NAVIGATING ETHICS IN RESEARCH EVALUATION: TOWARDS A FRAMEWORK FOR RESPONSIBLE ASSESSMENT

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Abstract

The area of research evaluation encompasses the process of evaluating the quality of research and the influence it has at different stages during the journey of research. Depending on the nature of the review and the goals that it seeks to accomplish, the techniques and criteria that are used to evaluate research might be different. The techniques that educational institutions and research bodies use are influenced by the various evaluation methodologies employed by these organisations. However, there are hurdles to overcome in the process of evaluating research, notably with regard to peer review and the dependence on metrics based on citations, which has led to demands for responsible utilisation of metrics. The purpose of this study is to argue for ethical theories that contain research evaluation. It also proposes the development of research evaluation ethics, which is an intersection between research ethics and evaluation ethics. Within the framework of the research review, the crucial ethical theories of virtue ethics, deontological ethics, and consequentialist ethics are being investigated. These ideas are at the heart of this investigation. The purpose of this endeavour is to argue for an ethical stance that incorporates both deontological and consequentialist ideas, with the 'common good' serving as a possible basis for research assessment methodologies. An strategy that is a combination of several methods is advocated for the purpose of constructing a framework for research assessment ethics and navigating ethical difficulties in research evaluation.

Paper Identification

Introduction

Research evaluation encompasses the processes of assessing research quality and the impact of academic works both before and after their publication. Typically, "ex ante research evaluation pertains to evaluating research proposals for grant funding, focusing on their quality, feasibility, and potential contributions. Conversely, ex post research assessment" evaluates the outcomes of a research project after its completion, analyzing its scholarly and sometimes economic and social repercussions. These evaluations are crucial in academic decision-making, such as recruitment, promotion, and grant allocation.

Despite its critical role, there's a lack of ethical standards guiding evaluation methods and criteria. Various national evaluation systems have conflicting goals, leading to diverse assessment standards. Whitley (2007) argues that institutions vie for favorable evaluations, potentially limiting intellectual autonomy and the pursuit of innovative research. Moreover, research evaluation can shape disciplines and hinder the generation of novel ideas, as powerful scientific elites may influence evaluation criteria to align with their perspectives.

Challenges in research assessment include biases in peer review, particularly regarding gender, race, language, career stage, and interdisciplinary work. Peer reviewers may be risk-averse toward innovative approaches, and the reliability of peer review is inconsistent despite advancements in processes and platforms. Additionally, metrics reliant on citations have led to metric manipulation, competition among researchers, and a decline in publications in local languages.

The utilization of metrics has prompted calls for reevaluation and reform, catalyzed by initiatives like DORA, The Metrics Tide, The Leiden Manifesto, and the Hong Kong Principles. Considering the complexities of research assessment, there's a debate on whether to adopt a theoretical or empirical perspective. While theoretical frameworks like CUDOS (Communalism, Universalism, Disinterestedness, Organized Scepticism) offer a starting point, they lack ethical justifications and may be overly generic. Hence, there's a need for a deeper exploration of research evaluation ethics, which straddles research ethics and evaluation ethics.

This paper examines three ethical theoriesdeontological ethics, consequentialist ethics, and virtue ethics and proposes a hybrid approach as the most effective method for research assessment.

2 Ethical Standards and Principles in Research and Evaluation

As part of this section, we will investigate the most significant publications that are associated with research ethics and integrity, on the one hand, and evaluation ethics, on the other hand, in order to position the ethics of research assessment within the area that overlaps between these two domains (Figure 1).

2.1 Research ethics and research integrity

The European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity (ALLEA 2017) is a comprehensive document that illustrates the concepts of research ethics. These values include responsibility, respect, honesty, and dependability on the part of researchers. Moreover, it provides a description of effective research procedures in a variety of contexts. Regarding the section on reviewing, assessing, and editing, which mentions the following, this article is of special importance to the reader:

- Through their participation in refereeing, reviewing, and assessment, researchers demonstrate that they take their responsibility to the research community very seriously.

- Reviewers and editors who have a conflict of interest are not allowed to participate in the decision-making process regarding publishing, financing, appointment, promotion, or incentive systems.

- It is the responsibility of reviewers to preserve confidentiality unless there is previous authorization for dissemination.

- In order to ensure that the rights of authors and applicants are respected, reviewers and editors make sure to ask for permission before using any of the ideas, facts, or interpretations that are given.

There is minimal advice about how to design research assessment methods and criteria, or how to deal with the often disputed problems of bias and conservatism in peer review, as well as the detrimental effects of using citation-based metrics. This is despite the fact that the recommended practices dictate what a reviewer should do. To put it another way, there is a deficiency in the concepts that direct the procedures and standards of research assessment which are in and of themselves.

2.2 Evaluation ethics

The ethics of evaluation have been the subject of discussion and controversy within "the framework of international development organisations. The American assessment Association (AEA), the Australian Evaluation Society (AES, AES2), the Canadian Evaluation Society (CES), the United Nations (UN), and the United Kingdom Department of International Development (DFID) are only some of the organisations that have produced assessment principles and best practices. In Table 1, we provide a list of the themes that pertain to the ethics of evaluation, which are derived from the existing ethical principles and good practices for evaluation that are used by the institutions that were previously stated".

Figure 1: Evaluation Ethics as opposed to Research Ethics constitutes Research Evaluation Ethics.

Table 1: Topics addressed in guidelines of ethics of evaluation.

Topics	Organisations
Responsibility	AES2, UNEG
Systematic inquiry	AEA, AES
Free of bias	AEA, UNEG
Avoid conflict of interest	AEA, AES2, CES, DFID, UNEG
Competence and honesty	AEA, AES, AES2, CES, UNEG
Accountability	AES2, CES, UNEG
Respect for dignity and diversity	AEA, AES, CES, DFID, UNEG
Avoidance of harm	AEA, AES2, DFID, UNEG
Common good	AEA, AES2
Disclose evaluation results	AEA, AES

These standards and best practices, on the other hand, are not always explained or supported by ethical theories. This is something that happens rather often. Helen Simons, who was a plenary speaker at the workshop titled "The Framing Ethics in Impact Evaluation, for example, argues that the current ethical guidelines are primarily based on principles of intentions, and that they frequently concern the methodology of evaluation and the quality of the evaluation product. She makes this argument during the workshop. On the other hand, she is of the opinion that ethical criteria need to instead centre on establishing whether or not the assessment of research is suitable and appropriate. In addition to this, she underlines the need of having an ethical framework that may direct the actions and decisions of those who are evaluating. Furthermore, Laura Camfield, an additional presenter at the workshop, emphasises the significance of socio-political contexts: "Therefore, it seemed practical to establish a procedure through which standards could be arbitrated in accordance with the particular socio-political context," rather than establishing an absolute minimum standard.

In a manner that is analogous, publications like as The Leiden Manifesto have been responsible for drawing attention to the substantial concerns that are associated with the ethical implications of research evaluation. On the other hand, it is essential to emphasise that they do not provide in-depth talks about the challenges and issues that are now being encountered. Despite the fact that evaluation is considered by some to be a kind of research activity due to the fact that it creates information, Groves Williams (2016) contends that ethical advices tend to be different for research and evaluation due to the fact that these two activities have distinct aims and follow various types of procedures." As a consequence of this, it is of the utmost importance to take into account the ethical theories for research evaluation, which clearly take into account evaluation ethics within the framework of research.

3 Ethical Theories

In order to effectively tackle the ethical considerations that arise in the process of evaluating research, it is vital to delve into the various ethical theories and the instruments they provide. In their endeavour to expand the methodological range of philosophical ethics, Doris and Stich (2007) investigate conventional approaches to ethical reasoning. Their argument posits that an empirical approach could potentially augment the efficacy of established ethical theories, thereby aiding in the resolution of ethical dilemmas. As a result, novel ethical

frameworks that integrate tacit and implicit ethical knowledge could provide the necessary explanatory mechanisms for investigating the ethical implications of research evaluation. Upon scrutinising the ethical tradition pertaining to research, one discerns a restricted assortment of theoretical frameworks. Normative ethics is predominantly composed of deontological ethics, consequentialist ethics, and virtue ethics to a lesser degree. The aforementioned three ethical frameworks form the foundational elements of normative ethics as they pertain to the evaluation of research.

3.1 Deontological Ethics

According to deontological ethics, the link between responsibility and the morality of human acts is given a significant amount of weight and importance. In deontological ethics, an action is deemed morally excellent not because the result of the activity is good but rather because of some aspect of the action itself that is judged to be morally acceptable. The theory of deontological ethics asserts that there are some actions that are ethically required, regardless of the effects such actions have on the welfare of humans. In certain circles, it is even referred to as "duty for the sake of duty." Examples that are most often used include: "Thou shalt not," which is found in the Old Testament; "Love thy neighbour," which is found in the New Testament; "Good is to be done and evil is to be avoided," which is attributed to Thomas Aquinas; and "Act as if the maxim of your action were to become through your will a universal law of nature," which is attributed to Immanuel Kant.

An individual is subject to laws and responsibilities that are absolute and universal, and these rules and duties are determined irrespective of the individual. People find themselves in the arena of responsibilities that have been assigned to them by extra-individual entities such as God, humanity, rationality, and the world spirit, amongst others. Due to the fact that these responsibilities are considered to be universal, it is impossible for a person to change them. Being moral is acting in a way that is consistent with the norms and does not make any exceptions. The rules for ethical behaviour are condensed into a small number of criteria that are clearly specified. Directions that are easy to understand are provided by these standards and their explanations. Furthermore, they do not provide for any room for moral ambiguity or further conversations. The ethical theories that fall under this category are confronted with at least two challenges: (i) in general, they are too broad, and/or (ii) they are too rigid. This form of knowledge tends to disregard individual variations in complicated scenarios or in instances that are morally wanted, which is why they are barely useful in actual situations. For example, one must know what is good in advance. Because of this, they are not applicable in concrete situations. In the event that global moral law cannot be enforced in the day-to-day actions of a peer reviewer, what would happen? Or, what if the role of a researcher became the standard in every country? It is possible for deontological ethics to serve as a guide for the list of norms that regulate the behaviour of research evaluators when applied to the setting of research assessment. It is necessary to establish the standards in a manner that includes BEs and DOs or DON'Ts, such as the following: do not do damage, respect, and be objective.

3.2 Consequentialist ethics

The concept of consequentialist ethics is concerned with universal values such as life, freedom, property, and other similar concepts. The values that are "saved" are what characterise conduct that is moral. In other words, the increasing quantity of common good in society is the sole significant criteria that should be considered when evaluating moral behaviour. Due to the fact that preset norms are irrelevant in consequentialist ethics, there is no

particular list of norms that has been established. It is a philosophy of morality known as consequentialist ethics, which is based on the idea that responsibility or moral obligation is derived from what is good or desirable as a goal that is to be reached. The action that is considered to be morally good is the one that, when compared to other acts, has the best potential effects. The "social principle," which states that the greatest benefit should be done for the largest number of people, is the most important principle in consequentialism. Additional concepts that are associated with the consequentialist philosophy include the principle of universality, the principle of hedonism, the principle of utility, and the principle of consequences.

Within the framework of research evaluation, we are able to pose questions such as: What larger societal benefit is achieved throughout the process of assessment? As part of the review process, what values are being considered? Is there a way to make the scientific community as happy as possible? "There are at least three problems that remain unanswered in consequentialist ethics: (i) the unpredictability of consequences, such as the fact that not every circumstance is as straightforward and transparent as providing a clear-cut assurance of its outcomes; (ii) the hedonist approach, such as the fact that it would be rather unethical to suppress or censor the results of a research study, which would undoubtedly make some politicians unhappy; and (iii) the difficulties in measuring and comparing the consequences of ethical action, such as the question of how to provide a compelling argument when measuring the consequences of two or more conflicting values, such as truth and happiness, freedom and security, scholarly integrity and solidarity, etc".

3.3 Virtue ethics

In contrast to both deontological and utilitarian ethics, virtue ethics is an alternative to both of these approaches. The focus of virtue ethics is on the sort of person that one ought to be and become, as well as the qualities that she ought to include in her character. In other words, ethics is not about laws or behaviours, but rather about the characteristics and characteristics of an individual. In the context of research assessment, it is of the utmost importance to identify the virtues that are associated with both the researcher and the evaluator for this particular ethical perspective. Given that research assessment is not just about the person doing the evaluation but also about the person being evaluated, virtue ethics may be confronted with a potential dilemma: what if the qualities of the evaluator and the evaluated are incompatible with one another? In addition, what if the overall research ethos is incompatible with the particular characteristics of the researcher? In light of the fact that virtue ethics addresses the question of what type of person an evaluator ought to become, it does not provide a compelling argument for the universality of ethical standards and principles.

3.4 A mixed approach of ethics in research evaluation

In order to circumvent the flaws of the ethical theories that were addressed before, we offer a hybrid method to address the problems that are associated with measuring the effectiveness of research. It is our presumption that deontology and consequentialism may be brought together at some point. In addition to providing a foundation that is essential for research assessment ethics, this sort of approach that takes a middle ground has the potential to cross the borders that separate competing hypotheses.

During the course of her discussion of the principles, it is feasible that she may simultaneously express the values. It is possible that the utilitarian principles, or values that are similar to them, may be given as norms in a commandment style. This is a possibility. One example of a value that may be converted into a commandment or an

imperative is the concept of universalism. It is possible that some values and qualities, such as honesty, responsibility, respect, and so on, may be transformed into duties if verbs were added to the sentence. It is possible, for instance, to be truthful, to maintain responsibility, to respect other people, and so on. Research ethics and assessment ethics are, in this sense, largely built on norms, standards, and values, which are represented in declarations, initiatives, and manifestos. "In other words, both types of ethics are established on the same principles. Significant examples include, but are not limited to, the San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment, which is often referred to as DORA (ASCB, 2013), the Leiden Manifesto for Research Metrics, and the Hong Kong Principles for Assessing Research. For example, "do not use metrics as a surrogate measure" and "be open and transparent" are instances of imperative deontological affirmations that are expressed for researchers. Both of these assertions are examples of imperative ethics. Table 2 provides an overview of a number of core components of significant ethical theories, as well as some examples of how these concepts have been used in the context of study evaluation.

When it comes to the sphere of deontological ethics, one of the most significant concerns that must be taken into consideration is the origin and authority of the principles: Where do they belong, if anyone? People who are exposed to them are expected to conform to the principles, but the issue that has to be asked is why this is the case. As a result of the removal of entities such as God, karma, and Kant's universal reason, we are compelled to have to deal with various types of rule-givers or to seek to defend the rules using a number of different techniques.

Table 2: Ethical theories and their characteristics.

Ethical theories	Basic characteristics	Typical examples from research evaluation
Deontological	Given rules, norms and principles • Morality is based on individual duties • Formalism: priority of rules over consequences (e.g. common good) • The notions of right and wrong are preconceived, they are not subject to change	The duty of the evaluator is to comply with the rules and norms, which are not under her control. Precise application of the rules is a priority of the evaluation procedures. Research is evaluated per se and not on its social consequences. As in Leiden Manifesto: protect excellence in locally relevant research; allow those evaluated to verify data and analysis; scrutinize indicators regularly etc.

Consequentialist	Given values • Morality is based on the consequences of action • The notions of right and wrong are not clearly defined in advance • Teleology: priority of consequences (e.g. common good) over rules • Context-dependence	The evaluator seeks to maximise common good assessing potential impact of the research under scrutiny. Research is not evaluated per se, its importance is revealed rather via its consequences. As in objectives of Cardiff Statement (2019): "the first is to restate and champion the fundamental role that the SSH play in society and the second is to call for an expanded role for the social sciences and humanities in tackling problems through interdisciplinary research."
Mixed approach (of this paper)	Norms and principles are related to common good • Some notions of right and wrong are given but they might be changed by ethical subjects • Common good means taking stakeholders into consideration • Context-dependence	The evaluator needs to take into consideration all the stakeholders that research under evaluation deals with. The norms might be more flexible and not that rigid as in deontology. Still the norms are present (which is denied by traditional consequentialism).

As a result of this, we are able to take into consideration the concept of the common good in utilitarian ethics. This is because it is not required to investigate the topic of who precisely is responsible for the creation of the principles. Rather, it is of more importance to develop such a set of ideas that contributes to the improvement of the common good. By way of illustration, Collins and Evans (2017) contend that the scientific endeavour is a moral activity that is directed by ideals that are important to everyone, sometimes known as the concept of the common good. Therefore, if a researcher is involved in the process of creating a common good, then the assessment of research need to also be included in the process". Because it is the responsibility of the assessors to ensure and maintain the quality of the study, which facilitates the development of both important information and the influence that it has on society. In this particular scenario, assessment systems have the potential to both facilitate research that is useful to society and prevent research that is not relevant.

Moving on to the following point, what exactly is meant by the term common good? How is it possible to avoid overlooking theoretical information, which is unable to make instant influence on the occasion? It is necessary to have a social compact, which means that there should be conversation amongst peers rather than the act of imposing one's will on others who are helpless. It is necessary for a person to obtain something significant in exchange for delegating some rights, like as safety, freedom of opinion and speech, research, and other such benefits. A temporary remedy may be to adopt the idea of the veil of ignorance as a prerequisite to the initial stance from John Rawls (1971, 2001). This would be a solution that would be transitory. If a stakeholder who is responsible for producing an ethical list of principles does not know which portion of the assessment process she

is going to undertake, including the one that is the least privileged, then the principles may be more reasonable or justified than they would be otherwise.

It is essential to structure the rules for research assessment ethics around the idea of the common good or collective good (as Kitcher 2001 alternatively names it). This is because the concept of the common good does not merely come within the criteria of the utilitarian notion of society pleasure. The reason for this is because all of the aforementioned factors indicate that it is essential to have a conversation about the principles. On the basis of the identification of the stakeholders and the moral duty that they have to the research assessment, the research evaluation ethics obtains a solid premise to establish additional research evaluation principles and norms. This is done in order to develop further research evaluation ethics.

4 Conclusion

Issues regarding the scope and depth of inquiry represent significant challenges within the realm of research evaluation ethics. Essentially, the core question revolves around determining ethical behaviors and distinguishing between epistemological and ethical considerations. Mustajoki and Mustajoki (2017) outline a three-step process for identifying ethical concerns: (a) identifying stakeholders, which encompass various entities such as individuals, groups, communities, and ecosystems; (b) understanding stakeholders' rights and responsibilities; and (c) exploring options that aim for a win-win situation among stakeholders. Although the concept of the common good isn't explicitly mentioned, Mustajoki and Mustajoki's framework inherently implies its relevance within ethical discussions.

Considering the ethical perspective in research evaluation, the aim is to achieve a higher impact or advance the common good. This raises questions about the responsible party accountable for the evaluated research. The concept of the common good serves as an abstract but essential horizon guiding ethical considerations, albeit challenging to define, track, and quantify, especially within social sciences and humanities. Breaking down the notion of the common good into manageable segments is necessary to address various collective interests, where assessors must consider the target groups or stakeholders involved.

The assessment process's initial stage involves acknowledging accountability to academic and disciplinary communities. High-quality, truthful research is vital for societal benefit, necessitating a thorough evaluation of scientific integrity from the outset. Research with significant flaws contributes minimally to community development. Legitimate research, both epistemologically and methodologically, holds potential for enhancing the common good by addressing practical issues.

Schwandt (2015) emphasizes the importance of broad evaluation standards grounded in critical thinking, devoid of biases and group-centered perspectives. Professionalism in evaluation, as advocated by Schwandt (2018), underscores ethical evaluation practices, highlighting interpersonal interactions, social responsibility, and respect for cultural values.

Evaluation systems significantly impact scientific knowledge generation in academic and research institutions, potentially limiting institutional independence when unconventional methodologies or areas of study are pursued. Multidisciplinary or interdisciplinary research evaluation necessitates considering every stakeholder, aligning with the pursuit of the common good.

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