

**Exploring academics' experiences of the research ethical clearance process:
A case study of a South African university**

A thesis publication submitted in fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of

MASTER of EDUCATION

Of

Rhodes University

By

Siyanda Mabutho Dominic Manqele

Student Number: 20M9799

ORCID - 0000-0002-7272-6519

Supervisors:

Prof Sioux McKenna

&

Prof Clement Simuja

December 2024

ABSTRACT

This study explores the experiences of academics regarding the research ethical clearance process at a South African university, aiming to identify key challenges and opportunities for improvement. The rationale behind this investigation stems from the increasing emphasis on ethical considerations in research, alongside the potential barriers that may hinder academics from navigating the clearance process effectively. The research questions focus on understanding the perceptions of academic staff concerning compliance, trust in the ethical review process, and the role of education and community engagement in facilitating ethical research practices. Utilising qualitative research methods approach, this study employed thematic analysis alongside qualitative methods, involving semi-structured interviews with 14 academic staff members from six faculties, all possessing a minimum of five years of experience in research and postgraduate supervision. The thematic analysis revealed several critical themes, including compliance challenges, trust and mistrust in the ethical clearance process, the necessity of education and awareness, and the significance of community engagement in fostering a supportive research environment. The findings indicate that compliance with ethical standards is often perceived as burdensome, leading to frustration among academics. Trust issues emerged, highlighting a perceived disconnect between researchers and the ethical review board, which can undermine the integrity of the clearance process. The study underscores the importance of enhancing education and awareness regarding ethical guidelines, suggesting that targeted training programmes could improve understanding and adherence among researchers. Community engagement also emerged as a vital element, with recommendations for fostering collaborative relationships between the university and local communities to enhance ethical research practices. The implications of this study point toward the necessity for universities to reevaluate their ethical clearance processes, promoting transparency, trust, and collaboration. By addressing the identified challenges and fostering a culture of ethical research, universities can support their academics in conducting research that is not only compliant but also socially responsible. Future research could further explore the perspectives of ethical review board members to gain a comprehensive understanding of the ethical clearance landscape.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to God for providing me with the opportunity and strength to undertake this research. My journey has been both challenging and rewarding, and I am deeply thankful for the guidance and support I have received along the way. I would also like to acknowledge my family, whose unwavering support has been invaluable during my studies. A special thank you to my wife, Mrs. Nozipho Manqele, who has been my number one fan and cheerleader throughout this academic journey. Her patience and understanding have allowed me to focus on my research, as she held down the fort during my absence from our beautiful children due to studying. I extend my sincere appreciation to my supervisors, Prof. Sioux McKenna and Prof. Clement Simuja, for their steadfast belief in my potential. Their encouragement and mentorship have been instrumental in my development as a researcher. Prof. McKenna and Prof. Simuja's dedication to cultivating my skills has transformed me from a strong administrator into a competent researcher, broadening my understanding of research arguments and methodologies. Further appreciation goes to my employer, University of Zululand, for the financial support throughout this journey. I am profoundly grateful.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	i
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	ii
TABLE OF CONTENTS	iii
LIST OF FIGURES.....	vi
CHAPTER ONE	1
INTRODUCTION.....	1
1.1 Introduction	1
1.2 Researchers' Experience in Research Ethics.....	3
1.3 Purpose and Significance of the Study	8
1.4 Objectives	10
1.5 Structure of Thesis.....	10
CHAPTER TWO	12
LITERATURE REVIEW.....	12
2.1 Introduction	12
2.2 International Historical Cases and the Emergence of Ethics in Research.....	12
2.3 The Background to Research Ethics in Africa	16
2.4 International Guidelines and Frameworks for Research Ethics	19
2.5 Research Management and Administration in Higher Education	21
2.5.1 The Ethical Review Clearance Process in Academic Institutions.....	25
2.6 Understanding Research Ethics from Multiple Perspectives.....	28
2.7 The Structure of Research Ethics Committees (RECs) in HEIs.....	31
2.7.1 Health Research Ethics.....	34
2.7.2 Animal Research Ethics	36
2.7.3 Human and Animal Research Ethics Clearance: Key Role Players.....	38
2.8 Challenges Faced by Postgraduate Students.....	40
2.9 Conclusion.....	41
CHAPTER THREE.....	42
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY	42
3.1 Introduction	42
3.2 Case Study.....	43
3.3 The Selection of the Study Participants.....	44
3.3.1 Sampling	44
3.3.2 Selection of Participants.....	45
3.4 Data Collection	46
3.4.1 Semi-structured Interviews	46

3.5	Data Analysis.....	48
3.6	Limitations of the Study	49
3.7	Quality and Ethics	50
3.8	Positionality	51
3.9	Gatekeeper Permission	52
3.10	Research Data Management.....	53
3.11	Trustworthiness, Reliability, and Validity	54
3.12	Conclusion	55
CHAPTER FOUR.....		56
RESULTS AND DISCUSSION		56
4.1	Introduction	56
4.2	Technical Compliance	56
4.2.1	The Neoliberal University - Compliance to Quality Assurance Processes	57
4.2.2	Perception of the Ethics Committee.....	58
4.3	Resistance in the Research Ethics Clearance Process	59
4.4	The Disciplinary Nature of Ethics	61
4.4.1	Imposing the Medical Model on Social Sciences	62
4.5	Trust and Mistrust.....	63
4.6	Engagement	66
4.7	Importance of Research Ethics Processes.....	68
4.7.1	Perceived Value of Research Ethics Processes	70
4.7.2	Reviewers in Research Ethics Processes.....	70
4.7.3	Ethical Clearance Driving and Developing Research Integrity	71
4.7.4	Change and Improvements in Ethics Review Processes	72
4.8	Access to Communities and Research Participation.....	74
4.9	Conclusion	78
CHAPTER FIVE.....		80
RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION.....		80
5.1	Introduction	80
5.2	Findings of the Study.....	80
5.2.1	Assessing Researchers' Perception of the Ethical Clearance Process.....	80
5.2.2	Evaluating the Alignment of Ethics Guidelines in South African HEIs	81
5.2.3	Identifying Gaps Between Researchers and the Ethical Clearance Process.....	82
5.2.4	The Roles of Research Ethics Committees in the Ethical Review Process.....	83
5.2.5	Promoting the Importance of Research Ethics and Integrity	84
5.2.6	Developing Research Ethics Training and Education	85
5.3	Conclusions from the Study	86

5.3.1	Assessing Researchers' Perception of the Ethical Clearance Process.....	86
5.3.2	Evaluating the Alignment of Ethics Guidelines in South African HEIs	87
5.3.3	Identifying Gaps Between Researchers and the Ethical Clearance Process.....	87
5.3.4	The Roles of Research Ethics Committees in the Ethical Review Process.....	87
5.3.5	Promoting the Importance of Research Ethics and Integrity	88
5.3.6	Developing Research Ethics Training and Education	88
5.4	Recommendations.....	88
5.4.1	Enhanced Student Engagement Programs.....	88
5.4.2	Communication Platforms for Researchers.....	88
5.4.3	Ethics Committee Training and Sensitisation	89
5.4.4	Cultural Competency Workshops for RECs	89
5.4.5	Nuanced Approach to Ethics Education.....	89
5.4.6	Implementation of Gatekeeper Waivers.....	89
5.4.7	Continuous Education Initiatives for Researchers	90
5.4.8	Alignment of Role Players in the Ethics Clearance Process	90
5.4.9	Research Managers or Administrators as a Glue	90
5.5	Implications for Future Research	90
5.5.1	Practical Implications	91
5.5.2	Future Directions of the Study	91
5.5.3	Limitations of the Study.....	92
5.6	Contribution of the Study	92
5.7	Conclusion.....	93
6.	REFERENCES.....	95
7.	APPENDICES.....	111
	APPENDIX A.....	111
	INTERVIEW SCHEDULE: SIYANDA MANQELE	111
	APPENDIX B	113
	ACCESS LETTER REQUESTING PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH	113
	APPENDIX C	115
	INFORMED CONSENT DECLARATION	115
	APPENDIX D.....	117
	ETHICAL CLEARANCE CERTIFICATE – ETHICS APPROVAL	117
	APPENDIX F.....	119
	PERMISSION LETTER FROM THE GATEKEEPER	119
	APPENDIX G.....	120
	PROVISIONAL APPROVAL LETTER	120

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 2.1: Guiding principles and policies of research ethics in South Africa	28
Figure 2.2: Key role players in the ethical clearance process.....	39
Figure 3.1: Word cloud.....	48
Figure 3.2: Ethical clearance processes	73

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

Research needs to be undertaken ethically to ensure that the knowledge created and disseminated contributes to the public good and to build a field, rather than such aims being outweighed by the potential for harm to people or the planet. Concerns about the need for ethical awareness in research have led to the emergence of ethical clearance processes in most universities (Haggerty, 2004). All institutions of higher education in South Africa are now required to acknowledge that ethical clearance processes play a crucial role in research management and are obligated by various regulations to implement these processes. Research in ethical clearance is a fundamental aspect of academic research, ensuring that studies which include human and animal research are conducted ethically, responsibly, and in compliance with regulatory standards (Mbabe et al., 2021). There are numerous perceptions that obtaining these approvals can be time-consuming, leading to delays in research progress, discouragement among researchers, and rendering the research outdated before it even begins. Some researchers approach research ethics processes with anxiety and uncertainty. Certainly, it is clear from the literature discussed in this thesis (refer to Chapter 2) that ethical clearance processes are often considered problematic.

In exploring ethics review procedures, ethical considerations, and the role of ethics committees, this study seeks to shed light on the relationship between ethical dimensions of research in academia and the importance of upholding ethical standards in scholarly research on the one hand, and ethical clearance processes on the other. In particular, it seeks to interrogate how academics experience ethical clearance processes at the selected university. Furthermore, the exploration of the selected academics' experiences aims to clarify research ethical clearance processes in higher education, the associated challenges and complexities and the implications of the processes for researchers, institutions, and the broader academic community.

This study collected and analysed academics' experiences interacting with research ethics processes within one university in the Eastern Cape province. The motivation for the present study stems from intellectual curiosity arising from my work experiences, as Ethics Officer at

one of the universities in South Africa. I have been working in research management for the past thirteen years, and I am involved in the management and administration of research ethics and integrity. This includes implementing research ethics policies developed by external regulatory bodies. I often experience frustration from the researchers I work with as I assist them in attending to issues required by the regulatory body for them, their study, and thus for the university to meet compliance requirements.

Their dissatisfaction with aspects of the processes triggered an interest in finding out the causes. During this time, I saw the role played by research ethics committees in enforcing policies through reviewing research applications and conducting training for the application process to ensure ethical behaviour. And so, I was unsure why it at times seemed that the researchers were not on board. In all three universities I have worked in, research ethics processes seemed at times to be perceived as inserting unnecessary bureaucracy and red tape within the research journey. While I was not a researcher at the time, I was committed to the role that research plays in building knowledge, so I wanted to understand the researchers' experiences, frustrations, and role in the process.

Research ethics processes start with an application process from the researcher, which is administered by the research administration and sent to research ethics committees for approval. This process relies on documentation compliance and adherence to timelines. The independence of research ethics committees (RECs) in their decision-making in institutions is required for their functioning (McAreavey & Muir, 2011). The agreement between the National Health Research Ethics Council (NHREC)¹ and institutions conducting research requires the establishment of sufficient financial and administrative resources for the process to be smooth (Page & Nyeboer, 2017). However, researchers are usually not included in this agreement between NHREC and universities, which often causes problems and arguably promotes a focus on compliance rather than promoting research integrity through education and engagement with the ethics process itself (Hyytinen & Löfström, 2017).

¹ In South Africa, ethical clearance processes are governed by the Department of Health, regardless of whether the research pertains to health or not. This is an issue I return to in the South African Ethics in Health Research Guidelines: Principles, Processes and Structures 2024 Third Edition.

1.2 Researchers' Experience in Research Ethics

As a researcher with a strong interest in this study as it aligns with my career, I struggled with attaining the necessary reflexivity, especially where the literature and results challenged my long-term beliefs about ethical clearance processes and how I have been implementing them over the years. Reflexivity entails the critical examination and interrogation of one's own thoughts and beliefs (Mortari, 2015). It is an ongoing and iterative process that researchers actively participate in, starting from the inception of a research idea and continuing through every stage of the research process until the findings are disseminated to the broader audience. This introspective practice of reflexivity remains integral in ensuring a rigorous approach to research that acknowledges and addresses potential biases and influences (Brown, 2022).

Throughout my work experience I have always viewed research ethical clearance processes as laws that cannot be broken, and researchers can be charged. I worked tirelessly to implementing my belief which caused more frustration due to the pushback from researchers in different institutions. As I engaged with the literature in this study, I realised that research ethical clearance processes are guiding principles of integrity and can be managed with an open-minded approach and flexibility. I felt a need to understand how the ethical clearance processes, required in every South African university, are perceived and to find better ways of aligning them with the researchers' understandings and interests so that their research could be conducted without frustrations while still being carefully supported to ensure ethical behaviours.

My position within the three universities brought many frustrations and I experienced backlash as researchers did not follow the approved process, yet I was missing a bigger picture of frustration. Suffice it to say that I was committed to supporting ethical research but concerned at what seemed like resistance from some researchers to the ethical clearance process. Protection of human and animal subjects is an ethical mandate for all contemporary research as is the need to ensure that environmental harm is not caused through research endeavors (Tsan & Nguyen, 2019). The factors contributing to ethical clearance rejections are many, including weak research questions or hypotheses, poor questionnaire/interview schedule design and inadequate consideration of ethical issues (Farrimond, 2012). But there was clearly a need to better understand the researchers' experiences of the ethical clearance process for these processes to fulfil their mandate and to assist research offices to determine what

interventions can be in place to assist researchers in acquiring a positive perception of the ethical clearance process.

Given the critical role of the university research ethics committee (REC), there is a need to assess and understand its work and to identify areas for improvement and thus focus on capacity building to respond to the escalating volume, type, and complexity of research (De Wet, 2010). There are many constraints that factor into the ethics review process which include the massive rise in research, the centralization of RECs in many institutions, unfamiliar online systems and standardized forms which are created as “one size fits all” without regard for differences in research undertakings across fields and contexts (Hunter, 2018). There is the challenge of aligning national guidelines and university policies (Kadam & Karandikar, 2012). Farrimond (2012) suggests that the increasing complexity and number of research submissions to South African Research Ethics Committees (RECs) highlight the importance of appropriately developing and bolstering their capacities. This enhancement is crucial to maximize their effectiveness and align with the research objectives of universities.

According to the Council of Higher Education (CHE) Vital Statistics report of 2023, the headcount of students enrolled for postgraduate education continued to increase to reach 115 189 in 2005, 138 610 in 2010, 159 182 in 2015, 166 362 in 2020 and 155 359 in 2021 which shows consistent growth albeit with a slight drop in 2021 (CHE, 2023). The minor decrease in postgraduate enrolments might have been due to the Covid-19 pandemic. However, subsequently the numbers increased. Almost all these postgraduate students’ research projects would require ethical clearance reviews and approvals (Saidi, 2024). Also, it is not only the numbers that have increased but also the increasing complexities of the ethics process. For example, most universities now require students to include a data management plan, which was not a requirement previously.

The emergence of new requirements could increase the frustration of the growing numbers of researchers. Tsan and Nguyen (2019) explain that the limitations encompass insufficient funding and resource allocation for research ethics education/training and administrative structures, and they indicate that academics acknowledge the significance of research ethics clearance processes and endorse educational initiatives to raise awareness about ethical clearance.

The combination of increasingly complex requirements with the rapid increase in students and staff requiring ethical clearance brings about a number of challenges and frustrations. Farrimond (2012) suggests that the increasing complexity and number of research submissions to South African Research Ethics Committees (RECs) highlight the importance of appropriately developing and bolstering their capacities. This enhancement is crucial to maximise their effectiveness and align with the research objectives of universities. This also raises another important debate about separating research ethics processes and research integrity issues as these concepts are often used interchangeably thus causing another frustration. After so many years as an administrator, this was a lesson for me to learn through literature that these two issues need careful consideration when implemented. Research ethics clearance processes involve the documentation submission, filling in of forms and meeting agenda deadlines for the actual review process of a REC, which focuses more on compliance with what is required from the researcher. This process emphasises governance and monitoring which includes internal and external policies and procedures (Armond et al., 2021). On the other hand, research integrity encompasses principles of honesty, transparency, and objectivity. It involves adhering to the research question and steering clear of biases during data interpretation throughout the research process. Although some researchers consider research integrity to align with scientific integrity, others perceive it as a component within the broader scope of scientific integrity (Israel, 2014). In addition, whereas some definitions of research integrity focus solely on the absence of misconduct, it entails more than this, with truth at its core. Researchers prioritize honesty, transparency, and objectivity, with integrity surpassing mere avoidance of misconduct. Scientific integrity extends beyond research integrity, covering a wider spectrum of ethical conduct in the scientific realm (Shaw & Satalkar, 2018).

I observed that it is dangerous for REC members, administrators, and policy implementors to fall into this trap of using the two concepts mentioned above interchangeably as this could create a stubborn mindset against researchers thus causing conflicts and frustrations to all parties involved in the ethical clearance process. The terminology surrounding research ethics, particularly those encountered during the ethical clearance process, can be quite complex and bewildering for novice researchers (Van den Hoonaard, 2011). Terms such as Research Ethics Committees (RECs), Human Research Ethics Committees (HRECs), Animal Research Ethics Committees (ARECs), as well as concepts like amendments, expedited reviews, non-human research, and the distinction between ethics approval and gatekeeper permission, often contribute to confusion. For researchers navigating the ethical clearance process for the first

time, this complexity can lead to significant setbacks in their applications, hinder effective communication, and delay the feedback process. These challenges not only undermine the efficiency of obtaining ethical approval but can also discourage researchers from engaging with the ethical review process, potentially impacting the quality and integrity of their research. Therefore, it is essential to address these terminological barriers and provide clearer guidance to facilitate a smoother ethical clearance experience for researchers through training and education.

Internationally, the REC is a key element of university administration, and the literature argues that it has gained increasing importance as a review mechanism for those institutions that wish to conduct responsible research, along with safeguarding research ethics standards, scientific merit, and the rights of participants (Israel & Hay, 2006). However, as mentioned above, it is essential to recognise that the dominant discourses around ethical clearance processes and the development of regulatory frameworks for ethical clearance have been driven by the health and biomedical disciplines (Davies, 2020). In South Africa, for example, although research methodologies and analytical paradigms may differ, all research, including social science research and trans-disciplinary research, is expected to be reviewed in line with the same ethical principles and guidelines developed by the Department of Health (Department of Health, 2004, 2015, 2024).

In South Africa, research ethics compliance thus falls under the National Department of Health (NDoH) mandated by Section 72 of the National Health Act 61 of 2003. The National Department of Health established the National Health Research Ethics Council (NHREC) to monitor and audit all ethics review processes, including social science and non-medical research. The Act mandates the Minister of Health to establish the NHREC's functions, which include giving direction on ethical issues and developing guidelines for the conduct of research involving humans and animals. The Council observes and advises on international developments in health ethics issues through liaison with relevant international organisations. The NHREC is tasked to oversee all 26 public university Research Ethics Committees and any other organisation conducting research, including private higher education institutions and organisations such as the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), Council of Science Innovation Research (CSIR), National Research Foundation (NRF) and many others. These Research Ethics Committees are audited and registered with NHREC to be able to review applications and give approval, according to the National Department of Health Ethics guide (NDoH, 2024).

Having all research ethics overseen by a medical organisation, as happens in South Africa, may be unusual, but the influence of the biomedical model on what constitutes ethical research is not a local phenomenon. According to Schrag (2011), for decades scholars in the social sciences and humanities have questioned the appropriateness and utility of prior review of their research by ethics committees because ethics review committees were first introduced in the early 1960s in relation to concerns about medical research.

Addressing this challenge and related considerations, in 2024, the National Department of Health (NDoH) released updated guidelines titled “South African Ethics in Health Research Guidelines: Principles, Processes and Structures, 3rd Edition.” This new designation is significant as it reflects a deeper commitment to the context of South Africa, incorporating essential elements such as cultural considerations, community engagement, qualitative research methodologies, and effective research data management. By emphasising these aspects, the guidelines aim to foster a more inclusive and relevant approach to ethical health and social sciences research that resonates with the diverse social and cultural landscapes of South African communities (Dhai, 2024).

This contextualisation aims to clarify the application of the ethical principles outlined in the guidelines while supporting researchers in navigating the complexities of conducting ethical research. It is important to consider how these principles can be adapted to align with local customs and needs, recognising that their effectiveness may vary in practice. Consequently, this updated framework is poised to strengthen the ethical foundation of health research in South Africa, promoting integrity and respect for the communities involved (Engelbrecht, 2023). The National Health Research Council (NHREC) report also highlighted that although most research institutions in the country have ethics committees, they often run their research without involving an independent review process (NDoH, 2024). The NHREC expects all research institutions to have an independent ethics department or office that coordinates and manages the ethical clearance processes. In line with concerns raised in many other countries (Kass et al., 2003), guidelines and regulations for the ethical conduct of research exist in institutions but are not always adhered to.

Moreover, the report indicates that most institutions are running ethical clearance application processes without appropriate technology systems, relying on paper-based systems. A study conducted in South Africa that looked at the introduction of a workflow system for managing

ethical clearance in research work (Mbate et al., 2021) illustrated the dangers of ineffective tracking and feedback processes. This raises risks in monitoring and evaluation of the ethics process and archives with major audit queries from external bodies carrying out the audit review. In such a case, Munro (2011) suggested that technology-based ethics processes could be an effective alternative to resolve the challenges faced by paper-based ethics application processes in Higher Education in South Africa. Some institutions in South Africa have adopted online systems in line with the recommendation in the national audit reports produced by the NDoH (2024), but a problem arises when these are implemented without considering the context or experiences of the researchers or the institutional culture in which the system is being implemented (Beckmann, 2017).

1.3 Purpose and Significance of the Study

The exploration of academics' experiences in the research ethical process is crucial due to the significant role that ethics plays in upholding the integrity and credibility of research. By exploring these experiences, this study aimed to uncover the challenges and complexities that researchers encounter when navigating ethical guidelines, particularly within their specific disciplines. This research is valuable as it sought to identify gaps and inconsistencies in current ethical practices, thereby offering findings that may inform the development of more effective training and support mechanisms for researchers. Understanding the lived experiences of academics contributes to a broader dialogue on improving ethical frameworks to better serve researchers and the communities with which they engage. Ultimately, the goal of this research was to achieve a deeper understanding of how ethical processes are perceived and enacted within academic settings, leading to recommendations for enhancing ethical training programs and refining ethical review processes, which will foster a more robust culture of ethics in research.

During an ethics committee review meeting that I was present at as the institutional ethics coordinator, an academic researcher asked if the research ethics office was aware of the difficulties that researchers face in the ethical clearance process. It was evident in the frustration that the researcher expressed that they felt that there was little understanding of their experiences of the process. Yet, the entire issue of research ethics centres on their work. I thus set out this study to enable academics to share their experiences of the ethical clearance process. The study contributes towards filling the knowledge gap around challenges and opportunities

that academics encounter in the research ethical clearance process in higher education institutions.

There is a significant knowledge gap concerning the ethical clearance processes as experienced by academics in higher education institutions, highlighting the need for further research and exploration in this area. Also, there is a need for all key role players who are involved in the ethical clearance process to be aligned with their responsibilities and understand that they are all equally important in this process for its smooth operation for one main objective: for research to be conducted with integrity and fairly. The majority of research studies on research ethics in Higher Education in South Africa have concentrated on examining the standards, processes, and protocols governing the ethical conduct of research (Beckmann, 2017; Munro, 2011; Horn, 2017). Against this background, this study explored the academics' experiences of the research ethical clearance process at Rhodes University in the Eastern Cape province, South Africa.

While the primary focus of this study lies in academics' experiences with the ethical clearance process, it ultimately highlights the necessity for proposing guidelines to enhance the design of ethical clearance processes by integrating insights from academics' experiences. I hope that the results from this study may inform the National Health Research Ethics Council (NHREC) and institutional research ethics offices in South Africa about the experience that researchers encounter in the research ethical clearance process and thereby ensure that ethical clearance can achieve its dual aims of developing awareness around ethical issues and ensuring ethical research praxis.

Unless we understand the processes from the perspective of the researchers themselves, there will always be constraints in implementing ethical clearance processes. This includes understanding that the bureaucratic aspects of the process, paperwork, and administrative challenges can be perceived as burdensome (Travers, 2007). It also includes understanding why researchers might feel that the stringent ethical requirements limit their autonomy and creativity in conducting research, known as 'academic freedom' (Alexander et al., 2021).

This study's findings also further understanding of ethics clearance processes from the perspective of academic researchers. As such, it provides a deeper understanding of the

researchers' perspectives, concerns, and voices in relation to these processes. This may also inform other similar institutions in shaping their appropriate ethical clearance processes.

The primary objective of this case study was to explore the experiences of academics' encounters during the research ethical clearance process when conducting research or supervising student research. In pursuit of this objective, the study aimed to address the following research question:

What are the experiences of academics of the ethical clearance review process at higher education institutions?

1.4 Objectives

The study was undertaken to:

- Assess researchers' perceptions of the ethical clearance processes at Rhodes University.
- Evaluate the alignment between various ethics guidelines in the South African context and how these are experienced at Rhodes University.
- Identify gaps between researchers' experiences and the intentions of the ethical clearance process at Rhodes University.
- Evaluate the roles of research ethics committees in the ethical review processes as reported by researchers' experiences.

By doing this, the study aimed to:

- Provide empirical evidence on research ethics and integrity from the perspectives of academic researchers.

1.5 Structure of Thesis

This chapter laid out the foundation for the research by articulating the core arguments justifying the study. It began by exploring the personal experiences and motivations that led me to this research area, establishing a personal connection to the topic. The chapter culminated in the central research question and the specific objectives and aim that guide the investigation. Chapter Two provides a historical overview of the development of ethical clearance

procedures, tracing their evolution both globally and within the specific local context. This historical perspective sets the stage for an examination of key debates within the existing literature on research ethics, highlighting the complexities and controversies surrounding ethical clearance. Chapter Three outlines the research methodology and justifies my research decisions. It includes details about data collection and analysis. Chapter Four presents the research findings, integrating them with a comprehensive discussion that draws upon relevant scholarly literature. The results are analysed and interpreted in light of existing theoretical frameworks and empirical studies, providing a nuanced understanding of the findings within the broader academic context. In Chapter Five, the key findings presented in the preceding chapters are reiterated, drawing together the various strands of the research into a cohesive conclusion. Based on these conclusions, the chapter offers concrete recommendations for future research, practice, and policy, aiming to contribute to the advancement of knowledge and understanding in the field.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

This chapter offers an overview of the literature pertaining to research ethics and its review process. It further considers important moments in history that have helped shape how governments and research institutions, such as universities, review the ethics of research. A literature review is a comprehensive analysis of scholarly sources related to a specific research topic or question (Snyder, 2019). It involves systematically identifying, evaluating, and analyzing existing research to provide a critical overview of the current state of knowledge in the field. Literature review is important in research as it helps establish the context of the study, identify gaps in existing research, and justify the need for the current research (Fink, 2019). It also helps researchers refine their research questions and hypotheses, select appropriate methodologies, and interpret their findings in light of previous work (Onwuegbuzie, 2016).

Literature reviews can be categorized into various types, including narrative reviews, systematic reviews, and meta-analyses (Fink, 2019). Narrative reviews provide a broad overview of a topic and are often used in exploratory research. Systematic reviews follow a rigorous methodology to identify and synthesise all relevant studies on a specific question. Meta-analyses statistically combine the results of multiple studies to provide a more precise estimate of the effect of an intervention or phenomenon. The specific type of literature review used in a study depends on the research question and the available evidence. This study employs a narrative literature review to explore the existing literature on ethical clearance processes in research, drawing upon a variety of sources, including journal articles, conference papers, newspapers, books, and institutional reports. For example, the study considers the historical development of research ethics regulations as well as the challenges and benefits of ethical review processes.

2.2 International Historical Cases and the Emergence of Ethics in Research

Most of the gravest abuses of human beings in research occurred in medical research dating back to the 1900s across the world. This is not surprising considering that drug trials,

particularly phase one studies, present some of the highest risks to research participants, where new drugs are introduced to a cohort of human beings to investigate their safety. The Tuskegee Syphilis Study is one such case (Freimuth et al., 2001). Between 1932 and 1972, Dr Neisser and his team studied the trajectory of syphilis and the possibilities of inoculation. They undertook research on vulnerable portions of the population in the wider Tuskegee area in the USA. Most participants were African American, many of whom were illiterate, and many of whom were prostitutes. Healthy participants were injected with a serum formed from the blood of patients infected by syphilis. The study continued long after the cure for syphilis was found (Fisher & Anushko, 2008).

The African American study participants were not informed of their diagnosis and were denied treatment for syphilis even once it became readily available. The study was mainly an observational study focused on documenting the impact of untreated syphilis on the human body (Reverby, 2012). This study stirred significant controversy and is currently recognised as one of the most severe instances of unethical medical research in recent times. This unethical study contributed to the establishment of ethical guidelines for the research instruments review process by RECs with much more attention being paid to informed consent by participants and regulations to protect human subjects in research.

Nazi human experimentations carried out at concentration camps during World War II are among the most infamous examples of unethical research conducted (Weindling, 2014). One such case is the experimentation by Josef Mengele at Auschwitz, where he performed heinous experiments on prisoners, including twins, without their consent. These experiments involved surgeries without anaesthesia, injecting dangerous substances, and deliberately infecting individuals with diseases to study the progression of symptoms (Bonah & Schmaltz, 2018). Sterilisation experiments at Ravensbrück is another notable unethical experiment under Nazi Germany that took place at Ravensbrück concentration camp (Spitz, 2005), where female prisoners were subjected to coerced sterilisation procedures to advance the Nazi eugenics programs. Known as the “sterilisation experiments,” these procedures were conducted without regard for the subjects’ consent or well-being, highlighting the extreme ethical violations prevalent during that time (Ghooi, 2011).

These flagrant violations of human rights and ethical standards during World War II led to the establishment of the Nuremberg Trials, where prominent Nazi leaders were prosecuted for war crimes, including unethical human experimentation. The trials culminated in the development of the Nuremberg Code published in 1947, a set of ethical principles that laid the foundation for contemporary guidelines on the ethical conduct of research involving human subjects (Bonah & Schmaltz, 2018). Other cases include the Milgram experiment, where research was conducted by a psychologist called Stanley Milgram in the 1960s. This study investigated obedience to authority figures (Pačalska et al., 2006). Participants were instructed to administer electric shocks to another person under the guise of a learning experiment. The person receiving the shocks were actors and, in some cases, even feigned death as a result of the shocks administered by the study participants. Many participants experienced lifelong post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as a result of this study. The study raised ethical concerns regarding deception, psychological harm, and informed consent, leading to increased awareness of research ethics in social psychology (Weindling, 2017).

Cases such as this created a revolution in participant informed consent processes. Informed consent is now sometimes even addressed in larger documents unrelated to research. For example, the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (Act 108 of 1996: Section 12 (2) (c)) states that:

*Everyone has the right to bodily and psychological integrity which includes the right – not to be subjected to medical or scientific experiments without their **informed consent**.*

Therefore, studies conducted without informed consent of participants or persons acting on their behalf are now considered both unconstitutional and unethical. For example, in South Africa, the National Health Act 61 of 2003: Section 71 states as follows:

Research on or experimentation with human subjects, (1) Notwithstanding anything to the contrary in any other law, research or experimentation on a living person may only be conducted in the prescribed manner; and with the written consent of the person after he or she has been informed of the objects of the research or experimentation and any possible positive or negative consequences on his or her health.

Another well-known example of ethical misconduct in research is the Stanford Prison experiment where research was conducted by psychologist Philip Zimbardo in 1971. This study simulated a prison environment to examine the effects of roles on behaviour (Le Texier, 2019). The experiment was terminated early due to ethical violations, including psychological harm to participants and a lack of adequate safeguards (Ghooi, 2011). This case has been referred to in order to highlight the importance of ethical oversight and participant protection in research studies. As these examples suggest, the development of research ethics requirements can be traced back to the twentieth century (Fisher & Anushko 2008), a period that witnessed a sudden surge in the amount of human research being conducted globally. Without knowledge of the historical context, it is very difficult to understand the need for research ethics, more so its rapid development over the past decades to become a formal requirement for research to be undertaken (Liddle & Brazelton, 1996).

These, and many other abhorrent cases, thus make plain the need for ethical considerations to be central in the research endeavour. But ethical considerations are constantly evolving as fields develop. The nature of academic work has become more complex, and academics are expected to take on multiple roles and increasingly heavy teaching and assessment loads which may have consequences for the extent to which they can engage with ethical considerations pertinent to research in their area (Israel & Hay, 2006). Juggling the demands of teaching, supervision, coping with new technology, with their own research and increased accountability while maintaining their own professional practice (Page & Nyeboer, 2017) all can play a negative role in implementing the ethical clearance process. The literature suggests that a key concern on the part of academics is that ethical clearance processes can infringe on academic freedom by restricting the ability of social scientists to research the topics they deem important (Guta et al. 2013).

Hedgecoe (2016) argues given that the principle of autonomy must surely apply to researchers as well as to the people they study, the application of ethics review to the social sciences amounts not only to a bureaucratisation of research but also to unwarranted restriction on the freedom of researchers. In the USA, prior ethics reviews have also been presented as an infringement of the First Amendment and a clear threat to academic freedom (Hedgecoe, 2012). Hedgecoe (2008) argues that there is a risk that the review process may be influenced by organisational reputation management concerns, potentially leading to the suppression of data that could harm the university's interests. However, it is essential to distinguish between research that is methodologically sound but may yield unfavourable results and research that

employs unethical methods. The latter should be the primary concern of ethics review committees. Therefore, our focus should be on ensuring that the procedures and strategies implemented in the research design are ethical, rather than only focusing on the potential implications of the findings. By maintaining this distinction, we can safeguard the integrity of the research process and uphold the principles of ethical research practices. Research ethics reviews can indeed be employed as a means of internal social control and avoidance of future reputational harm for the institution (Benson, 2017), and thus, they need to be engaged critically.

Academia is witnessing a shift from professional ethics rooted in academic norms to the codification of ethics through ethical regulation by external review bodies (Marušić et al, 2011). Marušić et al. (2011) suggest that this shift has created consternation among researchers in relation to some of the following:

- Ethics reviews are often reduced to tick-box exercises.
- Processes of review boards/committees are not transparent – they are often secretive.
- Lack of consistency in interpretation and application of guidelines by review boards.
- Some disciplines are a burdened, and others are privileged by ethical reviews.
- Approaches to ethics are rooted in positivism and a biomedical conception of harm.
- Ethics creep has been linked the erosion of academic freedom.

According to Israel and Hay (2006), applying to a Human Research Ethics Committee, or HREC, in South African universities today involves completing a long form containing questions about many aspects of the project that are of dubious relation to the experience of actual human subjects. The questions are often so broad – e.g., “Could the research cause any harm or risks of harm - whether physical, psychological, social, cultural or financial - to subjects?” – that they are open to a wide variety of interpretations. Israel (2014) goes so far as to mention that the ethics application form is now typically longer than the eventual research paper. It is within such complex debates that this inquiry into academics’ experiences of ethical clearance processes was undertaken. But first a brief history of the emergence of ethical clearance processes as a necessary part of research is needed.

2.3 The Background to Research Ethics in Africa

In recent years, Africa has experienced a massive surge in research undertaken by independent

research institutions, Higher Education institutions (HEIs), non-governmental organisations, and religious organisations in response to the serious health and social challenges faced by the continent. In many cases, the funding for such research comes from countries in the Global North and therefore arguably follows foreign agendas that may fail to take local concerns and contexts sufficiently into account (Kruger et al., 2014). This has at times played out in abuses and lapses of ethical behaviour in various internationally funded projects in Africa. For example, in Zimbabwe, during the early 1990s, Dr Richard Gladwell McGown, a British anaesthetist, was charged with conducting dangerous human experiments (Kruger et al., 2014). He was arrested on allegations of having carried out medical experiments on 500 patients, most of whom were of black race. Having been charged with murder, Dr McGown was found to have conducted interventional studies using new drugs and anaesthetics without the approval of the National Drugs Authority and without the knowledge of his patients. A Harare court found him guilty of professional negligence (Kruger et al., 2014).

In another example, in Nigeria in 2001, 30 families sued the Pfizer pharmaceutical company over trials of trovafloxacin (Trovan), an antibiotic that was intended to treat meningitis (Kruger et al., 2014). In 1996, Pfizer flew a team of doctors from the USA into Kano, Nigeria to test Trovan, an experimental drug, against bacterial meningitis. The new drug was tested on nearly 200 children during a meningitis outbreak. The trial compared Trovan with the recommended drug Ceftriaxone. Unfortunately, children in the control arm allegedly received Ceftriaxone at an inadequate dose. Eleven children died, while some survivors suffered permanent brain damage and paralysis. During investigations, it was found that the clinical trial had not been approved by a local research ethics committee, and that the families concerned were not adequately informed that their children were research participants in a study employing the use of Trovan. The families sued Pfizer through the USA courts, resulting in an out-of-court settlement (Kruger et al., 2014).

An increase in research volume in Africa has not necessarily been accompanied by improvements in ethical awareness and research oversight systems, including ethical review committees, leaving the continent vulnerable to exploitative research, often funded by economically developed countries (Hyder et al., 2013). There has been considerable controversy in recent years about the ethics of research sponsored by the government of the United States of America and conducted in developing countries rather than in their own country. Many such issues are addressed in the U.S.A National Bioethics Advisory Commission in its report, *Ethical and Policy Issues in International Research* (2001).

The imperative for African nations to develop mechanisms to enhance their research capabilities and safeguard against exploitation has contributed to the establishment of ethics review committees and other governance processes to ensure ethical research conduct and protect national interests. South Africa was the first country in Africa to establish an ethical review committee at the University of the Witwatersrand in 1966 (Davies, 2020). Over the last three decades, most tertiary institutions in South Africa have introduced research ethics committees. The South African Department of Health established a national council in 2004 that directly monitors all institutional committees and helps them create guidelines or standard operational procedures aligned with the principles set out by the National Health Research Ethics Council (NHREC). The registration of such ethics committees is divided according to the subjects they would involve: There are (1) human, (2) animal, and (3) health and biomedical ethics committees. They function separately and are expected to have their own policies and Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs), according to the National Health Act 61 of 2003.

However, laws and ethics are not necessarily the same. What is demanded or forbidden by law may not be by ethical standards and vice-versa (Detardo-Bora, 2004). The distinction between law and ethics is especially crucial in research-related matters, where they are not interchangeable, although there should ideally be significant alignment for laws to embody ethical principles. Instances may occur in research ethics where legal obligations diverge from ethical considerations, and conversely, ethical norms may differ from legal dictates (Otto, 2007). For example, while research regulations may dictate the minimum required protections for vulnerable populations in a study, ethical standards may advocate for additional safeguards to preserve their welfare and autonomy. Conversely, a researcher may find themselves ethically compelled to disclose certain findings that have significant societal implications, even if legal confidentiality obligations might limit such disclosures.

In South Africa, for instance, the apartheid government system that governed the country before the multiparty regime in 1994 comprised in part a set of laws but none of them were ethical or moral. Morality relates to the rightness or wrongness of behaviours. As a society or community, we believe that some behaviours are right while others are wrong and as individuals, we draw on such social understandings of right and wrong to determine our own set of morals. Many people use the terms ethics and morality interchangeably as they both have to do with the rightness or wrongness of an action. However, ethics are slightly different from morals in that ethics are systematised and codified accounts of acceptable behaviour shared by

a particular community or group (Wendel, 2005). Such systems and codes might pertain to specific workplaces, such as through a code of conduct, or to specific processes, such as the rules and processes for ethical research in universities.

Past and recent abuses of research participants have directly and indirectly contributed significantly towards the research regulations and codes that are now in place in various countries throughout the African continent and elsewhere. Some countries, institutions, and agencies have articulated their own national ethical statements, which provide an intermediate step between the principles set out in international guidance and decisions about how these should be applied within countries (Ghooi, 2011).

2.4 International Guidelines and Frameworks for Research Ethics

International guidelines that govern research ethics processes include the Nuremberg Code of 1947, as mentioned above, the Declaration of Geneva in 1948, the Declaration of Helsinki in 1964, the Belmont Report of 1979, The International Code of Medical Ethics (in 1949 with regular updates since then) and the Cape Town Statement of Research Integrity issued in 2022, which was later published in 2023.

Most literature argues that these international guidelines have significantly influenced our comprehension of research ethics and integrity, largely reflecting Western perspectives (Israel, 2014). They fundamentally define ethical practices in research, emphasising principles that align with Western ideologies and values, potentially marginalising Afrocentric ethical viewpoints. As pivotal documents, they have shaped research conduct standards, but their origins in Western thought may overlook the cultural nuances and ethical frameworks unique to the Afrocentric perspective, thus limiting their applicability within diverse global research contexts (Cyprian, 2023). These complexities raise serious concerns about ethical standards during data collection within indigenous communities and how such research is being reviewed by RECs using Western guidelines that may be at odds with norms of ethical behaviours in other contexts.

Declaration of Geneva (1948): This declaration outlines the ethical responsibilities of physicians and emphasises the importance of patient welfare. It aligns well with the later Belmont report (below) in mentioning the commitment to maintaining the utmost respect for human life, which is important when accessing communities. It is crucial for researchers to

understand what it means to be ethical during their study far beyond the ethical clearance process. This declaration can be seen to have partly emerged from the atrocities revealed in the Nuremberg trials discussed earlier.

Belmont Report (1979): The Belmont Report was released by the U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare in 1979. This report delineates essential ethical principles and standards for human subject research, covering aspects like respect for persons, beneficence, and justice (Sims, 2010). The enduring influence of this framework has significantly shaped research ethics practices and contributed to the formulation of regulations such as the Common Rule in the United States. These guidelines gave birth to the participant informed consent, an important requirement for researchers to ensure that voluntary participation is clearly outlined and to minimise risks to participants. This report also emphasises the importance of assuring anonymity during data analyses and the presentation of results.

Declaration of Helsinki (1964): This declaration provides ethical principles for medical research involving human subjects. It emphasises informed consent, confidentiality, and the need for ethical review. This guideline outlines the protection of vulnerable populations in research which is often implemented through an assessment tool used to identify such groups.

International Code of Medical Ethics (1994): This code sets forth ethical standards for medical professionals globally. It covers principles such as patient confidentiality, honesty, and respect for patients' autonomy. This guideline is a cornerstone for the new South African POPIA Act, 2021, discussed in more detail later, as it guides physicians on maintaining patient privacy, providing truthful information, and not sharing personal information.

Cape Town Statement of Research Integrity (2022): This statement addresses research integrity and ethical behaviour in academic and scientific research. It emphasises honesty, fairness, and transparency in research practices. This statement also protects indigenous communities and knowledge that is communally shared. Lastly, it highlights the importance of avoiding plagiarism and ensuring proper attribution of sources. The Cape Town Statement was published by the World Conferences on Research Integrity (WCRI) on 24 March 2023. Participants at the seventh WCRI, stated that they “recognised that unfair and inequitable research practices remain prevalent at all stages of research from proposal development to funding application, data collection, analysis, sharing and access, reporting and translation” (Horn et al., 2022, p 2).

These international codes all illustrate the growing concern for human rights and the protection of the vulnerable. They also each illustrate the increasing codification of what should constitute ethical behaviour. This has been a key driver in the rise of an area known as ‘research management’ in higher education. Research management oversees and facilitates the ethical clearance processes and administration.

2.5 Research Management and Administration in Higher Education

Over the last few decades, South Africa has been involved in improving and updating the ethics review processes at all of its institutions of higher education (Kruger et al., 2014), through the support of research administrators who are research management professionals. Research management and administration development has led to the emergence of research governance structures in universities. The growing emphasis on stringent research management processes within universities has arguably led to a shift towards a more regulatory and policing-oriented approach rather than one that fosters support and guidance (Hedgecoe, 2012; Israel & Hay, 2006). This transformation has sparked apprehensions among academic researchers, particularly in relation to academic freedom, as scholars express concerns about potential constraints on their autonomy, creativity, and intellectual pursuits within the evolving research landscape (Klitzman, 2015). The unquestioning acceptance of a medical model of ethical review based on positivist methodological assumptions has resulted in a disconnect for many researchers between their ongoing ethical research endeavours and the process of obtaining authorisation from Research Ethics Committees (RECs) (McAreavey & Muir, 2011). This has resulted in separate conversations in different rooms between researchers and ethics administrators amid frustration.

There is a widely held view that unethical practice not only causes possible harm to participants but could also tarnish the image and integrity of the whole sector. For this reason, every member of the higher education system must be an agent of ethical conduct, particularly in research and publishing but also more generally across all of academia (Ferrero et al., 2012). Compliance checks and balances employed by these professionals have arguably shifted the focus from research integrity to compliance (Horn et al, 2023). Compliance can be seen as completing the required processes without engaging with them deeply. Much has been written about the extent to which universities have become increasingly bureaucratic and managerial,

resulting in compliance rather than commitment (Israel, 2014). For example, in the realm of academic research, this shift towards compliance-driven practices may manifest as researchers prioritising meeting funding requirements and institutional protocols in the pursuit of innovative and impactful research endeavours. As a result, researchers may find themselves caught in a cycle of ticking boxes and adhering to procedural formalities, potentially compromising the depth and authenticity of their scholarly contributions.

This also opens a very important conversation around the connection between ethical research and scholarly publishing. The ‘publish or perish’ processes have become pervasive in our universities, and this has arguably driven predatory publications (Eshchanov et al., 2021). Such publications do not follow peer review or other quality processes in publication and are regarded as unethical research outputs. Publish or perish has also driven the increasing number of articles being retracted for falsified data and plagiarism which is an ethical issue. Several journals now require proof of ethical clearance approval letters as a condition of publication (Wassenaar & Mamotte, 2009).

Sivasubramaniam, et al. (2021) argue that ‘ethics’ need to be understood within the wider ambit of ethical approaches to knowledge creation and dissemination and not simply as the administrative ‘ethical clearance’ requirement prior to data collection. Ethics in research need to be considered within the broader concern of academic integrity, and this is particularly important in a time when universities are often pitted against each other as competitors in a market and individual academics are often pressurised to privilege outputs rather than quality contributions if they are to be successful in their careers. University rankings offer benefits, but they also come with notable drawbacks. While they may foster healthy competition, they frequently result in unethical behaviours and prioritise immediate gains over long-term sustainability. For instance, in the race to climb global university rankings, institutions may exert pressure on faculty to focus excessively on publishing research in high-impact journals to boost their position, inadvertently pushing researchers towards publishing in predatory journals or compromising the integrity of their work to meet strict publication quotas (Moustafa, 2024).

Following a workshop on the Ethics of Scholarly Publishing on 11 April 2018 and the collective goal of advancing research integrity in South Africa, the Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf), the Council for Higher Education (CHE), the National Research

Foundation (NRF), the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) and Universities South Africa (USAf) signed the joint “*Statement on Ethical Research and Scholarly Publishing Practices*” in Pretoria on 31 July 2019. This was done in response to the global adoption of the Singapore Statement on Research Integrity in 2010 (www.singaporestatement.org).

The 2nd World Conference on Research Integrity, held in Singapore July 21-24, 2010, brought together 340 participants from 51 countries – researchers, funders, representatives of research institutions (universities and research institutes), and research publishers to discuss different aspects and issues related to the responsible conduct of research. During the Conference, the participants worked on a joint document as a global guide for responsible conduct of research called the ‘Singapore Statement on Research Integrity’ (Marušić, 2010). According to Marušić (2010, p. 4), it states “The value and benefits of research are vitally dependent on the integrity of research. While there can be and are national and disciplinary differences in the way research is organized and conducted, there are also principles and professional responsibilities that are fundamental to the integrity of research wherever it is undertaken”. This statement deals with researchers conducting research ethically and not the ethical clearance process. The extent to which ethical considerations are conflated with the ethical clearance processes is a matter of concern.

The ethical issues related to humanities and social science research have not enjoyed as much scholarly attention as the ethics of biomedical research (Wassenaar & Mamotte, 2012) and humanities and social scientists continue to debate the relevance of ethical clearance and ethics review. However, even biomedical scientists have objected to aspects of ethical review of biomedical research, and much has been gained from the ensuing debates (Wassenaar & Mamotte, 2012). Social scientists are generally inadequately trained in research ethics and may still adopt a dangerous view, common among behavioural scientists in the 1950s, that ethical concerns reflect a kind of methodological or scientific simplicity, as ethics review committees were initially designed for medical research and not social sciences (Lincoln & Cannella, 2009). Humanities and social science research, with a few clear exceptions, require rigorous ethical review, and research ethics committees have an obligation to be competent in the appropriate review of humanities and social science research, including all forms of qualitative research.

An interesting example of the potential effect of medical research ethics regulation on social science research is found in South Africa. On 1 March 2012, Section 71 of the National Health Act (NHA) was operationalised by the Minister of Health to implement the requirement that all non-therapeutic research conducted on children would have to be approved by the Minister. The term “*non-therapeutic research*” caused a lot of confusion to many social sciences researchers. At first, many social sciences researchers assumed this must be a typographical error and that it was *therapeutic* research that needed approval from the national minister of health, which also caused a scare on how long that process would take.

While most non-medical researchers described their research as a ‘non-therapeutic’, they were angered that this meant ministerial approval was now needed for almost every humanities and social science study, most of which do not contain a therapeutic aspect. However, this miscommunication stemmed from concerns in the Ministry of Health that all (medical) research should have therapeutic benefits. So, when patients were asked to participate in studies where no therapeutic benefit was likely, additional oversight was needed. The Ministry’s rationale for placing such strict regulations on all such research was not made clear. Frustration arose among all role players.

Scholars also critiqued the rigid requirement that parents or guardians had to consent to children’s participation in research but there was no requirement for consent from children themselves. Researchers indicated that this contradicted what is stated in Section 10 of the South African Children’s Act, i.e. that children of the appropriate age, maturity, and developmental level have the right to participate in matters that concern that child and that children’s viewpoints on such issues should be given consideration (Singh et al, 2007). Children are legally dependent but have significant privacy interests. These interests must be considered when reviewing and approving research. Furthermore, researchers argued that even though parents have to give permission, this does not mean they have the right to know results (e.g. with STI/HIV testing). Minors should participate in research only when their participation in the research is indispensable to the research, i.e. the research cannot deliver the desired outcomes if adults are used instead (Wilkinson et al, 2021).

The emphasis on ethical considerations in research ethics review appears to be influenced by the increasing bureaucratisation of the review process, as noted by Kara (2018). This growing formalisation and structure in the review system may enhance the focus on ethical standards

within research practices. This often leads to a system clouded by organisational hurdles that need to be overcome by university staff, members of RECs, and researchers (van den Hoonaard, 2011). There is indirect evidence indicating that researchers may be inclined to avoid studies that present challenges in obtaining ethical clearance. The literature suggests that researchers in the humanities and social sciences often circumvent Research Ethics Committees (RECs) by making specific research decisions, as time constraints can sometimes lead participants to disregard REC policies and procedures. RECs are often viewed as a potential obstacle for studies involving children (Butler et al., 2020). Many researchers working in this area believe that their applications are subjected to stricter scrutiny than those aimed at other populations. However, it remains unclear whether this perception aligns with actual practices.

Social science researchers conducting research involving children or other vulnerable research populations would, therefore, be faced with regulations that not only restrict them because of their rigidity and assumptions of approaches related to medical research but which are also experienced as confusing. While an amendment to Section 71(3) in the National Health Act in September 2014 delegated the authority to grant clearance for non-therapeutic research on minors to appropriate bodies, including university RECs, the NHA's strict research regulatory framework might have had serious implications for the production of knowledge generated from non-therapeutic research on children.

One could reasonably assume that onerous bureaucratic requirements (legal or institutional) could considerably affect knowledge production. As Hendricks (2018, p. 25) illustrates with reference to student researchers, a "lengthy and problematic system of gaining ethical approval" can be "very off-putting", and some supervisors advise their students not to conduct research for which the ethics approval process is lengthy and problematic unless they have submitted an application for approval "several months previously". Prout (2002) mentions that restrictive regulations that constrain children's participation in research contribute towards the risk of valuable insights (from a child's perspective, and therefore on novel aspects of the social situations, settings, and issues of children), being lost.

2.5.1 The Ethical Review Clearance Process in Academic Institutions

As indicated previously, Research ethics clearance processes are frequently viewed as mere compliance requirements rather than as essential components of the research journey. This perception can undermine the integral role that ethical considerations play in safeguarding the integrity of research and the welfare of participants. Research Ethics Committees (RECs) are encouraged to adopt a more supportive approach, avoiding the enforcement of stringent ethical regulations solely to satisfy external regulatory demands. The latter approach risks alienating researchers and may lead to non-compliance with established guidelines (Ashcraft & Krause, 2007).

This section provides a detailed examination of how research ethics clearance is structured within universities, both in South Africa and globally. It outlines the procedural steps involved in obtaining ethical clearance, including necessary documentation, submission processes, and the anticipated timelines that researchers must navigate. The study explores unique processes, such as specialised reviews conducted by institutional boards like the Financial Research Compliance Initiative (FRCI) and the Faculty Committee on Postgraduate Studies (FCPS), which contribute to the ethical oversight of research projects. By understanding these structures and processes, we can better appreciate the complexities and significance of ethical review in fostering responsible research practices and ensuring the protection of research participants across diverse academic landscapes.

There is a basic ethical clearance process that is being followed in institutions of higher education based on the researchers' experience, as follows:

STEP 1 - Submission of research proposal by researchers, where they are required to submit a detailed research proposal outlining the study objectives, methodology, participant information, and ethical considerations. This goes to the relevant ethics committee. There are universities that do not review desktop research, which is deemed as low-risk research as it does not include humans or animals, but in other universities, all research is reviewed.

STEP 2 - The submitted research proposal undergoes a thorough review by the RECs to assess its compliance with ethical guidelines, participant safety, anonymity, and potential risks and benefits.

STEP 3 - Research Instruments review includes evaluation of informed consent documentation,

questionnaires, interview questions & schedule, animal handling tools and care, and other kinds of instruments as relevant. Where people are involved, the researchers must obtain informed consent from participants, which usually includes clearly explaining the purpose of the study, potential risks, anonymity measures, and participants' right to withdraw from the study at any time.

STEP 4 - Risk assessment is used by ethics committees to evaluate the potential risks associated with the research study and ensure that appropriate measures are in place to minimise harm to participants, including animals and the environment, and maintain their well-being. This also highlights a criterion of whether it is low, medium, or high-risk research depending on the risk assessment. Researchers are expected in their application to evaluate risk levels for themselves which is later verified by REC reviewers.

STEP 5 - Data management and storage: This is where researchers are required to indicate how they will secure data management and storage protocols to protect participant information and ensure data confidentiality is in line with data protection regulations. This is often a challenge for many researchers as they are not sure how to manage it. Data management plans are a relatively new requirement more common after the Protection of Personal Information Act, 1 June 2021 (POPIA), implementation in universities.

STEP 6 - Continuing ethics oversight often involves ongoing monitoring and reporting requirements to ensure that researchers adhere to ethical standards throughout the duration of the study. This is done in two ways. Passive monitoring is when at the end of the study, the researcher submits a form that answers question regarding how the study was carried out. In contrast, active monitoring is, for example, where the REC sends a representative to the research site when the study is being conducted to ensure that the researcher does not deviate from what they stated in their approved application. This could be deemed as another stringent process of creating more red tape. It is a requirement by the new (2024) National Department of Health (NDoH) guidelines, processes and procedures.

These steps are typically followed in getting an ethics approval letter known as an ethical clearance certificate by researchers. This letter is evidence that the researcher has submitted the required documents and has undergone the above steps for review. The letter does not mean that the researcher will conduct this research with integrity but only confirms compliance in the application process. Keith-Spiegel et al. (2006) are of the view that not all researchers are

dissatisfied with the procedures and policies of their RECs. Keith-Spiegel et al. (2006) found that researchers tend to evaluate the performance of their REC based on their perception of their REC’s fairness. This, along with several comments made by participants in that study, strongly suggests that researchers’ perception of REC fairness plays a large role in the decision of some researchers to disobey research ethics policies and laws. The diagram below shows the connection and alignment of the regulatory policy documents that govern the ethics clearance process in South Africa and the bases of research management. Universities policies, standard operating procedures and terms of references content is drawn from these documents.

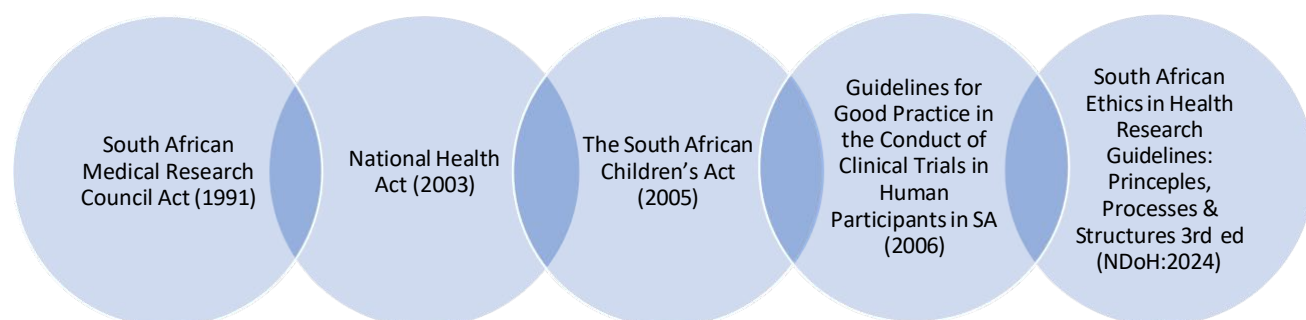


Figure 2.1: Guiding principles and policies of research ethics in South Africa.

2.6 Understanding Research Ethics from Multiple Perspectives

This section highlights one of the challenges associated with having a singular perspective on what constitutes ethics in research. While planning all aspects of a research project within a positivistic framework is feasible, such an approach often falls short in qualitative research, where flexibility and adaptability are essential. A researcher quoted by Pope, De Luca & Tolich (2010, p. 313) notes, “the more frustrating aspect for me was the pre-research phase and the necessity to predict and account for all likely scenarios when I knew full well that the unfolding of this (messy) ethnography could not be driven like a square peg into the round hole of the ethics application template”. The lack of transparency between researchers and Research Ethics Committees (RECs) during the application process contributes to the perception that ethics procedures are time-consuming, further complicating issues of trust and highlighting the need for a more nuanced understanding of ethical considerations in diverse research contexts (Parsell, Ambler & Jacenyik-Trawoger, 2014) hence the need for this study.

Importantly, completing the required application form and following the ethics application process correctly does not make one ethical. Ethical conduct is often realised in the interaction between researcher and the research participant (Cooper, 2012). Thus, ethical behaviour in research is often far more complex and shifting than can be ciphered in an ethical clearance application form. Researchers using qualitative methods, such as interviews and focus groups, can face unforeseen dilemmas forcing them to make unprepared ethical decisions (Welland & Pugsley, 2018). It can thus be argued that ethical clearance should not be seen as the approval for every step to be followed in the research design but rather an acknowledgement that the researcher has reflected deeply on what might come to pass and seems prepared to make ethical decisions as needed according to key ethical principles (Tolich, 2016). This understanding of the ethical clearance process as provoking reflection rather than monitoring compliance was not however dominant in the literature.

Gillam and Guillemin (2018) distinguish between ‘procedural ethics’ and ‘ethics in practice’. Procedural ethics involves seeking approval from committees, whereas ethics in practice concerns the everyday ethical issues that arise in the doing of research. These two concepts raise questions about much being undertaken in the name of procedural ethics and whether it is possible for researchers to receive procedural ethical clearance and be informed about ethics in practice. The rights of research participants must be protected and by complying with the obligations of an ethics application, it is anticipated that there has been a check on both the acceptability of the project through REC review and institutional credibility via policies and procedures complied to by the researcher (Gillam & Guillemin, 2018). Ethics in practice presents different problems, inviting an even more novel solution. In the field of ‘ethics in practice’, the responsibility for ethical conduct lies solely with the researcher and the supervisor in the case of postgraduate research, which comprises the bulk of university research. They must identify and respond to sensitive situations and ethical dilemmas by relying on their judgment. This can leave the researcher susceptible and uncertain, especially if they have not been educated in key ethical principles and how they might be applied.

The member or reviewer of the ethics committee assigned to the project could act as a critical friend by encouraging reflection on ethical issues that may arise. However, this is not always the case (Comstock, 2012). Many reviewers or members of the committee give discouraging

comments which have nothing to do with ethics in research (Fisher, 2021). The researcher could draw on the reviewer's expertise by creating the possibility for debriefing.

At the same time, this would encourage reflexivity, as envisaged by Guillemin & Gillam (2004) and build capacity both within the researcher and the reviewer. It is important to note that the supervisors are critical role players in the case of postgraduate research and are very vocal in protecting their student research from criticism which comes as comments from committees (Pope, De Luca & Tolich, 2010), and this needs to be navigated in ways that enhances the ethical nature of the research.

Hence many institutions of HE provide training on basic principles of research ethics, how to be ethical and what it means to do ethical research. There is a gap in academics' involvement in ethics reviews as few academics become members of these committees or do training, leading to less involvement in decision making of approval (Hyder et al., 2013). This raises the question of whether ethical clearance is about compliance and based on mistrust – or whether it is about ethical development and oversight. Schrag (2011) argues that because ethical processes are framed as being processes of compliance, they cannot serve the role of critical development. He argues that ethical clearance processes are based on the assumption that researchers are unethical.

Another complexity arises in that there is little methodological contestation in some fields while in others there is extensive debate about the ethical and methodical approaches. By applying many kinds of qualitative analysis, the researcher seeks to uncover underlying meanings, experiences, and perceptions related to ethical clearance processes, providing valuable insights into the challenges and perspectives. However, there may not be agreements amongst REC members on which approach is rigorous.

Thus, in many humanities and social sciences fields, there is much deliberation as to what would constitute appropriate methods (with all the ethical considerations pertaining to this). This often emerges from the theoretical framing of the study, but there is no consensus in any field regarding the theoretical framing or the methodological choices. This potentially raises the possibility of disagreement in an ethics committee that is difficult to negotiate. Researchers thus criticise RECs for acting unfairly by recommending changes to research protocols that are perceived to be beyond the scope of the RECs' authority and an impediment to their research. Haggerty (2004) uses the notion of ethics creep to refer to the intensification of research ethics

regulation by the addition of REC procedures which are viewed as beyond the scope of ethics. He defines the term as a dual process whereby the regulatory structure of the ethics bureaucracy is expanding outward, colonising new groups, practices, and institutions while at the same time intensifying the regulation of practices deemed to fall within its official ambit (Mamotte & Wassenaar, 2009).

2.7 The Structure of Research Ethics Committees (RECs) in HEIs

The REC is a key element of university research management and has gained increasing importance as a review instrument for those institutions that wish to conduct responsible research, along with safeguarding research ethics standards, scientific merit, and the human rights of participants. Given the significant role of the university REC, it is reasoned that there is a need to assess and understand the work of RECs to identify areas for improvement and thus focus on capacity building to respond to the escalating volume, type, and complexity of research (Davies, 2020).

The South African RECs' composition ranges between 10 and 30 members depending on the institution's size, faculties, research culture, and postgraduate throughput. The membership selection or appointment includes members with certain professions, sets of skills, and experience in research publications and supervision. According to the NDoH 2024 guidelines, REC membership should comprise physicians, veterinarians, scientists, legal experts, clinicians, social scientists, economists, nutritionists, pharmacists, statisticians, and community members e.g., pastors. Other crucial members would be laypersons (community members) or non-scientist members, which some institutions pay for attending meetings through an honorarium or cover transport fees as it is otherwise difficult to keep them as members. This can include traditional chiefs and representatives from local organisations not affiliated with the institution. It is also a requirement for RECs to strive for gender and race balance, but there is not much requirement on age (Davies, 2020). The new rule is that representatives of the twelve mentioned categories of members should always be present in the meeting to make a quorum. Such requirements are difficult for many committees to meet, as this, to some extent, depends on the institution's employment recruitment strategy through the Human Resources Division, which RECs have no control over.

According to the NDoH 2024 guidelines as a stipulated rule, meetings are scheduled monthly by the chair in advance and the REC secretariat circulates dates to all members to diarise. All committees have a requirement for a quorum, half plus one or two-thirds attendance depending on the institutional policy or standard operating procedures. Meeting the quorum requirements is difficult depending on the time of the year as REC members are also full-time academic staff members who are already overworked with teaching, research, community engagement and supervision and also struggle with punctuality (Kass et al., 2003). The REC meeting is the core function of the REC. Members must have adequate experience and expertise through training. Each application must have robust deliberations, discussions, disagreements, voting and seeking second opinion. The research application must be reviewed according to a benefits and risks analysis and verified to be culturally appropriate based on principles from the Belmont Report, 1976, which has been mentioned previously. Its criteria are:

- AUTONOMY (respect for the individual)
- BENEFICENCE (potential benefit)
- NON-MALEFICENCE (absence of harm)
- JUSTICE (fair sharing of benefit and risk)

Training for Research Ethics Committee (REC) members is vital, as mandated by the NHREC and the NDoH 2024 national guidelines, to ensure eligibility for reviewing applications and understanding the criteria of what to look for during the review process. The NHREC encourages REC members to undergo accredited training that includes assessments at the end of each training specific to human participants or animal research aspects, with certification. The accreditation of such training relies on experienced facilitators with backgrounds in academia, research supervision, and prior roles as REC members or chairs in their current or past positions. However, this does not guarantee that each member who has undergone training will act ethically or be an ethics specialist in the field.

Besides accredited training, internal/inhouse training, seminars, webinars, or workshops conducted by REC members or well-versed researchers, institutions are also encouraged to open a discussion on research ethics and raise awareness of researchers' needs through training (Engelbrecht et al., 2024). REC chairs are also encouraged to prepare basic induction training for new REC members on processes and policies alongside their accredited training (NDoH, 2024). Such induction training can include topics like the role of the ethics committee

members, code of conduct, expectations of integrity and confidentiality, responsibilities, management of conflict of interest, policies, standard operating procedures (SOPs), terms of reference (TORs), dates of meetings and reviews and the legal framework (NDoH, 2024, South African Ethics in Health Research Guidelines: Principles, Processes and Structures 3rd ed.).

To enhance the management of confidentiality and mitigate conflicts of interest among Research Ethics Committee (REC) members, new members are mandated to sign a non-disclosure agreement (NDA) form upon joining the committee. The purpose of the non-disclosure agreement form is to establish a legal framework for maintaining the confidentiality of sensitive information discussed within the committee meetings, research proposals, and participant data. By signing the NDA, REC members commit to upholding strict confidentiality standards, thereby safeguarding the integrity and privacy of research-related discussions. Moreover, the non-disclosure agreement serves to prevent the disclosure of confidential information to external parties, ensuring that REC members adhere to ethical standards and maintain trust within the committee.

According to the NDoH 2024 guidelines, potential conflicts are managed on submitted reviews where a member must disclose if the application being reviewed poses a conflict. In some institutions, when there is a conflict with a departmental colleague who has a protocol under review, such reviews are sent to another department, even to a department with less expertise, to avoid conflicts. Conflict of interest has raised challenges from the review point of view, where members feel uneasy voicing objections when fellow members' protocols are reviewed, fearing being labelled unfriendly or difficult (Silaigwana & Wassenaar, 2019). A member of the REC who has disclosed conflict is recused from the meeting while their application is being reviewed and deliberated upon. When they return to the room, they get feedback like other applicants after the meeting via the administrative process through the committee secretariate communication.

Procedural and administrative issues are commonly raised in the NHREC audits, where it's highly recommended that each institution gets administrative support for RECs. Most RECs have basic administrative capabilities from the chair, but it is more efficient to have dedicated administrative support (Kasule & Wassenaar, 2016). Administrative support assists in implementing standard operating procedures (SOPs), and policies, preparing agendas, keeping

minutes, communicating with researchers on the outcomes, and planning and coordinating training. Most RECs have some mechanism for reviewing research projects via online platforms, while others still use paper-based application processes (Kasule & Wassenaar, 2016). Due to the COVID19 pandemic, many processes had to be changed and amendment. Requested administrative support came in handy to many RECs to apply this change. Administrative support is of key importance in the ethical clearance application process for both RECs and researchers within the institution as responsible personnel (Silaigwana & Wassenaar, 2019).

The National Act separates the ethical clearance processes for research involving humans and those involving animals, as well as environmental or chemical research. This study focuses on human and animal research, as it refers to health research ethics.

2.7.1 Health Research Ethics

The National Health Act (NHAs 72(6)) gives authority to the NHREC to set norms and standards for health and health-related research that involves humans. Every organisation or institution, health agency, and health establishment at which health and health-related research involving human participants is conducted must establish or have access to a registered Health Research Ethics Committee (REC). Research governance structures in institutions of higher education have created great concern amongst academic researchers relating to academic freedom and delays in their students' postgraduate research on human participants. This has created some pushback from researchers relating to the feedback comments they receive from RECs. These comments are guided by the international guidelines that were responding to the horrific medical abuse on human research and how REC reviews its policies and guidelines based on this discipline. The total adoption of a medical/trial model of ethical review processes based upon positivist methodological assumptions has created many a mismatch between their own ongoing ethical research practice and the process of obtaining ethical clearance from RECs (Chen & BChir, 2024).

Human RECs help ensure that such research is carried out with the highest ethical standards and in an environment where all who are involved in the oversight of human subjects' research understand their primary responsibility for protecting the rights, welfare, and well-being of subjects (Madanhire, 2018). Universities and research institutions have Human

Research Protection Programs that are committed to supporting the active engagement of communities in research through RECs. The promotion of diversity, inclusion, and equity is fundamental to protecting participants and elevating the integrity of research and its value to society (Madanhire, 2018). Ethical principles assist RECs in identifying and protecting the interests of research participants by promoting the development of high-quality knowledge that may benefit future generations. These ethics principles are articulated in national and international research ethics guidelines. Persons who conduct research in South Africa are expected to adhere to these principles which underscore responsible and ethical research conduct.

Key norms and standards followed by the Human RECs are:

- Relevance and value
- Scientific integrity
- Role-player engagement
- Fair selection of participants
- Fair balance of risks and benefits
- Informed consent
- Ongoing respect for participants, including privacy and confidentiality
- Researcher competence and expertise

Research involving human participation adheres to global ethical standards and laws that stem from fundamental moral research principles like autonomy, beneficence, and justice. The responsibility of safeguarding participants lies with RECs, whose primary role involves assessing research proposals for ethical soundness, clinical significance, and scientific value (Madanhire, 2018). Central to the ethics review of research protocols is the protection of participants. Any shortcomings in the review process could jeopardise the lives and well-being of participants and communities, particularly if the REC fails to thoroughly evaluate the ethical and scientific dimensions of research protocols.

Under the Health Research Ethics Committee (HREC), you may find subcommittees or specialised committees such as Biomedical Research Ethics Committees (Biomedical RECs) research using human or animal subjects under the NDoH (2024) and Environmental Research

Ethics Committees (Environmental RECs) which are not governed by the NHREC or DoH guidelines but fall under the Department of Environment Fisheries and Forestry (DEFF).

Biomedical Research Ethics Committees (Biomedical RECs) focus specifically on research involving human participants in biomedical studies. Their primary role is to ensure that research involving medical interventions or health-related studies is conducted ethically, safeguarding the rights and welfare of participants.

On the other hand, Environmental Research Ethics Committees (Environmental RECs) address ethical considerations related to research that affects the environment and may involve human participants indirectly. They evaluate the potential impact of research on ecosystems and communities, ensuring that environmental factors are considered in the ethical review process.

2.7.2 *Animal Research Ethics*

Animal research involves animal participants. An animal is defined as a live, sentient non-human vertebrate (including eggs, fetuses, and embryos of fish, amphibians, reptiles, birds and mammals, and encompassing domestic animals, purpose-bred animals, farm animals and wildlife) and higher invertebrates (SANS, 2021). The ethical review of proposed animal experiments is based upon the acceptance by the University that non-human animals are organisms fully worthy of moral concern. As such, their interests must be protected as far as possible in their use for the advancement of biological knowledge and for the promotion of the health and welfare of animals and humans and the protection of the environment (Manciocco et al., 2009).

According to the South Africa Animal Protection Act 71 of 1962, in the use of animals for research, teaching, and testing, animal interests obligate scientists and educators to:

- not allow animals to be used for research and/or to be killed for trivial, irrational, unjustified, or inappropriate reasons.
- permit animals to live, reproduce and grow under conditions that are comfortable and reasonably natural to their species.
- keep animals free from disease, parasitism, injury, and pain by prevention, rapid diagnosis, and treatment.

- enable animals to express normal behaviour through providing as far as possible sufficient space and proper facilities in which to live in the company of the animal's kind, recognising the inherently social nature and hence the necessity of a social relationship for many species.
- protect animals from fear, deprivation, stress, distress, and pain by ensuring that their living conditions, handling, and treatment will be such that it will either minimise or eliminate the causation of these states upon those animals which are used for research, teaching, and testing.
- not unnecessarily repeat animal experiments the outcome of which is already known or is predictable.

According to the Performing Animals Protection Act 24 of 1935, 38, 4 Rs are important to consider when researching animal use:

- *Replacement* of animals with non-sentient research models or systems, i.e. researchers should strive to avoid the use of animals if alternative methods can yield the data they need.
- *Reduction* of the numbers of animals in experiments by design strategies that facilitate the use of the smallest number that will allow valid information to be obtained from the study and that will not be implemented at the expense of greater suffering of individual animals.
- *Refinement* of animal sourcing, animal care practices, and experimental procedures are to be adopted to minimise or remove physical and psychological distress and when this is not avoidable to counter those effects using ataractics (tranquillisers), neuroleptics (dissociative agents), anaesthetics, analgesics and other effective strategies.
- *Responsibility* of everyone using animals, whether for experimentation, testing diagnosis, teaching or sourcing of tissues or body fluids. Such people are responsible in their capacity for assuring that the animals they use are afforded the highest levels of welfare and protection from abuse and violations of the interests accorded to them.

Animals have made essential contributions to human and veterinary medical progress. Research with animals has improved treatments for patients living with many illnesses such as depression, Parkinson's and many other diseases. It is important for the benefit of society;

Careful considerations should be made following ethical guidelines when animal research is being conducted.

2.7.3 Human and Animal Research Ethics Clearance: Key Role Players

Human and Animal Research Ethics Committees (HRECs and ARECs) are integral components of the broader ethical clearance system that governs research practices. Understanding the ethical clearance process requires recognising the essential role played by various stakeholders involved in its operation. These key role players include not only the committees themselves but also researchers, institutional administrators, and community representatives. Each group contributes unique perspectives and expertise that are vital for ensuring that ethical standards are met throughout the research process. Researchers rely on the guidance of HRECs and ARECs to navigate complex ethical considerations related to human and animal subjects, while institutional administrators facilitate the necessary logistical support and resources for ethical reviews. Community representatives provide invaluable insights into local cultural and ethical norms, ensuring that research practices are respectful and aligned with community values. By acknowledging the collaborative nature of these relationships, we can better appreciate how they collectively uphold the integrity of research and contribute to the ethical treatment of participants and subjects alike. Diagram 2.2 shows how these role players align and link to the ethical clearance process:

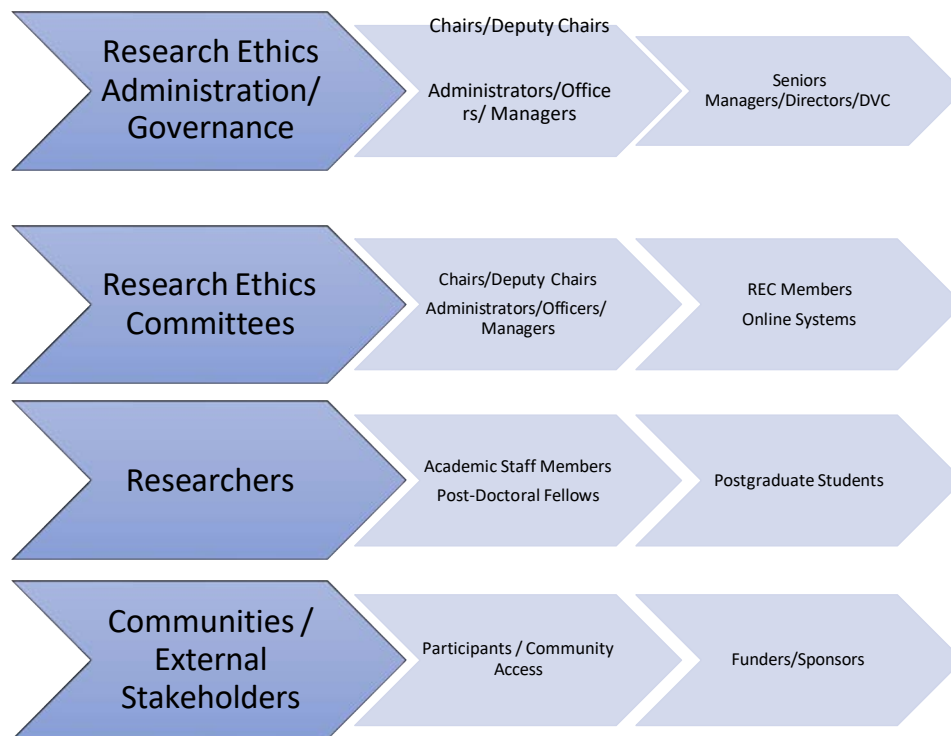


Figure 2.2: Key role players in the ethical clearance process.

The codes, policies, and ways of thinking mentioned in the literature cannot cover every situation; there are conflicts that require open debate and deliberation. Hence it requires the researcher to have a deep understanding of the underlying principles, making education in research ethics important. Such training tests and evaluates understanding of research ethics and its application to different ways of doing right depending on various kinds of research. Research ethics, thus, cannot be considered a blanket approach when it comes to reviewing, and independent and contextual review is required.

This is particularly pertinent when qualitative methodologies are employed, as the primary goal is to authentically represent the participants' experiences and voices within the research. It is essential to consider the roles of both the ethics committee and the researcher in relation to the research participants. Investigating the potential misunderstandings between these parties can shed light on their differing perspectives and interpretations of the ethical process. This triadic relationship comprising the ethics committee, the researcher, and the participants highlights the need for clearer communication and collaboration. Such an exploration could facilitate a more effective partnership between researchers and ethics committees, ultimately enhancing the ethics process and improving the quality of doctoral-level clinical research (Brindley et al., 2020). While there is a substantial body of literature addressing ethical principles, guidance,

and the perspectives of ethics committees on research ethics processes, there remains a significant gap in understanding the challenges faced by postgraduate students as they navigate these processes. Addressing this gap could provide valuable insights into their experiences, thereby fostering a more supportive environment for emerging researchers.

2.8 Challenges Faced by Postgraduate Students

The processes involved in obtaining research ethical clearance significantly impact postgraduate students, many of whom are new to these procedures and experiences. Supervisors are expected to take the lead in guiding their postgraduate students through the ethical clearance processes. According to Makola and Ntoyanto-Tyatyansti (2023), while students receive general guidance from their supervisors such as encouragement to adhere to research ethics, the information provided is often lacking in detail.

This highlights the need for educational programs, such as short courses and workshops, that teach research ethics comprehensively, covering both procedural aspects and integrity, prior to students engaging with the ethical clearance process. The need is for comprehensive training programs that not only cover the ethical clearance processes but also address the broader implications of ethical research practices for postgraduate students. This could include topics like cultural sensitivity, data privacy, and the ethical treatment of vulnerable populations.

Research Ethics Committees (RECs) may encourage support where experienced researchers or REC members provide ongoing support and advice to postgraduate students throughout the ethical clearance process by being available with transparent communication (Davies, 2020). This could reduce feelings of isolation and confusion among the students. Creating peer support networks among postgraduate students through communities of practice or social societies could be a valuable support mechanism. Such networks could facilitate knowledge sharing and discussions about navigating the ethical clearance process, thereby empowering students to support one another.

2.9 Conclusion

As indicated in this brief review of the literature, the ethics clearance process can be a cumbersome exercise which involves many people with various intentions. While virtually all academics see a need for subjecting research studies to ethical review, some feel the process is rather long and at times unclear (REF). This chapter reviewed the literature aligned with the study's objectives and research question. Through this exploration, the literature showed the importance of ethical clearance processes in research, with a strong need to explore the balance of how these processes are implemented for the benefit of the research conducted and consideration to researchers. While various shocking examples of unethical research in Africa and beyond make clear the need for an ethical clearance process, the literature also raised concerns about bureaucratisation, compliance and mistrust. A number of international ethical research frameworks and codes of conduct indicate that this is a global concern. The forthcoming methodology chapter details how these insights inform the research process and presents the methodologies adopted in this study.

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

It is essential to have a sound research plan since it serves as a connection between the initial research questions and the study's conclusions (Creswell, 2013). According to Rudolph (2015), Leedy & Ormrod (2015) a qualitative approach is one that is used in order to get an understanding of how people perceive and experience an event or phenomenon. It is in-depth research that focuses on feelings and emotions, and it is often employed when there is little information available on a subject. When doing qualitative research, interviewing participants, conducting case studies, or holding focus groups with open-ended questions are common methods for gaining insight into people's perspectives on a subject. Therefore, the study does not attempt to identify an objective truth that can be generalised and replicated. Nor does the study attempt to identify the causal mechanisms from which the academics' experiences emerge. Instead, the study provides a provisional and partial depiction of the varied ways in which academics experience the ethical clearance process. This necessity is influenced by my own experiences and assumptions.

This research adopted a qualitative method which involved collecting, analysing, and integrating methodologies (e.g., semi-structured interviews and document analysis). Qualitative research is implemented in cases where a relationship between collected data and observation is established based on coding and identification of data (Cohen et al., 2018). According to Creswell (2013), a qualitative research method uncovers a target audience's behaviour and its connection to a particular topic or issue. It uses in-depth analysis of small groups of people to build theories. The results of qualitative research are not predictive but descriptive. The danger of the 'double hermeneutic' arises in my approach in that the study is my own interpretation of the academics' interpretation of the ethical clearance process. I have endeavoured to balance this in three main ways. Firstly, I read widely on ethics and ethical clearance processes and came to understand the debates and deliberations available in the literature. Secondly, I have engaged in reflexivity guided through conversations with my supervisors, whereby I reflected on how my own assumptions and experiences could colour my interpretations of the data.

Having two supervisors enriched this process as I had two sets of readers to challenge my own interpretations. I present my tentative findings in the next chapter.

It is impractical to attempt to anonymize the research site by withholding the university's name because the institution's identity can be readily inferred from the context and details provided in the study, such as quotes from institutional policy. Attempting to conceal the university's name would be disingenuous given how easy it is for the reader to identify. Anonymising the institution in this case would thus be an instance where a process is followed for the purposes of compliance with common processes rather than selecting processes that are indeed ethical. Importantly, this study did not seek to point out issues pertaining only to the institutional study site, instead it selected the study site for pragmatic reasons in order to reach findings that would be useful for deliberations about ethics in research and ethical clearance processes at any university in South Africa or beyond.

This research study focused on seasoned academic staff members who have experienced ethics review and had at least five to ten years of experience working with ethical clearance processes on their own research or through their postgraduate supervision. The selection was across all faculties.

This methodology chapter provides an overview of the case study approach used in this research. It details the process of data collection through interviews, highlighting how insights were gathered from participants. The chapter outlines the analytical methods employed, specifically thematic analysis, which was facilitated using NVivo software to identify and interpret key themes within the data.

3.2 Case Study

The study was conducted at Rhodes University in the Eastern Cape province, South Africa. Most of the studies in the context of ethics in Higher Education in South Africa have focused on the standards and the protocols for conducting ethical research focusing on health-related research. It is against this background that in this study, I explore the experiences of academics in the research ethical clearance process at this one university. One of the primary expectations of the study is that its contributions will highlight the need for appropriate measures to be taken in improving research ethics review processes at all research levels, including by academic staff members, postdoctoral fellows, postgraduate students, and the university community.

Concerns about research ethics processes arise from arguments in favour of research productivity and academic freedom. While the data comprises the views of just a sample of participants within the case of RU, the aim is to elucidate understanding of ethical clearance processes more generally.

Cohen et al. (2018) define a case study as a specific instance that is frequently designed to illustrate a more general principle. A case study is a systematic approach taken to look at events, gather data, analyse information and report findings with the end goal of describing the case under investigation as fully as possible (Demetriou, Kyriakides & Avraamidou, 2003). It allows a researcher to examine issues in a great deal of depth rather than looking at multiple instances superficially.

A case study is thus deemed appropriate in this study because the main aim is to obtain in-depth information from academics at the selected university by looking at their research ethics insights, experiences, perspectives, and attitudes. The selected university in this case study, Rhodes University (RU), is a research-intensive university with over 15 externally funded research centres. My unit of analysis focused on the ethics application experiences, ethical research experiences, ethics review, research experiences, research participation, and perspectives on the data collection. The Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) recently confirmed that Rhodes University's research outputs went up by 15.6% between 2015 & 2016. This announcement came soon after the publication of Rhodes University's 2017 research report. According to the RU enrolment targets from 2020 to 2025, it has been recorded that the number of postgraduate students registered for 2024 was 2779, which shows a high throughput.

Case studies serve as examples of a broader phenomenon. In this instance, RU is the case under scrutiny regarding ethical clearance process in universities. As a case study, the finding cannot simply be generalised beyond the borders of this case but should highlight issues of concern.

3.3 The Selection of the Study Participants

3.3.1 Sampling

This research utilised a sampling method called purposive sampling since it is suitable for the subject matter of the investigation. Cohen et al. (2018) define sampling as a process of defining the population on which the researcher will focus and indicating how selection was made

regarding this population. In this study, purposive sampling was used to identify participants. In purposive sampling, the sample is chosen for a particular purpose (Cohen et al., 2018). The purposeful selection of participants based on their attributes is also referred to as the “judgement sampling” approach (Etikan & Bala, 2017). Unlike other techniques, this technique does not need a certain number of participants or a predetermined theory to be used. To put it another way, a researcher chooses what information is needed and then seeks out individuals who have that expertise or experience and are ready to provide it (Bernard, 2011).

Surveying the whole population of RU academics would be impossible; thus, purposive sampling would provide a viable alternative to a census. Sampling is useful when the cost of surveying the complete population is too expensive and when time restrictions make it impossible to survey the whole population (Mpofu, 2021). The purposive sampling for this study entailed selecting 15 researchers who were sampled from the university community. The participants were sampled based on five to ten years of conducting research, supervising student research and their exposure to the research ethics application process from departmental to institutional levels.

According to Sim et al. (2018), the sample size for qualitative research typically ranges from 4 to 35. The reason for sampling 15 participants in this study from the six different faculties was to ensure that should some of them withdraw from the study, I would still be able to get quality and reliable data from the remaining participants. The spread of participants from across the university community was to ensure an overview of ethical clearance experiences in different fields of study.

3.3.2 Selection of Participants

The portion of the overall population that was selected for the purpose of conducting research is referred to as the sample population, while the term “target population” refers to the group of interest that the researcher hopes to understand and that satisfies a certain set of predetermined criteria (Skovdal & Cornish, 2015). In this study, the target population was RU researchers, and 15 academic staff members from one university were interviewed. They are also involved in postgraduate student supervision. Keeping with the anonymity of the participants, the interviewees were represented with an assigned code. This assisted the researcher in easily recognising the participants and their responses, while maintaining confidentiality and anonymity for ethical considerations. The participants in this study had

between 5 and 10 years of experience in the field of research, including supervision, publication and using ethics review processes.

The participants were chosen across all faculties, with a selection of two to three staff members for each faculty. An email was written to each potential participant that was identified according to the selection criteria mentioned above. The email inviting participants included important attachments namely an informed consent form, the ethics approval letter and the interview schedule. Out of 20 approached, only 16 agreed to participate, and 15 were actually interviewed.

3.4 Data Collection

Primary data collection methods were utilised in this study. Primary data are collected for the first time specifically for the research being reported on (Kothari, 2004). In order to accomplish the basic goals of the research study, the primary data for this study were gathered via interviews. South African constitutional documents and national policies and frameworks were used for guidance in this study. Rhodes University policies and standard operating procedures (SOPs) that govern the research ethical clearance review process were consulted. Policies and guidelines that were consulted are based on the international laws and practices applied to the African context. There are many examples of ethical dilemmas in the African continent which touch more on social sciences.

3.4.1 Semi-structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews offer a flexible approach, combining pre-determined questions with the opportunity for open-ended exploration. This method allows researchers to gather in-depth information while adapting to individual responses (Adams, 2015). The flexibility inherent in semi-structured interviews facilitates a more conversational flow, encouraging participants to elaborate on their experiences and perspectives. This approach was chosen in this study to gain rich insights into academics' experiences with the research ethical clearance process. The use of semi-structured interviews allows for a deeper understanding of the complexities and challenges faced by researchers during this process. It was necessary to put a lot of consideration into the process of designing interview schedules in order to achieve the objectives of the study and find answers to the research questions (Kara, 2017). The participants were emailed open-ended questions before the interview so that they could clarify and expand on their thoughts about the topic at hand. A virtual platform was used for interview

sessions, which was an advantage as this was flexible for the participants regarding their availability in suitable timeslots. Zoom was the virtual platform used where the sessions were recorded during the one-hour long interviews and follow-up questions were shared for a more detailed experience to be captured.

One advantage of semi-structured interviews is that they enable the researcher to obtain detailed and in-depth answers from participants by posing probes, unlike structured interviews that normally follow fixed major questions with no follow-ups (Adhabi & Anozie, 2017). In the study, individual interviews were conducted with a sample of 15 participants. The Research Office's past research report (2021/2022) was used as data source to identify both the top 30 researchers/academics from 2014 to 2019 across faculties. A positive understanding was established with the participants as to the benefits of the study for researchers in the institution, as well as the current researcher's positionality and the anonymity of interviewees. It was made very clear that participation was voluntary, which was particularly important to do given my own position during these interviews. All interviews were voice recorded on zoom and transcribed to allow for member checking and participant validation after the interview. During the transcribing of data, codes were used to ensure the anonymity of participants so that they are not identified. This was done to ensure the validity, credibility and trustworthiness of data.

In Chapter 4, I discuss the findings from the interviews, beginning with the response rates of chosen participants and moving to the emerging themes from the participants' answers to questions posed to them. Participants' own voices feature prominently in the description of the themes.

The interview questions used were framed to elicit data from participants (see Appendix A). The data gathered from the interviews were transcribed and analysed qualitatively, with the aid of NVivo 12 software. The researcher opted to use thematic analysis (via NVivo) in this study because it is methodical, adaptable and can fine-tune data into convenient themes and subthemes, as mentioned in the previous chapter. The content and thematic analysis that I performed on the interview manuscripts yielded fourteen themes discussed below. It will be found that there are overlaps between some of the themes.

The below diagram shows the number of repeated words that came out during data analysis using NVIVO as words that form patterns in a word cloud.

Data analysis is an integral part of a research project, and it is a process of working with the gathered data to make meaning (Cohen et al., 2018). According to Connelly and Peltzer (2016), a thematic analysis is a layered analysis that is useful for comparing viewpoints and experiences (information about which can be gathered through semi-structured interviews). I closely examined the data to identify common themes, topics, ideas and patterns of meaning that come up repeatedly, particularly in the light of issues raised in the literature on ethics in research and ethical clearance processes. This method is crucial as it can emphasise both organisation and a rich description of the data set and provide an informed interpretation of meaning. NVivo version 12 was used for data analysis in this study with table coding. As mentioned in Chapter 1, the researcher has extensive experience in working with research ethics processes in institutions of higher education and there could have been a conflict of ideas. In order not to inflict that experience, the method of thematic analysis was envisaged to limit such conflict.

McLeod (2011) described thematic analysis concisely as a method seeking to uncover patterns of meaning in participants accounts of experience. Here the words “uncover”, “pattern” and “meaning” point to the purpose of thematic analysis: it is a method applied to uncover and interpret meaning, particularly meaningful patterns. The idea of uncovering meanings leads to existential questions about their status. In this study, I took at face value the participants accounts and the accounts of academics’ experiences on research ethical clearance processes. This means I suspended judgment on how accurately they represented what was going on when dealing with the ethical process because I have no tools or justifying knowledge to critically examine this question. But taking them at face value means that I assigned trustworthiness to their experience. I was thus more interested in how they described their experiences than any ‘objective’ notion of truth. However, my thematic analysis combines different accounts and thus constructs a new context for each account. It creates meaning in the hermeneutic sense, especially in the relationships and links between individual accounts. The themes the analysis identified are generated in this new comparative context.

3.6 Limitations of the Study

During the interviews, many participants deviated from the questions and focused on the effects of South Africa’s Protection of Personal Information Act (POPIA) which was promulgated on July 1, 2020, and implemented on July 1, 2021. Alongside conversations about

POPIA in the data collection, Covid-19 was also repeatedly raised despite not being a central concern of the study. This is not surprising, given that Covid-19 has changed the way we do almost everything. There was not much significant hope this was temporary at the time, but questions arose as to how we could carry out research that ensures the safety of the participants and researchers above all else.

Lockdowns and restrictions resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic have produced several ethical challenges for research that should be considered carefully (Newman et al., 2021). These are some of the challenges the participants alluded to when they were being interviewed and which they believed would cause further delays in ethical clearance processes. For example, obtaining informed written consent using remote technologies can be problematic when you are not able to obtain a physical signature or discuss the process face to face. To overcome this, consent forms could be sent, discussed, and returned via email. Oral consent could be considered, particularly if it's possible to record it. This would need to be outlined during the ethical clearance process.

Participating in online research remotely has been found to blur the participants' understanding of the setting, in some circumstances making them 'forget' the research context within which the conversation is taking place, particularly when people are inside their own homes (Hensen et al., 2021). While this offers rich data-gathering opportunities, it also makes it more important to remind them that they are being interviewed and/or recorded. Some research participants admitted surprise about how open they were during online interviews rather than in a more formal face-to-face setting. There was also privacy issues related to participants and facilitators carrying out research from within their homes or potentially public spaces.

3.7 Quality and Ethics

The study adheres to the latest version of the Declaration of Helsinki (2013) and the Rhodes University ethics policy on human participants. Therefore, I must discuss the major ethical issues that posed a potential risk when conducting this study. Equally, it is important that I discuss the ethical principles and strategies employed to address my positionality, and ensure quality, validity and credibility throughout this study.

Each participant was given the opportunity to read and sign a letter of informed consent indicating their desire to engage in the research of their own free choice. The letter described the purpose of the research, each participant's ability to withdraw and offered a guarantee of anonymity (see Appendix C). The information obtained during the interview was anonymised, and a number, such as "RU001" was allocated to each person who took part in the study. The Protection of Personal Information Act, which was passed in 2021, was followed by the researcher. Earlier studies have shown that qualitative research is biased as it is based on the researcher's own interpretation. Therefore, demonstrating reliability and validity of the present case is important (Golafshani, 2003). Brick (2011) highlights that the researcher must ensure that the findings of the study are actual findings, not the impression of the researcher. The researcher needs to ensure that the data gathering tools are systematic, credible and transparent (Bertram & Christiansen, 2014). I, therefore, employed a manual data coding table that derived themes and quotes from the data collected after also using the NVIVO. This was done to align what was said to the correct theme for data validity and credibility. The proposal for this study was reviewed by the university research ethics committee and received an ethical clearance certificate (see Appendix D).

3.8 Positionality

Relationships between the researcher and participants are not the same in terms of power (Cohen et al., 2018). It is often a case of those with more power to often research those with less power. As an ethics administrator at the time of data collection, I had an awareness of uneven power relations between the researcher and participants, although a senior professor or academic staff member could hold more power than the researcher. It was acknowledged that the researcher's position at work could be a potential risk to the study due to conflict as the ethics administrator at the selected institution and a colleague to the academic staff members who are the research participants. This could have influenced the way participants interact with the researcher during the research process. The selection of experienced academic staff members was a positive element of the study as participants were more comfortable and content with their experience and openly shared their views during the interview which was also a learning experience for the researcher.

As a researcher, I also examined my position in this study. Positionality refers to our self-awareness, encompassing our perception of ourselves, our identity, and the unique

contributions we bring to our research endeavours (Njeri, 2021). The statement on positionality within publications serves as a concise representation of this self-awareness, emphasising how our individual essence has influenced the trajectory and outcomes of our research (Brown, 2022). The researcher's positionality in this study is significant as I am a role player in the ethical clearance process, as a policy implementer, process overseer, research integrity promoter and compliance officer. I positioned myself as a co-learner, given my experience in this study, as the way of improving the ethics review process at the institution and for career growth. All information was managed strictly professionally and confidentially, saved in a Google drive that was only accessible to supervisors and the researcher. The names of participants were not recorded anywhere, and no one was able to connect to the answers given to any individuals.

As a researcher doing this research, as I am also an administrator in ethics policy implementation, I am often guilty of thinking that ensuring that researchers comply with filling in forms and maintaining what external regulatory bodies (NHREC) require means that ethical research will result. As this is successfully/painfully done, it makes me feel respected in the field by university management, as I am the best in the field or employee of the month. However, through this research I have realised that I have been operating narrowly.

3.9 Gatekeeper Permission

Securing access to participants stands as a critical element in qualitative research methodologies. Researchers often depend on gatekeepers to facilitate entry into study sites and engage with the various stakeholders within those communities. Gatekeepers play a pivotal role in not only granting researchers permission to approach potential participants but also in aiding in the dissemination of information about the study. Additionally, gatekeepers assist in identifying suitable meeting spots and interview venues, ensuring a conducive environment for data collection and participant engagement throughout the research process (Dahlke & Stahlke, 2020).

According to the institution ethics policy at Rhodes University, when collecting data from employees, the researcher requires permission from the Director, Human Resources before any data collection can commence. As mentioned in the above discussion in this chapter, data was collected from academic staff members. A formal letter was sent to the Director, Human

Resources for permission to conduct interviews. Appendix B is a template letter sent to the human resources director, and approved by the Rhodes University, Faculty of Education, Human Ethics Committee. In addition, I received provisional approval pending a gatekeeper letter from the institution research ethics committee to interview academic staff members. A letter of permission or gatekeeper approval was obtained through the office of the Human Resources Director. The researcher was later granted full approval to start with data collection from the university research ethics committee (see Appendix E). This letter of permission allows the researcher to interview employees from the university with a full ethical clearance certificate.

3.10 Research Data Management

The increasing demand for transparency and integrity in making data accessible for scrutiny appears to strengthen scientific integrity. However, these principles do not always consider the importance of maintaining social relationships within research (Pels et al., 2018). The new 2024 guidelines from the National Department of Health (NDoH) emphasise research data management as an essential ethical responsibility. This approach helps ensure the proper handling of research materials that arise from collaborative relationships built on co-production and mutual trust during data collection. This supports communities, as laypersons often cannot assess the reliability of the data themselves. Therefore, providing debriefing to participants after data collection is also crucial and was done in this study.

To maintain confidentiality, interview transcripts were anonymised so that all identifiable information was removed. Transcripts and video recordings were stored in separate password-protected files on a Gmail drive and all audio-recordings were deleted from the virtual platform (Zoom) once they had been uploaded securely onto the drive. Transcription of the video recordings was conducted solely by the researcher and each participant was assigned a reference code during the data collection and analysis processes. Participant reference codes were stored in a separate password-protected file on a password protected drive. Participants were informed during the interview that only the researcher and their supervisors would have access to all the transcripts during the data analysis. They were also advised that extracts from the transcripts may be used in the write-up of the research but that these would be anonymised to prevent identification. With the supervisor's support, the researcher will disseminate findings to the participants via a soft copy thesis. The data will be stored for a minimum of two to five years after the research has been published as per the university data storage standard operating procedure. The results will be

shared with the participants involved in the study to ensure that their feedback was correctly captured and analysed through this study.

3.11 Trustworthiness, Reliability, and Validity

Trustworthiness, reliability, and validity are important in qualitative research as they ensure the credibility and dependability of findings. Although originating in quantitative research paradigms, trustworthiness, adapted from concepts like validity and reliability, has become a cornerstone in qualitative research (Coleman, 2022). In this study it helped me as researcher to address the question of how I can determine the truthfulness of my research findings. This was particularly relevant in presenting subjective experiences of the selected academic researchers and interpretations of the data.

Reliability, in its traditional sense, refers to the consistency of a measurement instrument. A reliable instrument yields similar results under consistent conditions (Noble & Smith, 2015). Directly applying this concept to qualitative research can be challenging, and the principle of dependability serves a similar purpose. Dependability focuses on the stability of the data and findings over time and across different researchers (Anney, 2014). It asks whether the findings would be consistent if the study were replicated with similar participants and context. On the other hand, credibility, akin to validity, focuses on the accuracy and plausibility of the interpretations and findings (Cypress, 2017). It addresses whether the findings resonate with the participants' experiences and perspectives.

In this study, trustworthiness was addressed through several strategies. I prolonged engagement with participants through semi-structured interviews, which allowed for a deeper understanding of their experiences and perspectives and enhanced the credibility of the findings. I also did member checking where participants reviewed the interview transcripts and interpretations and ensured that my understanding aligned with their experiences. I also engaged in reflexivity, acknowledging my biases and assumptions, contributing to the research process's transparency and trustworthiness. All these strategies supported this study to ensure its findings' trustworthiness, reliability, and validity, providing a credible and dependable account of academics' experiences with the research ethical clearance process.

3.12 Conclusion

This chapter presented a comprehensive explanation of the research approach and methodologies employed in this study. It offered a detailed roadmap of the data collection methods, outlining the specific techniques and procedures used to gather information. The chapter also explored the thematic analysis approach, tracing its development and demonstrating its practical application within the research framework. This chapter establishes a robust foundation for the subsequent data collection and analysis phases by detailing the research design, the sampling strategy, the specific data collection techniques, and the chosen analytical methodology. This rigorous methodological approach ensures the reliability and validity of the findings. The following chapter will present the key themes identified through this analysis, exploring the insights they reveal.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I present the findings derived from the participants' discussions regarding the various processes and procedures outlined in the previous chapter. The literature reviewed highlights the critical importance of research ethics processes, which are recognised and upheld both nationally and internationally. However, there remain significant gaps in understanding how researchers effectively introduce and implement these processes. The participants in this study were anticipated to possess a comprehensive understanding of the principles and procedures associated with ethical clearance processes at Rhodes University. This familiarity was essential for them to provide informed and insightful perspectives on the regulations governing ethical research practices. The information obtained during the interview was anonymised, and a number, such as "RU001" or "FED001," was allocated to each person who took part in the study.

4.2 Technical Compliance

Across the data, it was clear that for many participants, completing the ethical clearance processes was a matter of technical compliance. While adhering to ethical clearance processes is vital, this often emerged in the data as technical compliance aimed solely at obtaining the ethics approval letter, rather than fostering a deep engagement with the ethical research design or reflecting on potential ethical issues that may arise during the research process. When asked to express their understanding of ethical process for research, FED 001 expressed:

"The ethics review and application process focus on what is required by law with documentation rather than a balanced approach." FED001

This perspective highlights a prevalent sentiment among participants regarding the nature of the ethical clearance process. There was a notable lack of understanding about why the ethics process is important and necessary. FED001 further suggested that ethical determinations are

based solely on submitted documents rather than on the researcher's ethical understanding or commitment to research integrity.

The findings indicate that the emphasis on compliance can hinder meaningful discussions about ethics in research. As the focus increasingly shifts toward fulfilling compliance requirements for ethical clearance, the potential for in-depth conversations about ethical behaviour diminishes. This concern aligns with existing literature, which argues that a compliance-driven approach can lead to a superficial understanding of ethics (Rawnsley, 2014). By framing ethical behaviour primarily as a matter of "ethical clearance," the responsibility for ethical conduct becomes relegated to the ethics office, potentially undermining the broader objective of fostering a culture of integrity within the research community. This finding suggests the need for a more holistic approach to ethical training and engagement in research processes.

4.2.1 The Neoliberal University - Compliance to Quality Assurance Processes

During the interview one participant pointed out the necessity of obtaining clearance forms for publication, recognising the requirement as a technical but essential step in the process. The participant emphasised the significance of ethical clearance for publishing in reputable journals, suggesting that universities without an ethical application process might face challenges in getting their researchers' work published.

"You know we all know this, but I think it's worth mentioning because without that we won't be able to publish in good journals and therefore that that in itself is a major benefit I know of some universities even in South Africa who don't even have ethical application processes yet. And I can't really see how those researchers will find it easy to publish anything." (FS001)

Increasingly, journals are calling on academics to include evidence of ethical clearance in their submissions. This raises the question as to whether these editors are wanting a demonstration that the research has been undertaken ethically or whether this is a case of the journal attempting to reduce risk by ensuring that some other body takes accountability for ethical issues. The ethical clearance process has become tied to the commodity of the publication in today's 'publish or perish' culture. This interviewee sees the ethical clearance process as part of the larger process of getting a publication. Getting publications is increasingly seen as the key currency for individual academics and for universities.

The data showing that ethical clearance was at times understood as a requirement of technical compliance (often fairly divorced from ethical deliberations) needs to be considered within the wider context of the neoliberal university where mechanisms of regulation have become pervasive. From compliance to quality assurance processes to compliance with performance management processes, there are enormous spaces where compliance is built into the day-to-day activities of academics. According to Le Grange (2019) the problem with ethical regulation in the neoliberal university is that it is codified and imposed from the outside through mechanisms of regulation.

4.2.2 Perception of the Ethics Committee

The results reveal that in the relationship between supervisors and their students, there is a negative perception of the ethics review through research ethics committees. This is evidenced through the participants' responses on how they discuss the ethics process when they are preparing to apply for ethics approval for the sake of going through it rather than engaging the process.

“I think the ethics committee and ethics processes are not spoken about positively in supervisor, student relationships. I’ve heard many conversations between supervisors and students where they’re saying, okay, but now how do we get it through? Yes. How do we get it through the ethics committee? Like it’s this barrier rather than just the discourse around it is like, it’s a barrier, it’s a thing that you have to do.” (FSC001)

Participant (FSC001) states that conversations between supervisors and students reflect negative views of the ethics committee, with discussions mainly focused on how to get research through the process rather than emphasising the benefits of ethical research. Some participants portray the ethics committee as a barrier to overcome, creating a sense of frustration for students and researchers.

Research Ethics Committees (RECs) are meant to promote research through their reviews. However, some committees focus more on being compliant with regulatory bodies, both internal and external (NHREC and University management). This is the same argument that the regulatory concerns are more technical than ethically substantive (Posel & Ross, 2014). The research results indicate that RECs must go back to basics and prioritise academic freedom and ethical research more than being compliant or balance the two, as this is perceived to be

an imposing process to researchers that is extremely biased. Geissler (2013) argues that undue technicalities of ethics review are now tied with the actual research process which poses a risk to researchers who fear that a full disclosure would jeopardise their prospects for ethical clearance, compromise the scientific reception of their work, or alarm donors. This again on its own merit is unethical as academic freedom is threatened and researchers harassed which is a clear definition of ethics processes missing the point and derailing from their main objective.

In agreement, another participant (FED002) supported the point that research ethics committees play a role in the ethics process as a barrier and reflect negatively on the postgraduate students. This creates a negative impact on how research ethics process is perceived.

“It’s this barrier that you must break through, which leads to the students have a lot of negative thought around it ... And I know that there was a strong sense of the ethics committee processes being a hindrance.” (FED002)

The above response from participant FED002 on how ethics committees are perceived brings in another sub-theme which focuses on ethics compliance versus the reality of the researcher through what is deemed as law.

4.3 Resistance in the Research Ethics Clearance Process

Some participants argued that ethical clearance processes constrain the research process, are out of touch with the purposes and processes of research and sometimes inhibit the researchers from doing certain research to avoid complex ethical clearance processes.

“I said for us the gatekeeper one in particular was a major problem because remember at the end of the day the ethics process cannot overstep the bounds of constitutional law in other words an ethics process cannot in any way infringe on the constitutional right to freedom of speech for example.” (FCE004)

RECs’ frustration with social sciences researchers’ non-acceptance of university ethics guidelines and differences of opinion between researchers and RECs could lead to conflict (Schreier & Stadler, 1992). Keith-Spiegel et al. (2006) draws attention to the perceived vulnerability of RECs, mentioning that researchers’ hostility towards RECs may be unfair. This vulnerability of RECs is understood as RECs are perceived obstacles to researchers who

depend on their own research productivity to define their professional identities. Although the REC may seem vulnerable in that regard, RECs have become increasingly more authoritative over the years, and as suggested by Eckstein, (2007), they have become the gatekeepers of human research.

One of the participants (FCE004) raised concerns about the ethics process and its limitations in relation to constitutional law. They emphasised the importance of not infringing on individuals' constitutional rights, such as the right to freedom of speech, which could also be defined as academic freedom within the higher education sector and highlighted the potential conflict between ethics and legal boundaries.

Law and ethics are not the same things, although they can overlap. What is demanded or forbidden by law may not be by ethical standards. Research ethics can be defined as norms or conduct that distinguish between acceptable and unacceptable behaviours in research. Research ethics is about the rights and wrongs in research, values of science and expected standards of conduct in science. Most participants felt that most academic researchers use the terms ethics and morality interchangeably as they both have to do with the right or wrongness of an action. The difference between morality and ethics is a crucial consideration. Morality is often seen as a normative concept, whereas ethics defines standards or rules that determine what is "good and bad" for a particular community, group, organisation, or social setting (Biggs, 2009). In the context of this study, this distinction became particularly relevant when navigating the complexities of gatekeeper decisions. By recognising the ethical dimensions of gatekeeper actions, this study was able to better understand their rationales and the implications of their decisions for the research.

During the interviews participant FED002 mentioned the issue of the permission letter, known as the "gatekeeper" letter. A "gatekeeper" is a figure within an organisation or site who possesses authority to deny or allow researchers access to research participants. Gatekeepers, such as school principals, clinic directors, department managers, club leaders, university registrars, community leaders (indunas/chiefs), religious leaders, municipal managers, or programme administrators, can have an understanding of the research site that is inaccessible to ordinary members and be in a position to determine whether or not the research should be carried out. Their informed decisions about allowing or requiring further explanations for the choice of site can provide valuable context and nuance to the research. By engaging with gatekeepers and acknowledging their insights, researchers can gain a more comprehensive

understanding of the research site and its complexities.

Compliance implementation can be perceived as both beneficial and hindering, depending on the researcher's engagement with the process. The participants express frustration and confusion about the need for ethical clearance for certain research activities.

"Maybe there needs to be a dedicated sort of office or officer within the registrar's division, or a closer link between ethics committee and the registrar's division that makes that process happen. So maybe, maybe some sort of liaison or oversight from ethics committee to registrar's division, just to say, look, these are the things that have been sent to you. What is the process? How long it will take? Just to make sure that there aren't those big bottlenecks or backlogs that end up frustrating researchers." (FHSS002)

Participant FHSS02 suggested the possibility of empowering the ethics committee, particularly for student projects, to serve as gatekeepers under the oversight of the registrar's division. They noted that this arrangement could expedite the process and provide better support for researchers. The participant also proposed the need for a closer link or liaison between the ethics committee and the registrar's division to prevent bottlenecks or backlogs that could frustrate researchers.

Through the data presented, it has been clear that regulatory bodies have been the focus of institutional RECs in terms of compliance. RECs have been worried about ticking boxes and been seen as heroes in getting research in check or in line, however the reality of researchers and their experience in ethics processes have been a nightmare. Their voices are not being heard, especially researchers from social sciences backgrounds, which has a specific disciplinary nature. Boden, Epstein & Latimer, (2009) support this discussion by stating that most university-based researchers working with human subjects will have experienced that ethics is now a highly regulated impacting on research, academic freedom and development. The next theme will be looking at the disciplinary nature of research ethics. The technical compliance understanding was acknowledged by most participants to be related to the medical underpinnings of ethical clearance which made it less relevant to some kinds of research.

4.4 The Disciplinary Nature of Ethics

As participants shared their insights, it became clear that their experiences engaging with research ethics that emanated from the medical discipline significantly informed their

understanding of ethical practices and the challenges they face in navigating these complexities in the research ethical clearance processes.

“I think there was one argument where they were saying this thing was designed from a medical perspective or some kind of medical perspective. Yes. But now must cover different disciplines and encompass different disciplines.” (FCM001)

The response above from FCM001 shares similar sentiments from other scholars such as Barrow et al., (2017) who note that research ethics was derived from medical research misconduct (see Chapter 2). Participant FCM001’s response suggests that most ethical processes in HEIs impose medical protocols in review of social sciences research which causes frustrations and confusion. Carniel et al. (2022) argues that there is no single discipline that forms overall ethics at a global level and ethical thinking, and that the practice of reviewing research for ethical clearance sits at a significant disciplinary-paradigmatic intersection.

FCM001 highlighted the challenge of understanding the policies that guide the ethics aspect across different disciplines. FCM001 noted that while the policies may have been initially designed from a medical perspective, they need to be adaptable and inclusive of various disciplines. FCM001 emphasised the importance of ensuring that each discipline understands its space within the ethics process and how its research aligns with the code of conduct governed by national legislation.

4.4.1 Imposing the Medical Model on Social Sciences

Participant FHSS003, from a social sciences discipline expressed concern about a medical model being imposed on all faculties and departments at Rhodes University. They believed that this model was not suitable for disciplines like sociology, politics, or anthropology, as it was more applicable to disciplines such as psychology due to its connection to the medical profession. FHSS003 emphasised the need for a more discipline-specific approach to the ethics process.

“Our main concern was that they seemed to be in the initial stages at least a kind of medical model that was being imposed on all the faculties and departments that was really not appropriate in sociology whereas in psychology there is an element of the medical profession. Many of them can register with the medical council in South Africa. So, it was much more applicable to disciplines like psychology than it was to a discipline like sociology or politics or anthropology.” (FHSS003)

As the ethics regulations and guidelines emanate from a medical point of view, social sciences research is affected as the same review style is used for qualitative research. McCormack, et al. (2012) argue that reviews on social science research using medical discipline processes become frustrating for qualitative researchers who must make their research fit multiple, often conflicting, and sometimes inappropriate demands by ethics committees during the review. To help avoid unnecessary delays and inappropriate recommendations, they suggested that sufficient representation of individuals with expertise in diverse qualitative designs and data collection approaches form part of the committee for a fair review. This also came through my findings as a suggestion. This will also prevent researchers from social science backgrounds from being dishonest through the application process. According to Posel & Ross (2014), the requirements of formal ethical clearance are necessary and important, however the process becomes very unruly when tensions arise due to unfair discipline-specific guidelines. The consistent battle between doing what is professionally required and what seems personally necessary to one as an ethical human being also introduces issues of trust and mistrust.

The ethical framework surrounding research has historically been shaped by a blend of discipline-specific codes of conduct and the professional reputation of research scientists through the medical model (Haggerty, 2004). This was also due to the grave abuse of participants during the 1900 on research conducted in Africa and across the world without ethics review, approval and consent. It was previously assumed that the training academics received in research methodologies, ethical considerations, and their hands-on experience in conducting research would provide adequate safeguards against unethical implementation.

4.5 Trust and Mistrust

Participants expressed mixed views on the trustworthiness of the review process but acknowledged its benefits for their studies. One participant (FCM001) acknowledged the existence of political factors that cannot be ignored in this context and that play a negative role in how the systems are being perceived by academic researchers, especially between supervisors and students. In this theme, I will share both sides on trustworthiness of the ethics process as participants draw on their varying experience.

“I think because there is definitely the issue of politics there is that we cannot hide from.”
(FCM001)

The comment from FCM001 suggests that ethical clearance process is often understood as a monitoring process and a vetting of the specific researcher rather than an opportunity to get support and feedback on making ethical choices in the research design and implementation. FCM00 further highlighted a shift in their perception of ethics in research, realising the nuanced nature of ethical considerations and the importance of balancing risks and research outcomes.

Literature suggests general agreement in all guidelines that all research protocols should receive independent ethics review before the commencement of the research, as an unbiased ethics review of research proposals is necessary to minimise any conflict of interest and enhance accountability (Emanuel et al., 2004). These conflicts of interest may affect the way the research is implemented, such as the formulation of research questions, recruitment of participants, and interpretation of data. REC processes must be transparent because this enhances accountability and assures the community that the research is not exploitative (Kara, 2018). Ethics review of research involving humans relies on the trust in researchers to offer their research for review, as well as trust in researchers to adhere, during their research process, to requirements RECs set for them (Kent et al., 2002).

This theme explains the view that ethics processes follow a structured and mechanistic path involving a set query format, namely the ethics review process and the ethics committees. Most participants in this study view this process as a necessary, important step that encourages deeper thinking and reflection on their research approach through reviewer feedback while also raising issues of trust that arise from the process. Some participants (FED001) saw trust as being at the heart of the ethical clearance process but then went on to express that because research is complex and there are multiple ethical considerations, many of which do not have a clear right or wrong, the ethical clearance process can enhance the research.

“I used to think that it was just the senseless thing. Like, what do you mean I’m going to be an unethical researcher? Like I’m an ethical researcher, but obviously you need to demonstrate it. And in demonstrating it, like I’ve come to think very differently about ethics in research.”

Like the fact that there's no black or white, it's all shades of grey and it's all about balancing risk versus what you're going to get out of the research.” (FED001)

The potential damage to reputation, both on an individual and institutional level, was highlighted by FCM002 who mentioned high-profile cases of unethical research that garnered negative attention in the media.

“There is, there've been these high-profile media cases of where research has not been done in an ethical way and people can see: Now, okay, that could really damage your reputation or the reputation of your university. As well as you know just being very unfair to the communities that you've researched in an insensitive or unethical way.” (FCM002)

FED002 shared a negative experience with the ethics review process, expressing distrust in certain reviewers and their lack of thoroughness. They recalled a specific incident where a reviewer did not read a student's proposal and academic politics took centre stage, suggesting a lack of engagement and commitment to the review process.

“In one of our committee review meetings, if my student's research project is reviewed by a certain individual, I know for a fact that we are going to receive very destructive feedback. I remember one time ... one of the reviewers did not read the proposal as we were sitting in a round table, she even changed positions to sit at the back. I could see she was reviewing the proposal as the meeting was in progress. And she was quick to give an outcome that was negative.” (FED002)

Another participant highlighted the positive aspect of obtaining ethical clearance, emphasising the official recognition and institutional sanction it brings to the research. They noted that receiving an ethical clearance letter provides a sense of protection and accountability, as the institution has reviewed and approved the research plan. This participant believed that if any adverse experiences occurred, there would be someone else who would share responsibility and provide support, adding to the perceived institutional protection for the researcher.

“So, if you apply and you go through these processes of getting ethical clearance and you actually get that ethical clearance letter from the committee, it kind of makes it feel official that your research has been recognised by the institution, it's sanctioned by the institution. And

that comes with the kind of idea that there's some degree of protection for you, as the researcher from the institution.” (FHSS002)

It suggests that if the institution has, through a panel of peers, vetted the proposed research, they will support the researcher in the case of things going wrong. This would not protect the researcher who does not follow the process as indicated to the committee or who made clearly unethical or negligent choices, but strictly speaking, ethical clearance should assist in protecting the researcher. Ethical clearance is often simply protecting the institution from institutional reputational risks and does conversely offer protection to researchers if things go wrong. For instance, research reviews conducted by RECs are important and recognised for safeguarding participants. However, they also serve to protect researchers, particularly in fostering integrity, according to Ramrathan et al., (2017). If researchers fail to uphold the integrity of their work according to the research ethics policies set through institutions of higher education, they risk being accused of misconduct if their research is tarnished in any manner.

In Chapter 2, it is mentioned that the relationship between researchers and the research ethics process through ethics committees has been mistrusted. Researchers generally see the ethics process and important in principle, but they also perceive it as antagonistic (Gillam & Guillemin, 2018). This has also been evidenced through the responses from some participants. The understanding of the technical aspects of ethical clearance processes is shaped by the broader context of the neoliberal university. In a neoliberal university, academics and all other staff are understood to be human capital who need to be monitored and managed. This suggests that there is an inherent mistrust built into this kind of institutional culture. The emergence of mistrust as a theme in this study is unsurprising, as the degree of anger expressed by the participants regarding this perceived mistrust indicates a resistance to the neoliberal culture. The rising need for ethics awareness and training is important and is discussed in the next theme.

4.6 Engagement

In stark contrast to the previous findings, some participants expressed the need for more engagement with ethical issues and a closer relationship between nurturing ethical dispositions and training on ethical clearance processes. Participants expressed frustration with the

bureaucratic nature of research ethics processes within their institutions. Participants reported challenges navigating complex protocols, unclear guidelines, and excessive paperwork.

“But I think starting space for researchers is to teach ethics at undergraduate level maybe, it could be a module, it could be something that involves ethics, and research in the higher education space.” (FCM001)

The comments from FCM001 suggest a growing challenge faced by institutions of higher education regarding research ethics and how the process has been introduced. This comment also is supported by Van den Hoonaard (2011), who reports that the number of sociology field theses produced in Canada increased considerably from 1995 to 2004, but that there was a decline in the number of theses that involved fieldwork with research participants. This suggests that postgraduate students increasingly avoided research that involves human participation, a trend that seems to be linked to the institutionalisation of ethics reviews of research involving humans. Sociology as a discipline relies heavily on fieldwork for new contributions, and the field’s theoretical basis would be negatively affected by this decline. This is indirect evidence of a tendency among researchers to avoid studies that need ethical clearance and a strong need for ethical education and awareness.

Some participants in this study perceived ethical clearance as being a space to engage in reflection on ethical issues. And with this theme of engagement were calls for education, etc. so that the university and all role players within it move from technical compliance to engagement. Participants emphasised the need for the promotion of research ethics and integrity to be created as a research culture among both undergraduate and postgraduate students and academic staff members before doing their own research as this promotes academic integrity. This would be done through ethics engagement from the undergraduate level to postgraduate studies through training and education. The engagement would be presented with a clear understanding of why research ethics is important and why its benefits in research are crucial to avoid resistance.

Most participants emphasised the need for comprehensive training and ongoing support for researchers in understanding and navigating research ethics requirements. Participants recommend the provision of workshops or resources to enhance researchers’ knowledge and skills in research ethics.

“I think the ethics training should be mandatory for every academic. I think for me, that’s the thing every academic should undergo ethics training. It does not matter whether reviewer or not.” (FHSS003)

Issues of time constraints and limited turnaround time were also raised. Researchers highlighted time constraints as a significant challenge in adhering to research ethics processes. Participants discussed the difficulty of balancing required ethics approvals with other project timelines and deadlines.

“I think we seem to be able to actually understand maybe what needs to be put on the form. Maybe we can say, we understand what needs to go into the form, but what we may not understand is the basis of why we need to do some of these things. So, it’s something like, we know we need to have the consent form, but do you understand why we need that particular consent form? Do you understand why we need to engage with a gatekeeper so I think it’s just that kind of engagement that probably students will probably need to understand a bit more through training and education.” (FCM001)

It is essential to consider the content and structure of any such training. Rather than presenting official documents such as the constitution, NHREC, university governance, and RECs upfront, it may be more effective to introduce them as supporting documents later in the training process. This would allow participants to engage in longer conversations, debates, and reflections on what it means to conduct research ethically, aligned with each knowledge type. By doing so, we can foster a deeper understanding of research ethics and its practical applications.

Research ethics education should also focus on encouraging more critical reflection on ethical issues in research, acknowledging the ownership and voice of all stakeholders involved, and shaping the research accordingly. This would enable researchers to approach their work with a more nuanced understanding of the ethical implications and responsibilities that come with it. Training on research ethics would lay a foundation for when the researchers engage with the ethics process as it is meant for oversight of research integrity. This awareness of educational drive could also assist in attending to the following sub-themes, which point out aspects to be avoided and could be eliminated. These aspects include the researcher’s perceptions, values, and attitudes toward ethical processes.

4.7 Importance of Research Ethics Processes

Participants' responses demonstrated a strong ethical consciousness and acknowledged the importance of research ethics within their work. While expressing a commitment to conducting ethical research, researchers noted frustration with the perceived inefficiencies of ethics processes.

Participant (FCM001) noted that postgraduate students are seen as emerging researchers who still need to learn more about ethics processes as they might be future researchers who will supervise and conduct research. It's important that they learn to understand why ethics is important to avoid being left with a negative perception.

“So, remember, students are only told that there's the ethics process that you need to do in order to start and complete your data collection. And then the student walks away [with a] kind of perception of ethics process as something to go through for completion, which I think is a problem. Students need to be engaged in terms of why this is important. It's not just the tick box or something that you just do last minute, but we need proper engagement with the student in those things.” (FCM001)

As noted in the above comments from FCM001 and supported by Mamotte and Wassenaar's (2009) study on the experiences of social scientists with their REC, the first of its kind in South Africa. The study found that South African researchers encounter the same issues and frustrations with RECs reviews as their counterparts in developed countries, indicating that the challenges faced in ethics review are not a result of having a less developed system, but rather stem from common review practices that occur within institutions.

Similar to previous studies presented in Chapter 2, the majority of participants in this study reported having generally positive experiences with their REC. Another study by Ferraro et al. (2012) revealed that some researchers felt that their REC has not treated them fairly and equitably because the ethics review process took too long, the relevant REC asked for unreasonable changes, bureaucratic procedures were excessive, and the REC went beyond the protection of participants and interfered with research and design. In contrast, a study by Ashcraft and Krause (2007) showed that researchers believed the time it took their REC to provide feedback on their research protocol was reasonable. Mamotte and Wassenaar (2009) found that South African researchers face challenges with their RECs similar to those researchers from developed countries as most RECs tend to have slow turnaround time and

problematic forms and procedures.

The issues of ethics in research go beyond ethical clearance processes, as these are one aspect of the whole research process. Mishi and Maredza (2024) argue that being trained, empowered, motivated, and resolved to act ethically or with integrity during your research must take centre stage to overcome the tick box exercise and staging. This suggests that ethical processes must align also more to science by working on the perception and appealing to the inner being of a researcher regarding research ethics. As mentioned in Chapter 2, making an accurate submission through the ethical clearance process and receiving the ethics approval letter, which gives a researcher the green light to start collecting data, does not mean that the researcher is ethical or has integrity.

Through bestowing benefits, the ethics process was also perceived by the participants to have a positive value, and this is discussed in the following sub-theme.

4.7.1 Perceived Value of Research Ethics Processes

There was no doubt from the responses of the participants that research ethics processes are valued and are important to researchers and their research. Participants through the interview shared their perceptions of the value that research ethics processes contribute to the overall research project. Participants identified benefits such as ensuring participant safety, promoting research integrity, and enhancing the credibility of findings.

“I perceived ethics process as black and white or right or wrong approach without really appreciating its value to my research. And I’ve definitely come to appreciate that more and more each application needs to be looked at carefully on its own merit. And there’s no, rights or wrong.” (FED001)

Participant FED001’s comments above suggest that ethics education to researchers is important in taking them through alignment and benefits for research, researchers, and the larger community. There is also a suggestion through data collected that there is a need for improvement in the research ethics process which will be discussed in the next sub-theme.

4.7.2 Reviewers in Research Ethics Processes

For researchers to understand the importance of ethics processes, there is a need to improve how researchers engage with the process. This alignment is important, as presented in the

findings, where a proposal to streamline the research ethics processes by reducing administrative burden and paperwork is proposed. Participants suggested centralising ethics guidelines and providing clearer instructions to researchers.

“I would like to see just some legal training or legal context for the reviewers. In other words, it’s important for reviewers to understand that ethical processes are constrained by constitutional rights. They can’t impose something on a researcher, whether a student or an academic researcher that wouldn’t be allowed in terms of the constitution.” (FHSS003)

The concept of making researchers understand and comply is found to be multifaceted, with interpretations varying between positive and negative perspectives. The implementation of research ethics processes can be perceived as beneficial and hindering, depending on the researcher’s engagement with the process. Researchers express frustration and confusion about the need for ethical clearance for certain research activities. The following sub-theme will focus on how best training and support could be implemented.

4.7.3 Ethical Clearance Driving and Developing Research Integrity

One participant discussed their evolving perspective on ethics, acknowledging that it is not as black and white as initially assumed. They emphasised the importance of considering the potential positive contributions of research to society, even if there are associated risks. Instead of outright rejecting research, the participant proposed working with the researcher to mitigate risks, recognising that the research adds value and contributes to society.

“I came into it thinking ethics is like it’s black and white. It’s either it’s right or wrong and I’ve come to appreciate that there’s no black or white at all but benefit to the researcher ... but let’s look at the fact that the research is doing good work and is going to contribute positively to society. So, the risk still exists, but you go to efforts to mitigate it because you do want the research to proceed because it contributes to society like I’ve come to [believe].” (FED001)

One of the key points raised in the data is that research ethics is often described necessary for the protection of participants. However, it is also beneficial for the quality of research through the review process and benefits the researcher. The review process for ethics approval benefits the research as it adds value and makes it more trustworthy. In this theme, I will present detailed data on how researchers themselves also see the benefit of the ethics review process across all faculties.

The same participant also noted that the ethics process adds value to the initial stages of research. It goes beyond merely ticking boxes and prompts researchers to step back and consider the ethical implications of their work.

“What I now think about it is that it adds to the initial stages of the research. It adds value to the initial stages of the research because it’s not just about ticking boxes, it’s about stepping back and considering the ethics of the research.” (FED001)

Another participant highlighted that obtaining ethics approval gives researchers credibility with potential interviewees. It serves as a stamp of approval from an ethical standpoint, signalling to interviewees that the research is legitimate. This approval adds weight to the research and enhances the trustworthiness of the collected data.

“It gives the researcher extra credit as it were with potential interviewees ... the official ethics process from an institution that definitely carries weight.” (FHSS003)

A participant mentioned that ensuring good conditions for animals, similar to providing comfortable conditions for interviewees, leads to more reliable data. They highlighted how the ethics process influences data reliability and validity by emphasising the importance of proper research conditions.

“Once your application is reviewed your data becomes reliable and you can trust your data ... So, if animals are kept in a good conditions you have more reliable figures for reliable data.” (FS001)

4.7.4 Change and Improvements in Ethics Review Processes

One participant (FS001) highlighted the diversity of backgrounds within the ethics committee, acknowledging the inclusion of individuals from various professions, such as veterinarians, South African National SPCA members, and the public. They emphasised the value that this broad range of perspectives brings to the committee.

“I think there’s something very good about the committee and that is that we have people from a very wide range of backgrounds whether it’s the veterinarian or whether it’s the NSPCA, social sciences or whether it’s a member of the community.” (FS001)

Some interview questions in this study also provoked the participants to express themselves on factors that influence ethics reviews and how best they could be improved, bringing change and improvements to research itself through their reviews. This was noted as important for academic freedom and for promoting research through different disciplines.

In terms of the ethics clearance process efficiency, one participant expressed satisfaction with the speed and thoroughness of their committee’s review process with the advantage of using an online system rather than manual submission which poses a risk to the quality of the process. They mentioned having a reliable pool of reviewers who generally understand their responsibilities well. However, they also acknowledged that some reviewers may provide unnecessary or unreasonable comments, requiring additional editing.

“I think our process is actually pretty quick you know with the help of online system than before where we used paper or manual submission and now there is thorough review and we’ve got a good pool of reviewers most of whom know what they’re doing, well trained although some may bring up rather ridiculous comments.” (FCM002)

The diagram below shows the status of ethics review processes from the responses by the participants divided into two streams, namely online system and paper-based review. The former is preferred for an effective process while paper-based processes are problematic.

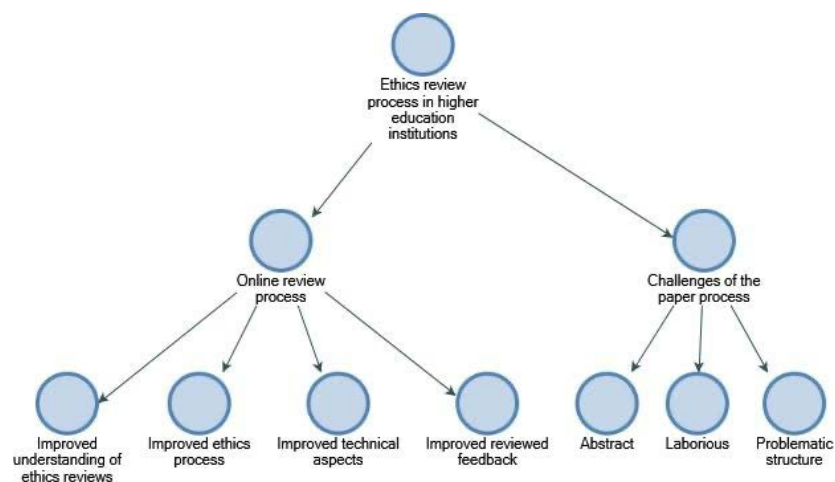


Figure 3.2: Ethical clearance processes.

The above diagram shows the advantages of having an online system that facilitates the ethics application process against the paper based or manual submission process, which brings many

red flags and disadvantages. Challenges of the paper process contribute to abstract, laborious, and problematic aspects, while the online review process brings much positivity which includes an improved ethics process, technical aspects, greater understanding of ethics reviews and clearer feedback.

Similarly, participant FHSS002 shared their opinion on the ideal characteristics of ethics committee members, supporting a more open-minded review. They expressed that it would be highly beneficial to have individuals who not only possess technical knowledge and knowledge of best practices but also have a philosophical orientation towards ethically conducting research. This would allow for a more creative and flexible approach to reviewing projects that may not fit traditional procedural frameworks.

“I think a massive benefit for ethics committee members required would be for them to have an open-minded approach during the review about research ethics aspects, rather than just one-sided think of knowledge on best practice or procedures. So rather than just having the technical knowledge, having the kind of appreciation of how the technical staff supports a particular philosophical orientation towards doing research ethically. I think the benefit of that is, it would then allow people to engage in their research more, or reviewers particularly also to engage with thinking about projects that are trying to be a bit more creative and might not fit within the typical procedural strictures of ethics review.” (FHSS002)

These quotes provided above are insights into the diversity within ethics committees and different disciplines across faculties and in agreement about the importance, benefit and efficiency of the review process. Further suggestions are made for the ideal characteristics of committee members as reviewers.

Part of the reviewers’ task is to consider the research participants, which results in the following theme on community engagement and access.

4.8 Access to Communities and Research Participation

Some participants highlighted the ethical considerations surrounding the act of asking individuals to sign something before interviewing them which RECs are not taking into consideration when reviewing the application. They mentioned that in certain types of research,

especially in indigenous communities, it could be seen as disrespectful to require people to sign consent forms prior to interviews. As institutions are made up of three important pillars namely teaching and learning, research, and community engagement. Ethics review processes also promote ethical data collection to communities.

“I know that in some research, like [in] indigenous communities, it’s also considered kind of disrespectful to ask people to sign something before you interview them.” (FCM002)

The same participant mentioned cultural issues that arise in their own work, particularly when conducting short interviews with individuals attending festivals. They found it challenging to navigate the question of obtaining informed consent within these specific cultural contexts.

“I know that there are some sort of cultural issues around that getting a consent for example, I was doing short interviews with people attending a cultural festival ... it was challenging to think well how will I get informed consent?” (FCM002)

One participant emphasised the need for a nuanced understanding of research, especially when working with communities. They highlighted the importance of adopting an African perspective, which involves considering cultural norms and approaches to engaging with research participants through language and respect. In this theme we look at different types of roles played by researchers when data is being collected, access to communities, engagement with the participants and exiting the community. Based on the data collected, institutions of higher education in South Africa review all research done by their researchers using research ethics committees (RECs) and grant them permission for data collection. In most research done in communities, RECs require certain standards to be taken to consideration when collecting data, depending on the culture and values of indigenous communities. In an African paradigm approach, the reasoning is that the communities have lived and experienced their reality for centuries. Thus, getting insights from the communities to inform universities’ strategic community engagement, research projects, and coursework is essential.

It is therefore imperative, in employing an Afrocentric epistemology, that the knowledge from the community should be allowed to validate our research findings. It is important for universities to treat community partnerships similarly to corporate partnerships. Signed or orally recorded agreements with expected targets solving community challenges should be part

of the university performance ratings. These agreements should be regularly evaluated against community upliftment results so that institutions remain impactful (Anderson et al., 2012). In addition, the implementation of a gatekeeper/permission letter process in ethics review should not be a blanket umbrella approach but a process to be carefully considered as in some instances a gatekeeper waiver is needed for certain studies.

“They tend to engage work with communities which means that they require a different understanding or a more nuanced understanding of research as opposed to a Europe-centric approach as most of us have been trained that way we need a mindset in terms of looking at research and bringing the African perspective ... if you going to do things the African way, [there are] issues of language barriers and approach.” (FED002)

During the interview, the participant further explained the importance of working with communities rather than on them, particularly when working with marginalised or indigenous groups. They emphasised that verbal agreements hold significance in these contexts, and in some cases, verbal consent is legally binding for indigenous peoples due to historical factors such as land appropriation.

“I explained earlier when you in particular when you work with community people doing events you tend to work with them rather than on them because the fact that they are there in the community they may not be educated but it doesn't mean they can't contribute knowledge ... When you work with indigenous people verbal agreement is as important as a written warning ... written consent is legally binding to indigenous people because of the history how the land was taken from people and all those things, so it draws fear.” (FED002)

In discussing the ethics process, the same participant mentioned the importance of not overstepping the bounds of constitutional law. They acknowledged the limitations of the ethics process and underscored the need to adhere to constitutional principles.

“I said for us the gatekeeper one in particular was a major problem because remember at the end of the day the ethics process cannot overstep the bounds of constitutional law in other words an ethics process cannot in any way infringe on the constitutional right to freedom of speech for example.” (FHSS003)

One participant (FHSS003) expressed concern regarding institutions implementing gatekeeper requirements that infringe upon individuals' rights to freedom of association, freedom of speech, and freedom of movement. They highlighted the potential problems that arise when an employer's permission is demanded before interviewing an employee through RECs requirements, as it limits these rights. However, they clarified that seeking permission to enter the employer's premises and take time from the workers' employment for the interview is understandable. This suggested a better aligned process of gatekeeper applications within institutions of higher education without enforcement.

"If ethics committees require a certain gatekeeper kind of requirement that infringes on those rights the freedom of association freedom of speech and movement then clearly they are problematic and saying to someone a student or an academic who's doing research you need the employer's permission before you can interview the employee immediately raises those kind of problem[s]." (FHSS003)

Another participant (FCM002) mentioned encountering difficulties in obtaining gatekeeper permission and made positive suggestions for RECs to review each application based on its merit and not use a blanket or umbrella approach. Rather, a gatekeeper waiver could be considered. They described situations where individuals expressed concern about being unable to speak with their intended population if gatekeeper permission was required. However, they addressed these challenges by considering reasonable and logical cases to determine when gatekeeper permission may be appropriate.

"I mean we have come across situations where it's been really difficult to get gatekeeper permission ... there was some cases around people saying well if you force us to get gatekeeper permission, we may not be able to talk to people at all because the gatekeeper would not provide permission, suggestion for a waiver depending on the research ... if there's a reasonable logical case for that then you can have something like the gatekeeper." (FCM002)

4.9 Conclusion

This chapter presented the research results related to compliance and governance activities in the research process. The findings demonstrate that compliance can be viewed from both positive and negative perspectives, and the ethics committee is often perceived as a hindrance rather than a facilitator. The mechanistic nature of the ethics process, however, pushes researchers to engage in more thoughtful research practices.

These findings contribute to understanding the complexities associated with compliance and governance in research, highlighting the need for comprehensive discussions and improved communication between supervisors and students regarding the benefits of ethical research. Further exploration in this area can aid in developing strategies to enhance researchers' engagement with compliance processes. The participants acknowledged that research ethics is a disciplinary field with its own set of guidelines, principles, and medical background. It is essential for researchers to have a solid understanding of these principles and apply them appropriately in their studies.

Building trust with participants is crucial for ethical research. Trust is also important between researchers and ethics committees who review the work and its authenticity. The interviews revealed instances where mistrust could hinder the research process, such as difficulties in obtaining gatekeeper permission. Researchers must work to establish trust through transparent and respectful communication. The discussions emphasised the need for ethical awareness and education among researchers. It is essential for researchers to understand the two separate aspects, research ethics processes and research integrity, associated with their work and continually update their knowledge to ensure ethical conduct.

Ethical clearance processes play a pivotal role in driving and developing research integrity. Obtaining ethical clearance acts as a safeguard to ensure that research is conducted ethically and with the utmost respect for participants' rights. The interviews pointed to the potential for change or improvements in research ethics practices. This could involve addressing issues such as gatekeeper permissions, cultural considerations, and the use of consent forms. Researchers should continuously strive for improvements in ethical practices to enhance participant experiences and research outcomes. The importance of community engagement was highlighted as an integral part of ethical research. Engaging with communities helps to

establish trust, respect local customs and perspectives, and ensure that research outcomes are beneficial and relevant to the community.

In conclusion, the interviews shed light on various aspects of research ethics, the misalignment between agendas and interests of various roles players causes a dysfunction within the ethics processes. Compliance, monitoring, reporting, and oversight of ethics is problematic when this logic drives the process. It undermines autonomy and credibility of the researcher and curtails research possibilities, but they are needed to ensure ethical research is undertaken. The next chapter presents the recommendations and concludes the thesis.

CHAPTER FIVE

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

5.1 Introduction

Research activities are often subject to regulatory oversight to safeguard the rights and well-being of participants, maintain research integrity, and uphold the credibility of academic institutions. However, the compliance is not without its challenges. Researchers frequently encounter bureaucratic hurdles, disciplinary disparities, and varying interpretations of ethical standards. The goal of this case study was to explore the experiences of academics in the research ethical clearance process. In line with achieving the research objectives, this chapter concludes with recommendations for enhancing understanding of ethical challenges, and broader conclusions that reflect the delicate equilibrium between compliance and autonomy. Through a comprehensive exploration of these themes, this chapter contributes to the ongoing dialogue on research ethics and governance, offering insights that can inform future strategies for fostering a culture of responsible and ethical research practices.

5.2 Findings of the Study

The key findings of this study are presented in relation to the research questions and the themes that emerged during data analysis.

5.2.1 Assessing Researchers' Perception of the Ethical Clearance Process

The objective of this study was to understand researchers' perceptions on ethical clearance processes. Participants expressed a strong ethical consciousness, emphasising the significance of research ethics in their work. Despite the commitment to ethical research, participants expressed frustration with perceived inefficiencies in the existing ethics processes. Participants such as FCM001 highlighted the need for comprehensive engagement with postgraduate students regarding the importance of research ethics. The concern is that students often perceive the ethics process as a mere checkbox for completion rather than understanding its intrinsic value. There is a call for proper engagement to gain a deeper understanding of why ethics is crucial in research.

The interviews underscore a prevailing issue where students are informed about the need for an ethics process but might not fully grasp its importance. The challenge lies in transforming the perception of ethics from it being a procedural requirement to an integral part of ethical research. Participants recognise the positive value of research ethics processes and discuss their perceptions of the contributions these processes make to the overall research project. Identified benefits include ensuring participant safety, promoting research integrity, and enhancing the credibility of research findings. A participant (FED001) shared a personal evolution in understanding, noting an initial perception of the ethics process as a black-and-white, right-or-wrong approach. There was an acknowledgement of the need to evaluate each application on its own merit, highlighting a shift from a rigid perspective to a nuanced understanding of research ethics.

The key findings illustrate a dual sentiment among participants – while recognising the importance and positive value of research ethics processes, there is a need for improved student engagement to shift perceptions of ethics as a procedural obligation to a genuine appreciation of ethical considerations. The frustrations expressed with existing processes point to an opportunity for refining and enhancing the efficiency of ethical review mechanisms.

5.2.2 Evaluating the Alignment of Ethics Guidelines in South African HEIs

An objective of this study was also to gauge from participants their evaluation or understanding of the alignment of ethics guidelines in South African HEIs. The interviews reveal a prevalent negative perception of Research Ethics Committees (RECs) within the dynamics of supervisor-student relationships. The discussions surrounding the ethics process often centre on overcoming the perceived barriers presented by the committee, with a primary focus on how to navigate through the process rather than understanding and embracing the benefits of ethical research. Participants highlighted that conversations between supervisors and students tend to be pessimistic, framing the ethics committee as a hindrance that needs to be overcome rather than an essential component of ethical research. The prevailing sentiment is that the ethics committee is viewed as a hurdle to research progress, leading to frustration among students and researchers.

The study revealed that RECs, while intended to promote research through ethical reviews, often prioritise compliance with regulatory bodies (both internal and external) rather than

focusing on substantive ethical considerations. Concerns are raised that the emphasis on technical compliance may overshadow genuine ethical principles, placing an undue burden on researchers and potentially compromising academic freedom. Participants expressed the need for RECs to recalibrate their priorities, placing a greater emphasis on academic freedom and ethical considerations. The perception is that the current emphasis on compliance may stifle academic freedom and compromise the scientific reception of research work. The undue technicism of ethics review is criticised for instilling fear in researchers, hindering full disclosure, and potentially jeopardising prospects for ethical clearance.

The negative perception of the ethics committee is observed to have a cascading effect on postgraduate students, creating a sense of negativity and hindrance around the ethics process. Participants echo the sentiment, characterising the ethics committee as a barrier that contributes to students harbouring negative thoughts about the process. Overall, the key findings emphasise a misalignment between the perception of RECs and their purpose, with a need for a paradigm shift to prioritise ethical considerations, academic freedom, and a more supportive approach to researchers. The perception of the ethics committee as a barrier warrants attention, as fostering a positive understanding of the ethical review process is crucial for cultivating a culture of responsible and ethical research practices.

5.2.3 Identifying Gaps Between Researchers and the Ethical Clearance Process

Concerns were raised about the limitations of the ethics process concerning constitutional law. Participant FCE004 emphasised the importance of not infringing on individuals' constitutional rights, particularly the right to freedom of speech, revealing potential conflicts between ethics committee requirements and legal boundaries. Furthermore, the distinction between law and ethics was highlighted, emphasising that what is demanded or forbidden by law may not align with ethical standards. In this context, research ethics involves distinguishing between acceptable and unacceptable behaviours in research, and the terms ethics and morality were discussed as related but distinct concepts.

Compliance was explored as a multifaceted concept with varied interpretations, generating both positive and negative perspectives. Researchers' engagement with the compliance process played a crucial role in shaping their perceptions, with expressions of frustration and confusion about the necessity of ethical clearance for specific research activities. A suggestion was made

to empower the ethics committee, particularly for student projects, by allowing them to serve as gatekeepers under the oversight of the registrar's division. This proposal aimed to expedite the process and provide better support for researchers, emphasising the need for closer collaboration and communication between the ethics committee and the registrar's division.

The data indicated a discrepancy between the focus of institutional Research Ethics Committees (RECs) on regulatory compliance and the actual experiences of researchers. While RECs were perceived as focusing on ticking boxes and ensuring compliance, researchers, especially those from social sciences backgrounds, described their experiences in ethics processes as challenging and sometimes nightmarish.

The participants' expressions reveal complexity where ethical compliance is perceived differently by researchers and ethics committees. The tension between regulatory demands, legal considerations, and the practical experiences of researchers highlights the need for a nuanced approach to research ethics that considers the diverse perspectives and challenges within different disciplines.

5.2.4 The Roles of Research Ethics Committees in the Ethical Review Process

Participants highlighted the importance of considering cultural nuances, especially in research involving indigenous communities. The act of asking individuals to sign consent forms before interviews, a common practice in research ethics, was considered disrespectful in certain types of research, particularly within indigenous communities. Specific challenges were noted in obtaining informed consent within cultural contexts, such as when conducting short interviews at cultural festivals. Participants expressed difficulties in navigating the cultural aspects of obtaining consent, highlighting the need for a more nuanced understanding of research.

Participants emphasised the importance of adopting an African perspective in research. This involves understanding cultural norms and approaching research participants with respect, considering issues such as language barriers and cultural approaches to engagement. The importance of working with communities rather than on them was stressed, especially when dealing with marginalised or indigenous groups. Verbal agreements were highlighted as significant in these contexts, with some cases where verbal consent holds legal significance due to historical factors.

Participants recognised the need to respect constitutional principles and not overstep the bounds of constitutional law in the ethics process. This acknowledgement was particularly relevant concerning gatekeeper requirements and their potential impact on constitutional rights, such as freedom of speech. Concerns were raised about gatekeeper requirements that might infringe upon individuals' rights, such as freedom of association, freedom of speech, and freedom of movement. Participants suggested the need for a more aligned process that respects constitutional rights, especially in situations involving employer permissions.

Participants proposed the idea of gatekeeper waivers, suggesting that each application should be reviewed based on its merit rather than applying a blanket requirement. This approach allows for consideration of reasonable and logical cases where gatekeeper permission may not be appropriate. There was a recurring perception that asking individuals to sign consent forms before interviews could be considered disrespectful in certain research contexts. This finding emphasises the importance of understanding cultural nuances and tailoring the consent process accordingly.

5.2.5 Promoting the Importance of Research Ethics and Integrity

Participants acknowledged the importance and value of research ethics processes to researchers and their projects. This recognition extended to benefits such as ensuring participant safety, promoting research integrity, and enhancing the credibility of findings. For instance, participant FED001 described an evolution in their perspective, moving away from viewing ethics in a black-and-white manner. They emphasised the need to appreciate the nuanced nature of each application, recognising that there is no one-size-fits-all approach. Furthermore, the key findings suggested that ethics education for researchers is crucial. Understanding the alignment and benefits of research ethics for the research, researcher, and the larger community was highlighted. Participants proposed the idea of providing legal training or legal context for ethics reviewers. This training would enable reviewers to understand that ethical processes are constrained by constitutional rights, preventing the imposition of measures that would infringe on these rights.

Some participants expressed the need to streamline research ethics processes by reducing administrative burdens and paperwork. The study revealed the need for centralising ethics guidelines and providing clearer instructions to researchers, aiming to improve their

understanding and engagement with the process. The concept of making researchers understand and comply was viewed from multifaceted perspectives, with interpretations varying between positive and negative. Researchers expressed both frustration and confusion about the need for ethical clearance for certain research activities. Other participants highlighted that research ethics processes, often associated with protecting participants, also contribute to the quality of research. One participant (FED001) emphasised the potentially positive contributions of research to society, suggesting collaboration with researchers to mitigate risks rather than outright rejection. Ethics approval was seen as adding value to the initial stages of research, prompting researchers to consider the ethical implications of their work beyond ticking boxes. Obtaining ethics approval was recognised as providing credibility to researchers with potential interviewees and enhancing the trustworthiness of collected data. The ethics process was noted to influence data reliability and validity by emphasising the importance of proper research conditions, such as ensuring good conditions for animals, which contributes to more reliable data.

Participants highlighted the diversity of backgrounds within ethics committees, including individuals from various professions such as veterinarians, South African National SPCA members, and the public. This diversity was seen as valuable for bringing a broad range of perspectives to the committee.

Some participants expressed satisfaction with the efficiency of their committee's review process, particularly with the adoption of online systems. The use of an online system was seen as advantageous compared to manual submission, contributing to a quicker and more thorough review process. Participants acknowledged having a reliable pool of reviewers who understand their responsibilities well. However, some reviewers were noted to provide unnecessary or unreasonable comments, requiring additional editing and suggesting room for improvement.

5.2.6 Developing Research Ethics Training and Education

The participants in this study expressed the necessity of embedding ethical awareness and education within the academic environment, offering a potential avenue for overcoming challenges and fostering a research culture grounded in integrity and ethical conduct. Some participants emphasised the importance of establishing a research culture that promotes ethics and integrity from undergraduate to postgraduate levels and among academic staff.

Recommendations include incorporating ethics modules or courses into higher education curricula to instill a clear understanding of the importance and benefits of research ethics.

Participants expressed frustration with the bureaucratic aspects of research ethics processes within their institutions. Challenges include navigating complex protocols, unclear guidelines, and dealing with excessive paperwork. There is a consensus among participants regarding the need for comprehensive training and ongoing support for researchers in understanding and navigating research ethics requirements. Suggestions included mandatory ethics training for all academics, regardless of their role as reviewers, and the provision of workshops or resources to enhance researchers' knowledge and skills. Time constraints emerge as a significant challenge, with researchers struggling to balance ethics approvals with project timelines and deadlines. The need for a deeper understanding of the rationale behind specific ethics requirements was highlighted, suggesting a focus on the "why" in addition to the "what" of the ethics process. Participants suggest the inclusion of content in training that covers the constitution, National Health Research Ethics Council (NHREC), university governance, and the roles of Research Ethics Committees (RECs).

The awareness and educational drive are seen as critical in addressing negative perceptions, values, and attitudes towards ethics processes. Training could help researchers understand the basis behind specific requirements, such as consent forms and gatekeeper engagement, promoting a more informed and positive approach.

5.3 Conclusions from the Study

5.3.1 Assessing Researchers' Perception of the Ethical Clearance Process

This study has achieved the research objective to assess researchers' perception of ethical clearance processes. The key findings illustrate a dual sentiment among participants. While they unequivocally acknowledge the importance and positive value of research ethics processes, there is a clear call for improved student engagement. This shift aims to move perceptions from viewing ethics as a procedural obligation to fostering a genuine and intrinsic appreciation for ethical considerations in research. The frustrations expressed with existing processes highlight areas of improvement and signify an opportunity for refining and enhancing the efficiency of ethical review processes. As the discourse on research ethics

continues, bridging the gap between procedural awareness and genuine ethical understanding emerges as a crucial endeavour for the research community.

5.3.2 Evaluating the Alignment of Ethics Guidelines in South African HEIs

This study has achieved the research objective to evaluate the alignment of ethics guidelines in the South African context. In conclusion, the key findings underscore a misalignment in the perception of RECs, advocating for a paradigm shift to prioritise ethical considerations, academic freedom, and a more supportive approach to researchers. The perception of the ethics committee as a barrier warrants attention, as fostering a positive understanding of the ethical review process is crucial for cultivating a culture of responsible and ethical research practices. Addressing these issues can contribute to a more conducive environment for research, ensuring that ethical considerations are at the forefront of the academic journey.

5.3.3 Identifying Gaps Between Researchers and the Ethical Clearance Process

This study has achieved the research objectives to identify gaps between researchers and the ethical clearance process. The key findings illuminate a complex landscape where ethical compliance is perceived differently by researchers and ethics committees. The tension between regulatory demands, legal considerations, and the practical experiences of researchers underscores the need for a nuanced approach to research ethics. This approach should account for the diverse perspectives and challenges within different disciplines, fostering a more collaborative and supportive environment for ethical research practices. The identified gaps present an opportunity for enhancing the alignment between the expectations of ethics committees and the realities faced by researchers in their ethical clearance processes.

5.3.4 The Roles of Research Ethics Committees in the Ethical Review Process

This study has achieved the research objective to evaluate the roles of research ethics committees in the ethical review processes. The study has illuminated the pivotal role of RECs in navigating cultural complexities within ethical review processes. The findings underscore the necessity of tailoring ethical guidelines to accommodate diverse cultural contexts, emphasising a more inclusive and culturally sensitive approach to research ethics. The proposed gatekeeper waivers and nuanced considerations for consent processes provide valuable insights for refining the roles of RECs in aligning ethical standards with cultural diversity.

5.3.5 Promoting the Importance of Research Ethics and Integrity

This study has achieved the research objective to promote the importance of research ethics and integrity. The key findings illuminate a collective commitment to advancing research ethics and integrity. The findings underscore the need for continuous education, streamlined processes, and a collaborative approach to ensure that research ethics are not only perceived as a mandatory procedure but are deeply ingrained as an essential component fostering the credibility, safety, and integrity of the academic research landscape.

5.3.6 Developing Research Ethics Training and Education

This study has achieved the research objective to assess the importance of research ethics training and education. The insights garnered from this exploration substantiate the resounding call for a paradigm shift in research culture through robust ethics training and education. The recommendations put forth collectively envision a future where ethical awareness is not merely a procedural obligation but an integral and instinctive aspect of the academic journey, ultimately contributing to a research landscape anchored in unwavering integrity.

5.4 Recommendations

The main research question that this study sought to address was to explore the experiences of academics in the research ethical clearance process. Based on the findings and conclusions of this study, the following recommendations can be made:

5.4.1 Enhanced Student Engagement Programs

The study findings revealed a prevailing perception among participants that postgraduate students often view the ethics process as a procedural checkbox, lacking a deeper understanding of its intrinsic value. To address this, implementing comprehensive engagement programs for postgraduate students is recommended. These programs should emphasise the importance of research ethics, thereby fostering a genuine and intrinsic appreciation for ethical considerations in research (FCM001).

5.4.2 Communication Platforms for Researchers

Frustrations expressed by participants with existing processes highlight an opportunity for improved communication channels. Establishing dedicated communication platforms or

forums where researchers can express concerns and engage in dialogue can contribute to continuous improvement. This aligns with the study's emphasis on refining and enhancing the efficiency of ethical review mechanisms based on researchers' feedback.

5.4.3 Ethics Committee Training and Sensitisation

The study identified a misalignment in the perception of Research Ethics Committees (RECs), with a need for a paradigm shift to prioritise ethical considerations and academic freedom. To address this, comprehensive training sessions for REC members are recommended. These sessions should sensitise committee members to the concerns raised in the study and advocate for a more supportive approach to researchers (FED001).

5.4.4 Cultural Competency Workshops for RECs

The study illuminated the pivotal role of RECs in navigating cultural complexities within ethical review processes. To enhance the alignment of ethics guidelines with diverse cultural contexts, workshops focusing on cultural competency within RECs are recommended. These workshops should emphasise the importance of tailoring ethical guidelines to accommodate diverse cultural norms and ensure a more inclusive ethical review process.

5.4.5 Nuanced Approach to Ethics Education

Findings indicated a complex landscape where ethical compliance is perceived differently by researchers and ethics committees. To bridge this gap, training programs offering a nuanced approach to research ethics are recommended. These programs should consider the diverse perspectives and challenges within different disciplines, fostering a more collaborative and supportive environment for ethical research practices.

5.4.6 Implementation of Gatekeeper Waivers

Participants raised concerns about gatekeeper requirements potentially infringing upon constitutional rights. To address this, the study recommends exploring the implementation of gatekeeper waivers. Each application could be reviewed based on its merit, allowing for reasonable and logical exceptions where gatekeeper permission may not be appropriate. This aligns with the study's emphasis on a more flexible approach to align ethical standards with cultural diversity (FCE004).

5.4.7 Continuous Education Initiatives for Researchers

Acknowledging the importance of continuous education, the study recommends initiatives emphasising the importance and benefits of research ethics. Such initiatives should facilitate going beyond perceiving ethics as a mandatory procedure, aiming for a deep and integral understanding of ethical considerations in the academic journey (FED001).

5.4.8 Alignment of Role Players in the Ethics Clearance Process

The study highlighted the importance of understanding that the demands of compliance are not the only dimension of ethics committees but that role players such as researchers, institutions, communities (participants) both human or animal and the research itself (time frame) are involved and need to be aligned and identified as important for the completion of the process. The process is not complete without each of these role players.

5.4.9 Research Managers or Administrators as a Glue

As stated in the positionality of the researcher, I discovered through the literature and data results that as an ethics administrator, I am exposed to all the role players mentioned above and therefore need to act as a 'glue' in connecting them. As ethics administrator, I am the central point for the ethics process and therefore need to have a mind shift on how I also perceive research ethics processes. The recommendation is that all administrators need to be equipped through training and awareness of their role in the process and how they could manage this task for the benefit of all role players. Research ethics administrators need to be advocates and ambassadors of the ethics process when exposed to each role player so that all parties will be aware of the common goal of the process. It is also important to note that the research ethics administrators are responsible for legal advice, compliance, promotion of research integrity, data management, community access and ethical publication.

5.5 Implications for Future Research

Implications of the study on theory, practice, methodology and future research are detailed in the section below.

5.5.1 Practical Implications

The study contributes to enhanced ethical awareness among researchers and members of Research Ethics Committees (RECs). By illuminating the dual sentiment among participants regarding the importance of research ethics processes, the study implies a need for more targeted efforts to still have a genuine appreciation for ethical considerations. Frustrations expressed by researchers highlight potential inefficiencies in existing ethics processes. The study's implication is that refining and enhancing these processes, based on the feedback and concerns raised, could lead to a more streamlined and effective ethical review mechanism.

The study underscores the importance of cultural sensitivity in research ethics, particularly when working with indigenous communities. The implication is that RECs should tailor ethical guidelines to accommodate diverse cultural norms, fostering an inclusive approach to ethical review processes. The misalignment in the perception of RECs suggests a need for a paradigm shift. The study implies that efforts should be directed towards prioritising ethical considerations and fostering a more supportive approach. This shift is crucial for creating a positive understanding of the ethical review process.

Concerns raised about the tension between regulatory demands, legal considerations, and researchers' practical experiences imply a need for a more nuanced approach to research ethics. The study suggests that a one-size-fits-all approach may not be suitable, emphasising the importance of considering diverse perspectives and challenges within different disciplines.

5.5.2 Future Directions of the Study

Future study would develop and implement targeted educational initiatives based on the study's findings. The study will aim to evaluate the effectiveness of these initiatives in fostering a deeper understanding of ethical considerations among researchers and assess their impact on the efficiency of ethical clearance processes. With the recent advances and penetration of digital technology in higher education, future studies should aim to investigate the integration of technology, such as artificial intelligence or online platforms, in ethics review processes. The study will aim to assess how technological advancements can streamline administrative burdens, enhance communication, and improve the overall efficiency of research ethics committees.

Furthermore, and given that this study was only carried out in a specific institution, further studies would aim to conduct an in-depth analysis of existing ethical guidelines within the South African context. Evaluate the clarity, comprehensiveness, and relevance of these guidelines and propose revisions or enhancements to ensure they effectively address the ethical considerations in contemporary research practices.

The above future directions aim to build upon the study's foundation and address evolving challenges in research ethics. By exploring these areas, researchers, ethics committees, and policymakers can work collaboratively to shape a more robust and responsive research ethics framework.

5.5.3 *Limitations of the Study*

The findings of the study are context-specific to one university based in the Eastern Cape province in South African. Generalising these results to other South African universities or global contexts may overlook unique cultural, institutional, and regulatory nuances influencing perceptions of ethical clearance processes. Furthermore, the assessment of researchers' perceptions relies on self-reporting, introducing potential biases and subjectivity. Participants might provide responses influenced by social desirability or their personal experiences, affecting the accuracy of the data.

5.6 Contribution of the Study

The study contributes to the advancement of research ethics education by emphasising the necessity of embedding ethical awareness and education within the academic environment. This implies that educational institutions should prioritise ethics training from undergraduate to postgraduate levels and among academic staff. The findings underscore a collective commitment to advancing research ethics and integrity. The study's contribution emphasises the importance of continuous education, streamlined processes, and a collaborative approach. This implies that cultivating a culture of integrity is essential for ensuring the credibility, safety, and integrity of the academic research landscape.

The study bridges gaps between researchers and ethics committees by highlighting the complex landscape of ethical compliance perceptions. The contribution lies in identifying the gaps between expectations of ethics committees and the realities faced by researchers. This implies

an opportunity for enhanced collaboration and understanding. The study contributes to informed decision-making for ethical clearance by acknowledging the need for a nuanced approach. This implies that researchers and ethics committees should collaboratively work towards a more flexible and culturally sensitive ethical review process, considering the diverse contexts in which research is conducted. The study implies a need for policy and process improvements in the ethical review mechanisms. By recognising frustrations and concerns expressed by participants, the study contributes to the ongoing discourse on how to enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of ethical clearance processes.

The study's implications and contributions extend from enhancing ethical awareness to fostering a culture of integrity, bridging gaps between stakeholders, and advocating for policy improvements in research ethics. These implications collectively underscore the study's significance in shaping ethical practices within the academic research community.

5.7 Conclusion

In culmination, this study has delved into the multifaceted realm of researchers' perceptions and experiences regarding ethical clearance processes within the South African academic landscape. The exploration of five distinct objectives has illuminated the intricate tapestry of attitudes, challenges, and opportunities inherent in the ethical review of research projects. The findings unveil a dual sentiment among participants, acknowledging the paramount importance and positive value of research ethics processes. However, there is an imperative need for enhanced student engagement. Transforming ethics from a perceived procedural obligation to an intrinsic aspect is crucial, emphasising the cultivation of genuine appreciation for ethical considerations.

The study underscores a significant misalignment in the perception of Research Ethics Committees (RECs), portraying them as barriers rather than essential components of ethical research. A paradigm shift is advocated, urging a prioritisation of ethical considerations, academic freedom, and a more supportive approach to researchers. A nuanced understanding of ethical compliance emerges as essential, considering the diverse perspectives and challenges within different disciplines. The tension between regulatory demands, legal considerations, and the practical experiences of researchers emphasises the need for a balanced and adaptable approach to research ethics.

The study highlights the pivotal roles of RECs in navigating cultural complexities within ethical review processes. Tailoring ethical guidelines to accommodate diverse cultural contexts is deemed necessary, fostering a more inclusive and culturally sensitive approach to research ethics. The participants collectively express a commitment to advancing research ethics and integrity. Continuous education, streamlined processes, and a collaborative approach are emphasised to embed research ethics not only as a procedural obligation but as an integral and instinctive aspect of the academic journey.

The study resonates with a resounding call for a paradigm shift in research culture through robust ethics training and education. Recommendations envision a future where ethical awareness is ingrained as an essential component, contributing to a research landscape anchored in unwavering integrity.

This study not only uncovers the nuances and challenges within the ethical clearance processes but also propels the discourse forward, advocating for transformative shifts in perception, practice, and education. The identified opportunities for improvement serve as a catalyst for future endeavours, fostering a research environment where ethics is not merely a regulatory process but an integral and revered facet of scholarly pursuits.

6. REFERENCES

- Adams, W. C. (2015). Conducting semi-structured interviews. *Handbook of practical program evaluation*, 492-505.
- Adhabi, E., & Anozie, C. B. (2017). Literature review for the type of interview in qualitative research. *International Journal of Education*, 9(3), 86-97.
- Alexander, G. J., Tollev, K. A., Maritz, B., McKechnie, A., Manger, P., Thomson, R. L., ... & Kerley, G. I. (2021). Excessive red tape is strangling biodiversity research in South Africa. *South African Journal of Science*, 117(9-10), 1-4.
- Anderson, E. E., Solomon, S., Heitman, E., DuBois, J. M., Fisher, C. B., Kost, R. G., ... & Ross, L. F. (2012). Research ethics education for community-engaged research: A review and research agenda. *Journal of Empirical Research on Human Research Ethics*, 7(2), 3-19.
- Anney, V.N. (2014) Ensuring the Quality of the Findings of Qualitative Research: Looking at Trustworthiness Criteria. *Journal of Emerging Trends in Educational Research and Policy Studies*, 5, 272-281
- Armond, A. C. V., Gordijn, B., Lewis, J., Hosseini, M., Bodnár, J. K., Holm, S., & Kakuk, P. (2021). A scoping review of the literature featuring research ethics and research integrity cases. *BMC Medical Ethics*, 22(1), 50.
- Ashcraft, M. H., & Krause, J. A. (2007). Social and behavioral researchers' experiences with their IRBs. *Ethics & Behavior*, 17(1), 1-17.
- Ashcraft, M. H., & Krause, J. A. (2007). Social and behavioral researchers' experiences with their IRBs. *Ethics & Behavior*, 17(1), 1-17.
- Barrow, J. M., Brannan, G. D., & Khandhar, P. B. (2017). Research ethics. <https://europepmc.org/article/NBK/nbk459281#free-full-text>.

- Beckmann, J. (2017). University research ethics clearances: Safety nets, or a false sense of legal immunity? *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 31(3), 6-23.
- Benson, P. R. (2017). The social control of human biomedical research: an overview and review of the literature. *Human Experimentation and Research*, 273-284.
- Bernard, E. (2011). *Algorithms and applications of the Monte Carlo method: Two-dimensional melting and perfect sampling* (Doctoral dissertation, Université Pierre et Marie Curie-Paris VI).
- Bertram, C., & Christiansen, I. (2014). Understanding research. *An introduction to reading research*. Pretoria: Van Schaik Publishers.
- Biggs, H. (2009). *Healthcare research ethics and law: regulation, review and responsibility*. Routledge.
- Boden, R., Epstein, D., & Latimer, J. (2009). Accounting for ethos or programmes for conduct? The brave new world of research ethics committees. *The Sociological Review*, 57(4), 727-749.
- Bonah, C., & Schmaltz, F. (2018). The reception of the Nuremberg Code and its impact on medical ethics in France: 1947–1954. *Wiener Klinische Wochenschrift*, 130(Suppl. 3), S199-S202.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2019). Reflecting on reflexive thematic analysis. *Qualitative research in sport, exercise and health*, 11(4), 589-597.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2023). Toward good practice in thematic analysis: Avoiding common problems and becoming a knowing researcher. *International journal of transgender health*, 24(1), 1-6.
- Brindley, R., Nolte, L., & Nel, P. W. (2020). We were in one place, and the ethics committee in another: Experiences of going through the research ethics application process. *Clinical Ethics*, 15(2), 94-103.

- Brown, N. (2022). Reflexivity and positionality in social sciences research. <https://the-sra.org.uk/SRA/SRA/Blog/ReflexivityandPositionalityinSocialSciencesResearch.aspx>
- Butler, A. E., Vincent, K., & Bluebond-Langner, M. (2020). Insights into the perception that research ethics committees are a barrier to research with seriously ill children: A study of committee minutes and correspondence with researchers studying seriously ill children. *Palliative Medicine*, *34*(3), 413-423.
- Carniel, J., Hickey, A., Southey, K., Brömdal, A., Crowley-Cyr, L., Eacersall, D., Farmer, W., Gehrman, R., Machin, T., & Pillay, Y. (2023). The ethics review and the humanities and social sciences: disciplinary distinctions in ethics review processes. *Research Ethics*, *19*(2), 139-156.
- Chen, N. L., & BChir, M. A. (2024). Ethical Principles of Clinical. *Ethical Approaches to the Practice of Anesthesiology-Part 2: Ethical Constructs that Impact Health Policy, Research and Professional Integrity, An Issue of Anesthesiology Clinics: Ethical Approaches to the Practice of Anesthesiology-Part 2: Ethical Constructs that Impact Health Policy, Research and Professional Integrity, An Issue of Anesthesiology Clinics, E-Book*, *42*(4), 581.
- Clarke, V., & Braun, V. (2017). Thematic analysis. *The journal of positive psychology*, *12*(3), 297-298.
- Cohen, L., Manion, L., & Morrison, K. (2018). *Research methods in education* (8th ed.). Routledge.
- Coleman, P. (2022). Validity and reliability within qualitative research for the caring sciences. *International Journal of Caring Sciences*, *14*(3), 2041-2045.
- Comstock, G. (2012). *Research ethics: A philosophical guide to the responsible conduct of research*. Cambridge University Press.

- Connelly, L. M., & Peltzer, J. N. (2016). Underdeveloped themes in qualitative research: Relationship with interviews and analysis. *Clinical Nurse Specialist*, 30(1), 52-57.
- Cooper, T. L. (2012). *The responsible administrator: An approach to ethics for the administrative role*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Council on Higher Education (CHE) Annual Report for the 2023/2024 financial year Cresswell, J. (2013). Qualitative inquiry & research design: Choosing among five approaches.
- Cypress, B. S. (2017). Rigor or reliability and validity in qualitative research: Perspectives, strategies, reconceptualization, and recommendations. *Dimensions of Critical Care Nursing*, 36(4), 253-263.
- Cyprian, C. M. (2023). Afrocentric research ethics: Decolonial possibilities for indigenous research and research design. *Indigenous Research Design: Transnational Perspectives in Practice*, 281.
- Dahlke, S., & Stahlke, S. (2020). Ethical challenges in accessing participants at a research site. *Nurse Researcher*, 1-28.
- Davies, S. E. (2020). The introduction of research ethics review procedures at a university in South Africa: review outcomes of a social science research ethics committee. *Research Ethics*, 16(1-2), 1-26.
- De Wet, K. (2010). The importance of ethical appraisal in social science research: reviewing a faculty of humanities' research ethics committee. *Journal of Academic Ethics*, 8, 301-314.
- Demetriou, A., Kyriakides, L., & Avraamidou, C. (2003). The missing link in the relations between intelligence and personality. *Journal of Research in Personality*, 37(6), 547-581.

- Detardo-Bora, K. A. (2004). Action research in a world of positivist-oriented review boards. *Action Research*, 2(3), 237-253.
- Dhai, A. (2024). Governance of Health Research updated in South Africa. *South African Journal of Bioethics and Law*, 17(2), 56-56.
- Eckstein, S. (2007). Research Ethics Committees. *Good Clinical, Laboratory and Manufacturing Practices Techniques for the QA Professional*, 99-108.
- Emanuel, E. J., Wendler, D., Killen, J., & Grady, C. (2004). What makes clinical research in developing countries ethical? The benchmarks of ethical research. *Journal of infectious diseases*, 189(5), 930-937.
- Engelbrecht, S. F. (2023). An ethical analysis of the reimbursement requirements and practices in health research in South Africa (Doctoral dissertation, Stellenbosch University).
- Engelbrecht, S., Coetzee, T., & Flack-Davison, E. (2024). Gauging the need for research ethics training in a Southern African Developing Community - A SARIMA initiative. *South African Journal of Bioethics and Law*, 17(2), 88-95.
- Eshchanov, B., Abduraimov, K., Ibragimova, M., & Eshchanov, R. (2021). Efficiency of “publish or perish” policy - Some considerations based on the Uzbekistan experience. *Publications*, 9(3), 33.
- Etikan, I., & Bala, K. (2017). Sampling and sampling methods. *Biometrics & Biostatistics International Journal*, 5(6), 00149.
- Farrimond, H. (2012). *Doing ethical research*. Macmillan International Higher Education.
- Fink, A. (2019). *Conducting research literature reviews: From the internet to paper*. Sage.
- Fisher, C. B., & Anushko, A. E. (2008). Research ethics in social science. *The SAGE handbook of social research methods*, 95-109.

- Fisher, J. (2021). How I dealt with my ethics committee and survived. *The Companion to Peace and Conflict Fieldwork*, 17-33.
- Freimuth, V. S., Quinn, S. C., Thomas, S. B., Cole, G., Zook, E., & Duncan, T. (2001). African Americans' views on research and the Tuskegee Syphilis Study. *Social Science & Medicine*, 52(5), 797-808.
- Geissler, P. W. (2013) Public secrets in public health: Knowing not to know while making scientific knowledge. *American Ethnologist*, 40, 13-34.
- Gillam, L., & Guillemin, M. (2018). Reflexivity: Overcoming mistrust between research ethics committees and researchers. *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research Ethics*, London: Sage, pp263-275.
- Gillam, L., & Guillemin, M. (2018). Reflexivity: Overcoming mistrust between research ethics committees and researchers. *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research Ethics*, London: Sage, pp263-275.
- Golafshani, N. (2003). Understanding reliability and validity in qualitative research. *The qualitative report*, 8(4), 597-607.
- Guillemin, M., & Gillam, L. (2004). Ethics, reflexivity, and “ethically important moments” in research. *Qualitative inquiry*, 10(2), 261-280.
- Guta, A., Nixon, S. A., & Wilson, M. G. (2013). Resisting the seduction of “ethics creep”: Using Foucault to surface complexity and contradiction in research ethics review. *Social Science & Medicine*, 98, 301-310.
- Haggerty, K. D. (2004). Ethics creep: Governing social science research in the name of ethics. *Qualitative sociology*, 27, 391-414.

- Harrison, H., Birks, M., Franklin, R., & Mills, J. (2017, January). Case study research: Foundations and methodological orientations. In *Forum qualitative Sozialforschung/Forum: qualitative social research* (Vol. 18, No. 1).
- Hedgecoe, A. M. (2008). Research ethics review and the sociological research relationship. *Sociology*, 42(5), 873-886.
- Hedgecoe, A. M. (2012). Trust and regulatory organizations: The role of local knowledge and facework in research ethics review. *Social Studies of Science*, 42(5), 662-683.
- Hedgecoe, A. M. (2016). Reputational risk, academic freedom and research ethics review. *Sociology*, 50(3), 486-501.
- Hensen, B., Mackworth-Young, C. R. S., Simwinga, M., Abdelmagid, N., Banda, J., Mavodza, C., ... & Weiss, H. A. (2021). Remote data collection for public health research in a COVID-19 era: ethical implications, challenges and opportunities. *Health Policy and Planning*, 36(3), 360-368.
- Horn, L. (2017). Promoting responsible research conduct: A South African perspective. *Journal of Academic Ethics*, 15(1), 59-72.
- Horn, L., Alba, S., Blom, F., Faure, M., Flack-Davison, E., Gopalakrishna, G., ... & Kombe, F. (2022). Fostering Research Integrity through the promotion of fairness, equity and diversity in research collaborations and contexts: Towards a Cape Town Statement (pre-conference discussion paper).
- Hunter, D. (2018). Research Ethics Committees: What are they good for? *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research ethics*, pp 289-300.

- Hyder, A. A., Zafar, W., Ali, J., Ssekubugu, R., Ndebele, P., & Kass, N. (2013). Evaluating institutional capacity for research ethics in Africa: a case study from Botswana. *BMC Medical Ethics*, 14(1), 31.
- Hyytinen, H., & Löfström, E. (2017). Reactively, proactively, implicitly, explicitly? Academics' pedagogical conceptions of how to promote research ethics and integrity. *Journal of Academic Ethics*, 15, 23-41.
- Israel, M. (2014). *Research ethics and integrity for social scientists: Beyond regulatory compliance*. Sage.
- Israel, M., & Hay, I. (2006). *Research ethics for social scientists*. Sage.
- Kadam, R., & Karandikar, S. (2012). Ethics committees in India: Facing the challenges!. *Perspectives in clinical research*, 3(2), 50-56.
- Kara, H. (2017). Methodologies, approaches, and theories. In *Research and Evaluation for Busy Students and Practitioners* (pp. 41-60). Policy Press.
- Kara, H. (2018). Research ethics in the real world. *Euro-Western and Indigenous Perspectives*.
- Kass, N., Dawson, L., & Loyo-Berrios, N. I. (2003). Ethical oversight of research in developing countries. *IRB: Ethics & Human Research*. Vol 25, pp 1–10
- Kasule, M., Wassenaar, D. R., IJsselmuiden, C., & Mokgatla, B. (2016). Silent voices: Current and future roles of African research ethics committee administrators. *IRB*, 38(1), 13-19.
- Keith-Spiegel, P., Koocher, G. P., & Tabachnick, B. (2006). What scientists want from their research ethics committee. *Journal of Empirical Research on Human Research Ethics*, 1(1), 67-81.

- Keith-Spiegel, P., Koocher, G. P., & Tabachnick, B. (2006). What scientists want from their research ethics committee. *Journal of Empirical Research on Human Research Ethics*, 1(1), 67-81.
- Kent, J., Williamson, E., Goodenough, T., & Ashcroft, R. (2002). Social science gets the ethics treatment: research governance and ethical review. *Sociological Research Online*, 7(4), 1-15.
- Klitzman, R. (2015). *The ethics police?: The struggle to make human research safe*. Oxford University Press.
- Kothari, C. R. (2004). Research methodology: Methods and techniques. *New Age International*.
- Kruger, M., Ndebele, P., & Horn, L. (Eds.). (2014). *Research ethics in Africa: a resource for research ethics committees*. African Sun Media.
- Le Grange, L. (2019). A comment on critiques of the article Age-and education-related effects on cognitive functioning in Colored South African women. *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 33(4), 9-19.
- Le Texier, T. (2019). Debunking the Stanford prison experiment. *American Psychologist*, 74(7), 823.
- Liddle, B. J., & Brazelton, E. W. (1996). Psychology faculty satisfaction and compliance with IRB procedures. *IRB: Ethics & Human Research*, 18(6), 4-6.
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Cannella, G. S. (2009). Ethics and the broader rethinking/reconceptualization of research as construct. *Cultural Studies – Critical Methodologies*, 9(2), 273-285.
- Madanhire, C. (2018). An evaluation of the ethical concerns of Zimbabwean Research Ethics Committees (RECs), using the Emanuel et al.(2004) principles and benchmarks (Doctoral dissertation).

- Makola, Z., & Ntoyanto-Tyatyantsi, N. (2023). Post graduate students' experiences with research ethics: A south African perspective. *Journal of Empirical Research on Human Research Ethics*, 18(4), 208-217.
- Mamotte, N., & Wassenaar, D. (2009). Ethics review in a developing country: A survey of South African social scientists' experiences. *Journal of Empirical Research on Human Research Ethics*, 4(4), 69-78.
- Manciocco, A., Chiarotti, F., Vitale, A., Calamandrei, G., Laviola, G., & Alleva, E. (2009). The application of Russell and Burch 3R principle in rodent models of neurodegenerative disease: the case of Parkinson's disease. *Neuroscience & Biobehavioral Reviews*, 33(1), 18-32.
- Marušić, A. (2010). The Singapore statement on research integrity. *Croatian Medical Journal*, 51(5), 381.
- Marušić, A., Bošnjak, L., & Jerončić, A. (2011). A systematic review of research on the meaning, ethics and practices of authorship across scholarly disciplines. *Plos one*, 6(9), e23477.
- Mbabe, W., Ajayi, O., Bagula, A., Leenen, L., & Schoeman, N. (2021). A workflow system for managing ethical clearance in research work. In *2021 IST-Africa Conference (IST-Africa)* (pp. 1-9). IEEE.
- McAreavey, R., & Muir, J. (2011). Research ethics committees: Values and power in higher education. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 14(5), 391-405.
- McCormack, D., Carr, T., McCloskey, R., Keeping-Burke, L., Furlong, K. E., & Doucet, S. (2012). Getting through ethics: The fit between research ethics board assessments and qualitative research. *Journal of Empirical Research on Human Research Ethics*, 7(5), 30-36.
- Mishi, S., & Maredza, A. (2024). *Research methods in economics*. Van Schaik.

- Mortari, L. (2015). Reflectivity in research practice: An overview of different perspectives. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 14(5), n.p.
- Moustafa, K. (2024). University rankings: Time to reconsider. *Bioimpacts*.
- Mpofu, F. Y. (2021). Addressing the saturation attainment controversy: Evidence from the qualitative research on assessing the feasibility of informal sector taxation in Zimbabwe. *Technium Soc. Sci. J.*, 19, 607.
- Munro, A. J. (2011, September 7-8). *Ethics and design research at South African higher education institutions: A prolegomenon*. [Paper presentation] 20/20 Design Vision, University of Johannesburg, South Africa.
- National Health Research Ethics Council (2004) Ethics in Health Research Principles, Structures and Processes. National Department of Health of the Republic of South Africa. Pretoria: NDoH 2004.67p.ISBN: 1-920031-0409
- National Health Research Ethics Council (2015) Ethics in Health Research Principles, Processes and Structures 2nd ed. National Department of Health of the Republic of South Africa. Pretoria: NDoH 2015. 94p
- National Health Research Ethics Council (2024) South African Ethics in Health Research Guidelines: Principles, Processes and Structures 3rd ed. National Department of Health of the Republic of South Africa. Pretoria: NDoH 2024.
- Newman, P. A., Guta, A., & Black, T. (2021). Ethical considerations for qualitative research methods during the COVID-19 pandemic and other emergency situations: Navigating the virtual field. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 20, n.p.
- Njeri, S. (2021). Race, positionality and the researcher. *The companion to peace and conflict fieldwork*, 381-394.

- Noble, H., & Smith, J. (2015). Issues of validity and reliability in qualitative research. *Evidence-based Nursing, 18*(2), 34-35.
- Onwuegbuzie, A. J. (2016). *Seven steps to a comprehensive literature review: A multimodal and cultural approach*. Sage.
- Otto, E. (2007). Law and Ethics. In S. Johnston (Ed.), *Ancient Religions* (pp. 84-97). Cambridge, MA and London, England: Harvard University Press. <https://doi.org/10.4159/9780674039186-011>
- Pachalska, M., Grochmal-Bach, B., MacQueen, B. D., & Frańczuk, B. (2006). Post-traumatic stress disorder in Polish stroke patients who survived Nazi concentration camps. *Medical Science Monitor, 12*(4), 137-149.
- Page, S. A., & Nyeboer, J. (2017). Improving the process of research ethics review. *Research Integrity and Peer Review, 2*(1), 1-7.
- Parsell, M., Ambler, T., & Jacenyik-Trawogger, C. (2014). Ethics in higher education research. *Studies in Higher Education, 39*(1), 166-179.
- Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods* (3rd ed.). Sage.
- Pels, P., Boog, I., Florusbosch, J. H., Kripe, Z., Minter, T., Postma, M., ... & Richards-Rissetto, H. (2018). Data management in anthropology: The next phase in ethics governance? *Social Anthropology/Anthropologie Sociale, 26*(3), 391-413.
- Pope, C. C., De Luca, R., & Tolich, M. (2013). How an exchange of perspectives led to tentative ethical guidelines for visual ethnography. In *Ethics and Academic Freedom in Educational Research* (pp. 97-111). Routledge.
- Posel, D., & Ross, F. C. (Eds.). (2014). *Ethical quandaries in social research*. Cape Town: HSRC Press.

- Posel, D., & Ross, F. C. (Eds.). (2014). *Ethical quandaries in social research*. HSRC Press.
- Prout, A. (2002). Researching children as social actors: an introduction to the children 5–16 programme. *Children & society*, 16(2).
- Ramrathan, L., Le Grange, L., & Shawa, L. B. (2017). Ethics in educational research. *Education Studies for Initial Teacher Education* (pp. 432-443). Juta, Limited
- Rawnsley, A. C. (2014). Cultivating an ethos of openness through research integrity. *Impact of Social Sciences Blog*. <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2014/02/25/cultivating-openness-through-research-integrity/>.
- Reverby, S. M. (Ed.). (2012). *Tuskegee's truths: Rethinking the Tuskegee syphilis study*. UNC Press Books.
- Rudolph, J. (2015). Leedy, PD, & Ormrod, JE (2015). *Practical research. Planning and design*. Boston, MA: Pearson.
- Saidi, A. (2024). Promoting access to, and success in postgraduate education in South Africa: a synthesis of emerging issues. *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 38(1), 1-27.
- Schrag, Z. M. (2011). The case against ethics review in the social sciences. *Research Ethics*, 7(4), 120-131.
- Schreier, B. A., & Stadler, H. A. (1992). Perspectives of research participants, psychologist investigators, and institutional review boards. *Perceptual and Motor Skills*, 74(3 Pt 2), 1067-1072.
- Shaw, D., & Satalkar, P. (2018). Researchers' interpretations of research integrity: A qualitative study. *Accountability in research*, 25(2), 79-93.
- Silaigwana, B., & Wassenaar, D. (2019). Research ethics committees' oversight of biomedical research in South Africa: A thematic analysis of ethical issues raised during ethics review of

non-expedited protocols. *Journal of Empirical Research on Human Research Ethics*, 14(2), 107-116.

Sim, J., Saunders, B., Waterfield, J., & Kingstone, T. (2018). Can sample size in qualitative research be determined a priori?. *International journal of social research methodology*, 21(5), 619-634.

Sims, J. M. (2010). A brief review of the Belmont report. *Dimensions of Critical Care Nursing*, 29(4), 173-174.

Singapore Statement on Research Integrity. (c2010). Available from: <https://wcrif.org/documents/327-singapore-statement-a4size/file>.

Singh, J. A., Wassenaar, D. R., Slack, C. M., & Strode, A. E. (2007). One step forward, two steps back-requiring ministerial approval for all 'non-therapeutic' health research involving minors. *South African Medical Journal*, 97(3), 200-202.

Sivasubramaniam, S., Dlabolová, D. H., Kralikova, V., & Khan, Z. R. (2021). Assisting you to advance with ethics in research: an introduction to ethical governance and application procedures. *International Journal for Educational Integrity*, 17, 1-18.

Skovdal, M., & Cornish, F. (2015). *Qualitative research for development: a guide for practitioners*. Practical Action (Organization).

Snyder, H. (2019). Literature review as a research methodology: An overview and guidelines. *Journal of Business Research*, 104, 333-339.

South African National Standard for the Care and Use of Animals for Scientific Purposes (SANS 10386:2021), produced by the South African Bureau of Standards (SABS)

Spitz, V. (2005). *Doctors from hell: The horrific account of Nazi experiments on humans*. Sentient Publications.

- Todres, L., & Holloway, I. (2004). Descriptive phenomenology: Life world as evidence. In F. Rapport (Ed.), *New qualitative methodologies in health and social care research* (pp. 79-98). Routledge.
- Tolich, M. (2016). Qualitative ethics in practice. In M. Tolich (Ed.), *Qualitative ethics in practice* (pp. 13-24). Routledge.
- Travers, M. (2007). The problem of red tape. *The new bureaucracy* (pp. 119-150). Policy Press.
- Tsan, M. F., & Nguyen, Y. (2019). Improving compliance with institutional review board continuing review requirements. *Journal of Empirical Research on Human Research Ethics*, *14*(4), 365-371.
- Van den Hoonaard, W. C. (2011). *The seduction of ethics: Transforming the social sciences*. University of Toronto Press.
- Wassenaar, D. R., & Mamotte, N. (2012). Ethical issues and ethics reviews in social science research. *The Oxford handbook of international psychological ethics*, 268-282.
- Wassenaar, D. R., & Mamotte, N. (2012). Ethical issues and ethics reviews in social science research. In Editors (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of international psychological ethics* (pp. 268-282). Oxford University Press.
- Weindling, P. (2014). Victims and survivors of Nazi human experiments: Science and suffering in the holocaust. Bloomsbury.
- Weindling, P. (2017). 16 Post-war legacies, 1945–2015. *From Clinic to Concentration Camp*, 337.
- Welland, T., & Pugsley, L. (2018). *Ethical dilemmas in qualitative research*. Routledge.
- Wendel, W. B. (2005). *Legal ethics and the separation of law and morals*. Cornell University School of Law.

Wilkinson, A., Slack, C., Crews, C., Singh, N., Salzwedel, J., & Wassenaar, D. (2021). How can research ethics committees help to strengthen stakeholder engagement in health research in South Africa? An evaluation of REC documents. *South African Journal of Bioethics and Law*, *14*(1), 6-10.

7. APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE: SIYANDA MANQELE

Hi, first off, I would like to start by thanking you for agreeing to be interviewed and assure you that the information that you provide me with today will greatly assist in my research.

For the purposes of the recording can I just ask you state your name and the Department and Faculty at which you are working for as well as the position that you hold at the University.

1. In what way or ways have you been involved in research ethics clearance processes at Rhodes University?

- As a supervisor?
- As a researcher?
- As a reviewer?

2. Over how many years have you been involved?

3. In what Faculty you have been based over this time?

4. My aim is to support the best possible REC system at Rhodes; for that reason, I would encourage you to feel free to be frank and honest when you answer the next questions; let's approach this as doing research on our shared institutional system together, rather than me judging you, or you judging 'my' system.

In that spirit, how have you found the research ethics clearance processes at Rhodes University over these five years?

5. What is the worst aspect of the research ethics clearance processes at Rhodes University in your view?

6. What is the best aspect of the research ethics clearance processes at Rhodes University in your view?

9. What has been the impact of the research ethics clearance processes at Rhodes University, in relation to the following ... Choose one of three options:

Positive impact - No impact - Negative impact. (Please explain your answer if possible).

- On the ethical nature of the research conducted?
- On the quality of the research conducted?
- On the types of research being undertaken?
- On research teaching or supervision?
- On productivity and outputs?
- On the university's reputation?
- Any other aspects?

9. In your view, how important is research ethics in a university context?

10. In your view, is a research ethics clearance system justified?

11. Do you feel that you are adequately equipped to make judgement calls on research ethics?
Please elaborate on your answer.

12. What improvements if any, have you observed over the past five years or so?

13. Do you have any recommendations for (further) improvements? E.g. regarding:

- The reviews
- The online system (ERAS)
- The form
- The overall set-up
- Anything else?

14. Finally, is there anything you would like to add?

APPENDIX B

ACCESS LETTER REQUESTING PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH

Siyanda Manqele

1 Bertram Street

Makhanda

6139

01 March 2021

Dear *Director of Human Resources*

REQUEST FOR PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH

I am a registered *Masters* student in the Department of *CHERTL* at the Rhodes University. My supervisors are *Prof Sioux McKenna, Dr Clement Simuja and Prof Eureta Rosenberg*.

The proposed topic of my research is: *Exploring the experiences of academics in the research ethics clearance process: A case study*. The objectives of the study are:

- (a) To focus solely on the Rhodes University academic staff members regarding ethics review process, across all Faculties. Leveraging inputs from all identified stakeholders, 3 per Faculty. The proposed research will critically investigate academic experiences on research ethics clearance process.

I am hereby seeking your approval for me to interview academic staff at Rhodes University for my study. In order to preserve anonymity of the participants within this research, each participant will be given a number or pseudonym. This will protect their identities, and will identify the participant by faculty only. The Researcher will follow the guiding ethical principles of the Rhodes University Ethics standard committee handbook, to protect the participants' rights to privacy and anonymity, as outlined in Section 2 and 3 of the RUESC handbook.

Anonymity of my records will be maintained and the identity, name or other information of participants will not be revealed to anyone beyond myself and my supervisors. The participants are free to withdraw from the project at any time even after having given consent and the project has commenced.

To assist you in reaching a decision, I have attached to this letter:

- (a) A copy of the ethical clearance certificate issued by the University
- (b) A copy the research instruments which I intend using in my research
- (c) A copy of the ethical clearance letter to be provided to participants

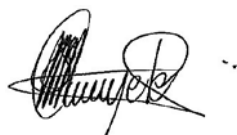
Should you require any further information, please do not hesitate to contact me or my supervisor. Our contact details are as follows:

Siyanda Manqele, siyanda.manjele20@gmail.com or 072 821 5653

Sioux McKenna, s.mckenna@ru.ac.za or 082 562 5671

Upon completion of the study, I undertake to provide you with feedback in the form of an electronic copy of the thesis. Your permission to conduct this study will be greatly appreciated.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Siyanda Manqele', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Siyanda Manqele

APPENDIX C

INFORMED CONSENT DECLARATION

(Participant)

Project Title: Exploring the experiences of academics in the research ethics clearance process:
A case study.

Siyanda Manqele is registered to do my Master's Degree with *CHERTL*, Rhodes University and hereby requests my participation in his study. The nature and the purpose of the research project and of this informed consent declaration have been explained to me in a language that I understand.

I am aware that:

1. The purpose of the research project is to: *To focus on Rhodes University academic staff members' experiences of the ethics review process, across all Faculties.*
2. Rhodes University has given ethical clearance to this research project and I have seen/ may request to see the clearance certificate.
3. By participating in this research project, I will be contributing in a study aimed at benefitting Rhodes University's ethics application processes. It may also assist other universities or policy developers of ethics procedures through its framework of analysis and pointing out of potential pitfalls.
4. I am agreeing to participate in the project in at least one interview, with the possibility of a follow-up interview if necessary.
5. Given the Covid-19 pandemic, the interview may be undertaken online.
6. The interview will last approximately an hour.
7. My participation is entirely voluntary and should I at any stage wish to withdraw from participating further, I may do so without any negative consequences.
8. I will not be compensated for participating in the research.
9. The interview will be audio-recorded.
10. I will be provided with a transcript of the interview and provided with an opportunity to edit or add comment at that stage.

11. My identity will remain anonymous. Neither my name nor any identifying characteristics will be shared. Any quotes from the interview will be ascribed to a pseudonym which might be attached to my faculty but not to my department.
12. I will receive an electronic version of the final thesis.
13. There are minimal risks associated with my participation in the project. Any questions I have can be put to the researcher or his supervisor, *Sioux McKenna*, *contact details: s.mckenna@ru.ac.za*.
14. By signing this informed consent declaration I am not waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies.
15. A copy of this informed consent declaration will be given to me, and the original will be kept by the researcher.

I,have read the above information and confirm that I understand this document's contents. I have asked all questions that I wished to ask and these have been answered to my satisfaction. I have not been pressurised in any way and I voluntarily agree to participate in the above-mentioned project.

.....
Participant's signature **Date**

Rhodes University, Research Office, Ethics

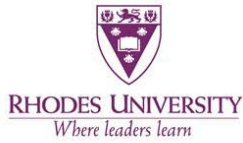
Ethics Coordinator: ethics-committee@ru.ac.za

t: +27 (0) 46 603 7727 f: +27 (0) 86 616 7707

Room 220, Main Admin Building, Drostdy Road, Grahamstown, 6139

APPENDIX D

ETHICAL CLEARANCE CERTIFICATE – ETHICS APPROVAL



Rhodes University, Education Faculty
Research Ethics Committee
PO Box 94, Makhanda, 6140, South Africa
Tel: +27 (0) 46 603 8393
Fax: +27 (0) 46 603 8028
email: e.rosenberg@ru.ac.za

<https://www.ru.ac.za/researchgateway/ethics/>

24/03/2021

Mr Siyanda Manqele

CHERTL

S.Manqele@ru.ac.za

Dear Mr Siyanda Manqele

Re: Exploring the experiences of academics in the research ethics clearance process : A case study

APPLICATION NUMBER: 2021-2802-5953

This letter confirms that your research ethics application has been reviewed and **APPROVED** by the Education Faculty Research Ethics Committee (EF-REC). Your permission letter has been received and you are free to proceed with your study.

Approval is granted for 1 year. An annual progress report is required in order to renew approval for an additional period. You will receive an email notifying you when the progress report is due.

Should any substantive change(s) be made during the research process, that may have ethical implications, you should notify the Education Faculty REC Chair via email. This includes changes in investigators. The REC Chair will advise as to whether a new application is necessary.

Do keep this clearance letter secure and accessible throughout your study and after its completion. It will be needed when a thesis is examined and when publications are submitted to journals.

Please also submit a brief report to the REC Chair on the completion of the research. This can be done via email. The purpose of this report is to indicate whether the research was conducted successfully and whether any ethics-related matters arose that the committee should be aware of, in order to guide future studies. XXX

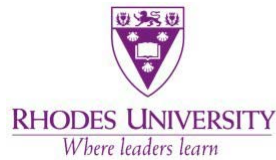
Sincerely,

Prof Eureka Rosenberg

Chair: Education Faculty Research Ethics Committee

APPENDIX E

ETHICAL CLEARANCE CERTIFICATE – RENEWAL/RECERTIFICATION



Rhodes University Human Research Ethics Committee
PO Box 94, Makhanda, 6140, South Africa
t: +27 (0) 46 603 7727
f: +27 (0) 46 603 8822
e: ethics-committee@ru.ac.za

<https://www.ru.ac.za/researchgateway/ethics/>

10 August 2023

Mr Siyanda Manqele

Email: S.Manqele@ru.ac.za

Review Reference: 2023-2802-7881

Dear Mr Siyanda Manqele

Re: Human ethics renewal application: Exploring the experiences of academics in the research ethics clearance process : A case study

Researcher: Mr Siyanda Manqele

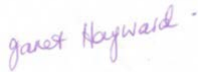
Supervisors: Prof Sioux McKenna ,

This letter confirms that the above Annual Report has been reviewed and **APPROVED** by the Rhodes University Human Research Ethics Committee (RU-HREC). Your Approval number is: 2023-2802-7881

Approval has been granted for 1 year. An annual progress report will be required in order to renew approval for an additional period.

Please ensure that the Human Research Ethics Committee is notified should any substantive change(s) be made, for whatever reason, during the research process. This includes changes in investigators. Please also ensure that a brief report is submitted to the ethics committee on the completion of the research. The purpose of this report is to indicate whether the research was conducted successfully, if any aspects could not be completed, or if any problems arose that the Human Research Ethics Committee should be aware of. If a thesis or dissertation arising from this research is submitted to the library's electronic theses and dissertations (ETD) repository, please notify the committee of the date of submission and/or any reference or cataloguing number allocated.

Sincerely,



Dr Janet Hayward

Chair: Rhodes University Human Research Ethics Committee, RU-HREC

cc: Ethics Coordinator

APPENDIX F

PERMISSION LETTER FROM THE GATEKEEPER



23 March 2021

Mr Siyanda Manqele
1 Bertram Street
MAKHANDA
6139

Dear Mr Manqele

REQUEST TO CONDUCT RESEARCH WITH RHODES UNIVERSITY STAFF AND/OR STUDENTS

This letter is to confirm that your request to conduct research on *“Exploring the experiences of academics in the research ethics clearance process: A case study.”* topic has been approved by the Ethics Committee. In my capacity as Acting HR Director, I do not have any objection should you wish to follow a coordinated approach by surveying and/or interviewing staff.

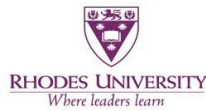
Yours sincerely



Mrs S Robertson
Acting HR Director

APPENDIX G

PROVISIONAL APPROVAL LETTER



Rhodes University, Education Faculty
Research Ethics Committee
PO Box 94, Makhanda, 6140, South Africa
Tel: +27 (0) 46 603 8393
Fax: +27 (0) 46 603 8028
email: e.rosenberg@ru.ac.za

<https://www.ru.ac.za/researchgateway/ethics/>

18/03/2021

Mr Siyanda Manqele

CHERTL

S.Manqele@ru.ac.za

Dear Mr Siyanda Manqele,

Your application "Exploring the experiences of academics in the research ethics clearance process: A case study", number 2021-2802-5953, has been reviewed by the Education Faculty Research Ethics Committee [EF-REC].

Provisional ethics approval has been granted pending Permission being obtained from the Rhodes University Human Resources division to interview staff.

Your application can be downloaded as a PDF version and forwarded with your permission request. Please refer to the Applicant User Guide for how to do so.

Please forward the required permission letter, once received, to the EF-REC Chair (E.Rosenberg@ru.ac.za) and Deputy Chair (pamela.vale@ru.ac.za) in order for your approval to be finalised.

Sincerely



Professor Eureka Rosenberg

Chair: Education Faculty Research Ethics Committee