Research Ethics and Institutional Review Boards in the Social Sciences Ador Revelar Torneo

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Recommended Citation
DOI: https://doi.org/10.59588/2350-8329.1470
Available at: https://animorepository.dlsu.edu.ph/apssr/vol22/iss4/1

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ISSN (Print): 0119-8386, ISSN (Online): 2350-8329

Published and distributed by
De La Salle University Publishing House
2401 Taft Avenue, 0922 Manila, Philippines
Telefax No. (+63 2) 8523-4281
Email: dlsupublishinghouse@dlsu.edu.ph
Website: http://www.dlsu.edu.ph/offices-publishing-house/default.asp

The De La Salle University Publishing House is the publications office of De La Salle University, Manila, Philippines.

Annual Subscription Rates: Foreign libraries and institutions: US$60 (airmail). Individuals: US$50 (airmail). Philippine domestic subscription rates for libraries and institutions: Php1,800, individuals: Php1,300. Please contact Ms. Joanne Castañares for subscription details: telefax: (632) 523-4281, e-mail: dlsupublishinghouse@dlsu.edu.ph.
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Research Ethics and Institutional Review Boards in the Social Sciences

The past few decades have seen increasing attention to ethics in research. Dark periods and events, such as World War II and the Tuskegee experiments, where researchers ignored basic human rights and ethics in their pursuit of knowledge, have led to the establishment of policies and standards meant to ensure the ethical conduct of research and the protection of the well-being of research participants. These days, many academic and research institutions, funding agencies, and academic journals require that studies involving human participants undergo a formal ethics review and approval by an institutional review board (IRB). While the practice originated in the health and biomedical fields, the practice has also spread to the social sciences.

Most institutions in developed countries have well-established policies and procedures for IRB review of research involving human participants. However, IRB policies, procedures, and practices vary considerably between institutions and researchers in the Asia-Pacific, especially in developing countries. While many institutions have started to adopt mandatory IRB reviews for research involving human participants, others do not yet have accredited IRBs or ethics review policies and requirements. In some universities, IRB review and approval are required only for university-funded research and those that receive support from external funding agencies. Some government organizations do not subject their research to IRB review. Many independent social science researchers engage in studies that do not undergo IRB review.

Despite the variations in policies and practices, mandatory IRB reviews and policies are seeing wider adoption in Asia-Pacific. More governments are establishing national policies on research ethics and IRBs. An increasing number of academic and research institutions are following suit, establishing IRBs and related policies and guidelines. Despite these developments, the process has not been smooth sailing due to various issues and challenges. The adoption of mandatory IRB review policies for social science research faces some resistance, and many institutions undergoing this process are experiencing birth pains.

While the IRB review has a long history and widespread acceptance in the health and biomedical fields from which it originated, its history and acceptance in the social sciences are much more limited. In many developing countries in the Asia-Pacific whose adoption of IRB review policies and processes is still in the early stages, I observe resistance, especially from social scientists, who object to some of the premises of this policy and are wary of the implications of such a change.

Appreciation for IRB review can vary, especially in institutions that do not have an established IRB and policies on ethics review. This is likely a manifestation of the varying understanding and appreciation of research ethics among social scientists. For those with limited exposure to research ethics and IRB review, the notion of research ethics may be limited to one or a few ideas, such as securing consent and ensuring the anonymity and privacy of research participants. Some see ethics as a matter of institutional compliance rather than an essential research guiding principle.
Some social scientists argue that many IRB procedures and requirements, originally developed for biomedical and health research, are excessive and inappropriate for social science research. They further argue that the context of social science research is different, and risks to participants are considerably lower and, at times, even negligible or non-existent. They also note that IRB requirements such as signed consent forms and waivers from participants are incompatible with and detrimental to social science research employing methods like ethnography or other approaches that require researchers to employ naturalistic interactions with individuals and communities. As such, even the most ardent supporters of IRB review in the field argue for IRB policies and procedures specifically designed for the realities and particularities of social science research.

There are also concerns about how some IRBs and ethics reviewers tend to have an overly broad interpretation of their mandate and, sometimes, no clear sense of boundaries. I have encountered many ethics reviewers who believe that all aspects of a study concern ethics and thus fall within the scope of their authority. This attitude can trigger or exacerbate interventionist tendencies that can undermine the autonomy of researchers. In some instances, IRBs have been accused of going beyond ethics review and unduly intervening in methodological and technical aspects of studies in which their members have limited or no expertise and have already undergone a separate review and approval by a technical panel of experts. This results in conflicts between the technical panel and IRB to the detriment of researchers.

Another major concern is that IRBs create yet another layer of bureaucracy that is costly to operate but ends up further complicating and slowing down the ability of researchers already operating in an already challenging environment to conduct research. On top of data privacy requirements, researchers must now subject their research to IRB review and monitoring, which can be costly and time-consuming. Institutions and researchers vary in capacity and inclination to comply with standardized IRB policies and processes. Given the many capacity and resource challenges faced by academic and research institutions in many developing countries in the Asia-Pacific, it is inevitable that the rigid and formalized requirement of IRBs is thus seen as another obstacle that hinders scholarly production and further exacerbates existing inequalities between and among countries, institutions, and researchers.

Despite these issues and challenges surrounding IRBs, few reputable social scientists and researchers will argue that ethics review has no place in social science research. Most will agree that social science research should be conducted ethically and will acknowledge the importance of ensuring that the rights and well-being of research participants and researchers are protected. There is also recognition of the value of general principles of research ethics, such as autonomy, non-maleficence, beneficence, and justice, despite disagreements on policies and procedural aspects of IRB reviews. Therefore, the issue is not whether we should dispense with IRB review but rather how we can reasonably operate in a region and during a period where IRB review policies and practices are highly uneven and still developing.

Since its establishment, the Asia-Pacific Social Science Review (APSSR) has put importance on research ethics but has stopped short of putting a hard requirement for IRB clearances for all studies involving human participants. This is an acknowledgment that the journal operates in a region where deep socio-economic inequality persists, and IRB policies, practices, and capacities vary considerably. Cognizant of this reality, the APSSR seeks to find a balance between ensuring that the studies it publishes have been conducted ethically while at the same time ensuring that contributors who may be disadvantaged by stringent requirements for IRB review (e.g., those outside the academe, those in institutions that do not have accredited IRBs, and those engaged in studies that receive limited or no financial support) are not excluded. The diverse selection of articles in this issue of the journal reflects this policy and practice.

In this issue, Jihyeon Bae explores the impact of Chinese patronage and what she argues is economic and normative support for autocrats on Southeast Asian democracy. Andrei Raymund R. Relente and Erik Paolo S. Capistrano describe how they adapted an innovation self-efficacy scale originally designed for students of engineering and applied it to college students taking up business management in the Philippines. On the other
hand, Hang Thanh Pham and colleagues examine the narratives of young boy novices studying in two temples in Thailand and Vietnam using qualitative phenomenology. Using Pope Francis’ social encyclical Fratelli Tutti as a lens, Gerardo Lanuza argues that community pantries that proliferated during the Philippines’ pandemic are expressions of “social charity” that can be transformed into “political charity” that provide an alternative to the failed promises of neoliberal ethos.

Nadeem Akhtar and colleagues examine the influence of group inclusion on employee satisfaction and ethical leadership, as well as the impact of the mediating role of the latter two on service innovation readiness based on data collected from business schools in Pakistan. Titaree Boontantrapiwat and Patreeya Kitcharoen use meta-analysis to examine organizational commitment from any level and effect sizes between organizational-related variables and individual-related variables and teachers’ organizational commitment. Using an index consisting of stability, economy, and diversity of energy production and exports, Youngmin Yoon examines the energy security of Russia.

Kyle H. Tan’s article provides a scoping review of Malaysian research and examines the prevalence of cis-heterosexualist attitudes towards LGBTQ in Malaysia and its associated contributing factors. Min Wei and collaborators’ research brief offers a scoping review of the relevant academic literature on patient preferences for Traditional Chinese Medicine in China and its contributing factors, identifying relevant research gaps and proposing directions for future research. Jing Chen provides a compelling review of the book Lore and Verse: Poems on History in Early Medieval China, authored by Yue Zhang and published in 2022 by the University of New York Press.

As a matter of policy and practice, the Editors of the APSSR request contributors of manuscripts based on studies involving human participants to make explicit declarations on IRB review and approval. Those who submit manuscripts based on studies that did not undergo an IRB review may be requested to explain why their study did not undergo an ethics review and how they ensured ethical conduct. On this basis, we evaluate each contribution on a case-by-case basis and reserve our right to decline manuscripts where we deem there is a high risk or potential violation of ethical research principles. This policy is bound to change as mandatory IRB review is widely adopted and institutionalized across Asia-Pacific. The APSSR will continuously review and update its policies in line with accepted practices within international journals. We ask our contributors, reviewers, and readers to bear with us as we undergo this challenging but necessary change.
Guidelines for Authors

1. The APSSR welcomes original and unpublished manuscripts discussing any topic in the social sciences situated in or with significant implications for the Asia-Pacific region.[1] As a multidisciplinary journal, the APSSR encourages diversity and inclusiveness and welcomes submissions from the various social science disciplines and authors in all regions and countries of the Asia-Pacific. The APSSR is also hospitable to Humanities research and will consider submissions in Literary, Translation, and/or Cultural Studies, particularly if they engage with issues pertaining to the Asia-Pacific region.

2. The APSSR encourages and welcomes submissions from different social science disciplines, regions, countries, and epistemological, ontological, and methodological traditions. The journal may decline a second or third consecutive submission from authors whose works have been recently published or accepted in APSSR to maintain the diversity of contributors and provide publication opportunities for other scholars.

3. The APSSR categorizes manuscripts into two—Research Articles and Research Briefs. Research articles are full-length submissions longer than 5,000 words but less than or equal to 8,000 words, including references. Research Briefs are shorter manuscripts less than or equal to 5,000 words in length but are short of a full article. It may present partial results or preliminary findings of ongoing research. Manuscripts submitted as Research Briefs cannot be converted to a Research Article after submission.

4. Authors may submit manuscripts anytime through the APSSR’s ScholarOne™ Submission Platform. Submissions to APSSR must be a single MS Word file bearing the Abstract and keywords (note: these parts are not applicable to Research Briefs), Introduction, Methods, Results, Discussion, Conclusion, References, Acknowledgements, and declarations of Funding Source/s, Ownership, Conflict of Interest and Ethical Clearance, as appropriate. The Abstract must state the rationale, objectives, methods, results, and conclusions but should be no more than 500 words.

5. Authors may include a maximum of five tables and high-resolution figures in a manuscript. These should be placed in their exact locations within the manuscript rather than at its end or in a separate file. Tables, figures, in-text citations, and references should abide by the rules of the American Psychological Association 7th Edition (APA). References in non-Roman scripts and non-English languages must have their English versions. Include the URL and/or DOI of each of the cited sources in the References section. Lastly, author names and affiliations should not appear on the document. The journal will only entertain manuscripts that follow the journal guidelines.

6. All submitted manuscripts will undergo preliminary screening, which includes: similarity check (is the similarity rating justifiable and acceptable?), writing (is the English Language expression correct and clear?), completeness, and organization (does it have all the required sections?), and formatting (are the sections appropriately done according to the rules of the journal and the APA Style guide?). The journal editors may decide to review, unsubmit, or reject manuscripts at this stage.

7. Manuscripts that pass the screening are queued for desk review and evaluation by the journal editors. The APSSR editors evaluate submitted manuscripts based on several criteria, which may include but are not limited to:
   • Alignment of the topic to the scope of APSSR (i.e., interesting, relevant, or emerging topics situated within or with implications to the Asia-Pacific region)
   • A compelling rationale for the study (i.e., clear research problem, well-articulated research questions or objectives, compelling significance)
   • Soundness and clarity of methodology (i.e., appropriateness of the selected method for the study and sufficiency of information about the research design and specific method of data collection and analysis)
   • Quality of data and analytical rigor (i.e., adequacy of data and how well the analysis support the interpretation and conclusion)
   • Coherence and organization of the manuscript (i.e., the manuscript is well-organized and the different parts and sections go well together)
   • Potential contribution to scholarship and/or practice (i.e., the value of the contributions of the manuscript justify publication)

8. The APSSR editors will determine which manuscripts will proceed to external review during desk review and evaluation. The editors may decide to proceed to external review, unsubmit, or reject submissions at this stage.
9. A queued manuscript means it will be considered for publication but only after it is peer-reviewed. APSSR adopts a double-blind review process. Review results are sent to the corresponding author once available. The reviewers may recommend accept, minor revision, major revision, or reject. The editors will consolidate and relay the results of the review along with comments and instructions.

10. Authors whose manuscripts have been recommended for revision are expected to provide their detailed responses to the comments provided by the reviewers and editors. Authors are also expected to provide information to facilitate further review. These include brief descriptions of changes to the manuscript and information on where these are located (e.g., page number, paragraph, line). Final decisions on manuscripts recommended for revisions will be made based on the evaluation of the revised manuscripts and the response to the reviewers and editors.

11. Acceptance of a manuscript for publication is tentative until the authors have satisfactorily addressed the required revisions and complied with the journal instructions. The APSSR reserves the right not to publish an accepted manuscript if the author fails to carry out requested revisions, promptly return a signed Copyright Agreement form, and/or comply with other journal requirements or instructions.

12. All decisions regarding review, acceptance, and publication of manuscripts shall rest with the journal Editorial Board. Manuscripts accepted for publication are queued on a first-come, first-served basis, according to the four regular editions—March (online edition only), June (online and print editions), September (online edition only), and December (online and print editions).

13. Accepted manuscripts are copy edited and are emailed to the corresponding authors for the appropriate action based on the suggested changes of the copy editor. Thereafter, the copy edited and author-checked version is formatted. Finally, the proof, along with instructions on accessing and completing the Copyright Agreement, is emailed to the corresponding author for proper action.

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