based WBR. Therefore, work-based researchers need to understand how ethics can inform vocational and work-based studies and how ethics principles are articulated in the WBR literature and how they guide ethics based WBR. In addition to clarifying the ethics principles, WBR literature requires understanding ethical challenges face by

researchers. Thus far, little academic attention has been paid to ethics concerns and challenges in WBR. However, literature has been proliferating more on ethical issues in work-based assessment in medical and forensic science. To address this gap, I have conducted desk research to understand ethical principles and challenges in WBR. To accomplish this, the paper finds answers to the following research questions:

- How does academic ethics conceptualise WBR ethics principles?
- What are the ethics challenges present to work-based researchers in data collection process?

The study seeks to explore the ethical principles that underpin WBR, including informed consent, confidentiality, autonomy, and the management of power dynamics. It also aims to identify the specific ethical dilemmas that may arise when conducting research at workplace where the boundaries between learning environment, professional and researcher's roles, often intersect. However, the scope of this inquiry is deliberately focused on the conceptual and theoretical aspects of ethics in WBR. The study does not extend to the practical implementation of ethical procedures or the development of operational frameworks for ethical compliance. These areas are acknowledged as important avenues for future research, where empirical studies and applied models can further inquire the understanding and application of ethical practices in WBR settings.

Conceptual background: WBR and ethical principles

Ethical principles occur at the different stages of research process. Parveen and Showkat (2017) mentioned ethical principles are divided into (1) general research ethics and (2) ethics related to research participants. The general research ethics consists of research integrity (European Commission, 2020) which includes This includes avoiding fabrication, falsification, and plagiarism during the research process which has been addressed by most previous literature (Bhaskar & Ola, 2024; Nazarovets, 2024). Next, ethics related to research participants become a critical aspect in this study. In this case, informed consent (Beauchamp & Childress, 2013), confidentiality and privacy, minimising harm to the participants (Sieber, 2009) and voluntary participation for withdrawal (World Medical Association, 2013), identifying vulnerable population (Resnik, 2018) are the considerations in ethics related to research participants.

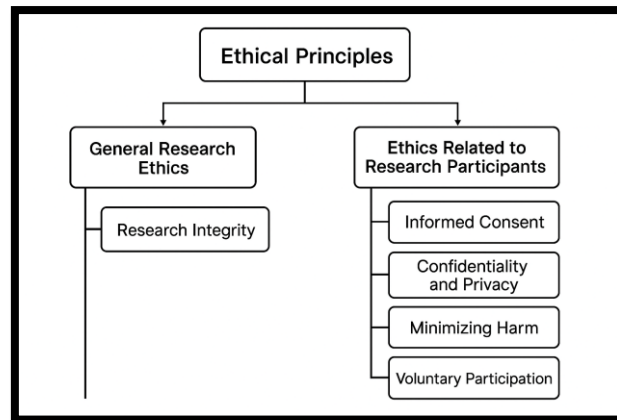


Figure 1. Conceptual framework for Ethical Principles.

Informed Consent in data collection process in WBR should ensure that the researcher understand the purpose, risks and consent from the authority (e.g. supervisors or mentors) when deciding the sample size of your population (Beauchamp & Childress, 2013; BPS, 2021). In this case, researcher needs to get approval from your research supervisor, employer and respective ethics committee in training institution for the clear, jargon-free information sheets and data collection tool (survey and/or structured or semi-structured interviews) before contact the participants. According to the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), additional information sheet should be provided along with the consent form to inform participants about how data will be stored, for how long, and who will have access.

Work-based researcher should assure confidentiality and privacy of the participants as they may share sensitive experiences about their workplace which could impact on their employment if disclosed (BPS, 2021). In this case, data can be anonymized or pseudonymized to protect the participants. Also, the researcher could make measures to protect digital and/or data, especially when study involved in workplace performance and trade secrets data. In addition, discussing workplace dynamics, conflicts, or feelings of underperformance and workplace politics may cause distress to the participants (Sieber, 2009). In this case, the researcher should consider using carefully worded questions to prevent any psychological discomfort, provide support such as resources or any referrals if sensitive topics arise during the data collection process. Additionally, the researcher should consider the timing of interviews or survey to avoid any disruptions of the workflows and put more burden on participants' working hours.

Voluntary participation is another concern which ensure that participant can withdraw at any time without penalty or negative consequences (Declaration of Helsinki, 2013). In this case, the research invitation should not be shared by the employer and therefore decide someone neutral in the power hierarchy at the workplace.

In research, vulnerable population is considered if the participants aged 16-18 due to limited life experience and education background. However, vulnerability in the WBR context goes beyond age as this connected to power dynamics within the workplace. For instance, research participants often hold a subordinate position in organisational hierarchies while reporting to several stakeholders such as supervisors, manager and/or mentors. These stakeholders influence the progress of the research

and career progression. This creates a space for research participants to damage their relationships with the employer. In such case, the voluntariness of consent may be compromised. Therefore, researchers must be aware that participants might agree to provide data for the research with a fear of negative repercussions rather than genuine willingness. To address the vulnerability issue in WBR, the researcher should separate inviting for the research data collection from the managers and the invitation or consent form should highlight that participation is entirely voluntary, confidential, and has no impact on the employment. Overall, the presence of power dynamics influences on the vulnerable to subtle coercion or social pressure in data collection process of WBR. As Resnik (2018) argues, ethics related to research participants depends on the sensitivity of the topic, context and the social realities in which participants live and work.

Work-based researchers, who use workplace as their research context, face several unique ethical challenges during the data collection process. These challenges often arise due to role duality, power dynamics, and the organizational context in which the research is situated. For instance, the researcher may have power to access to internal records or data not intended for research purposes. If the researcher follows secondary data collection, then s/he needs to avoid any misuse or overuse of internal data which could violate trust or data protection laws. In this case, consent needs to be obtained not from the supervisor, but from the top management itself (Saunders et al., 2019).

Conclusion

When conducting WBR, ethical considerations must extend beyond standard research ethics protocols. Work based researcher acts a dual role as both learners and employees, which places them in a unique and often vulnerable position. This complex situation introduces ethical challenges that are not typically encountered with researcher. Therefore, ethically responsible WBR requires a context-sensitive approach which comprises of the apprentices' lived realities, protects participants' autonomy, and upholds the highest standards of research integrity.

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