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The Ten Most Important Things to Know About Research Ethics

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Description

This short guide provides a list of ten rules on how to do good research, and how to handle questions of research misconduct.

Body

1. Be honest.

2. Be fair.

3. Do no harm.

4. Do good research.

5. Know and follow the rules.

6. Bad rules should be changed, not broken.

7. Be a good citizen.

8. When in doubt, ask questions.

9. Listen to the still, small voice of your conscience, especially when it's being overwhelmed by the cacophony of stress.

10. If you suspect unethical behavior, proceed cautiously.

Commentary

Brief and forceful statements are effective for moral instruction – witness the Ten Commandments, the Golden Rule, and innumerable proverbs from every culture. Even so, elaboration is sometimes welcome or necessary.

1. **Be honest.** In the context of research, "honesty" implies more than avoiding falsehoods; it requires telling the truth to the best of your ability and being candid. Candor sometimes requires revealing embarrassing or complicated details that you would rather leave out or gloss over. It also requires being honest with yourself: Self-deception is a real peril of research.

2. **Be fair.** Fairness applies to everyone – your students, your teachers, your co-workers, the humans or non-human animals who are the subjects of your research, your funding agency, the researchers who will build on your work – everyone. Give to each what is her or his due; accept only what is your due.

3. **Do no harm.** In research, as in medical practice and in life, it is often impossible to do no harm whatever, but that does not negate the importance of stating this principle in its strongest form. We should all strive to do no harm, even if the best we can actually.

4. **Do good research.** Good research is useful, interesting, or important, and well-designed – ideally, elegant. The moral implications of your choice of a research topic and the adequacy of your research design increase as the cost of your research increases. The cost of your research can be measured in your time and the time of others, in money (especially public funds), in human or non-human animal suffering, and in other resources.

5. **Know and follow the rules.** The rules of research include the conventions and customary practices of your particular field, as well as the policies, regulations, laws, etc., that cover your work, including the rules of your lab, department, university, field of study, city, state, country, and so on. Rules are almost always written in response to actual transgressions, which is sobering

when you consider the vast number of rules.

6. **Bad rules should be changed, not broken.** If you don't like or agree with a rule, don't break it – change it. Rules are made for reasons; changing one only requires convincing the right people that there's good reason to change it. Making the effort might convince you that it's actually a good rule. Or you might succeed in changing it.

7. **Be a good citizen.** Pull your weight. Be a responsible peer reviewer. Do your part to help shape the culture, climate, priorities, and direction of research.

8. **When in doubt, ask questions**. Most universities have a designated Research Integrity Officer (RIO), who is usually located in the office of the Vice President for Research, the Provost, or the Chancellor. It should always be safe to get in touch with the RIO.

9. **Listen to the still, small voice of your conscience, especially when it's being overwhelmed by the cacophony of stress.** If you ever think, "I can get away with this because no one will ever know the difference," or, "no one will ever find out," or "I don't have any choice" – stop. These are red flags from your conscience, and you are almost certainly contemplating doing something unethical. Before you act, ask yourself what will happen if you don't do it. Does the world come to an end? Do you die? Probably not. Then imagine that the unethical act you are tempted to do is impossible, for whatever reason, and think of three other actions you can take. One of them is bound to be ethical. It might not be as easy as the unethical course of action, but once you've identified it you can find the courage to follow through on it.Adapted from a statement by Bill Moyer's interviewee, Michael Josephson (videorecording, Alexandria, VA: PBS Video, 1988).
10. **If you suspect unethical behavior, proceed cautiously.** If you ever see someone acting in a way that you think is unethical, don't jump to conclusions. Treat it as a scientific question – gather data, observe carefully, and keep notes. Gathering data might include asking the person to clarify what's going on. You do have a responsibility to report misconduct, but you also have a responsibility (to yourself, to the person you suspect, and everyone else who might be implicated) to have a clear idea of what's really going on. Point 10 is about an activity usually called "whistle blowing." For much more complete

advice, see: C. K. Gunsalus, “How to blow the whistle and still have a career afterwards,” Science and Engineering Ethics 4(1998):51-64, also available at http://poynter.indiana.edu/teaching-research-ethics/tre-resources/#SEE.

Notes

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