

Ethics in Research

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Moses and The Ten Commandments, Hippocrates, Gautama Buddha, Mahatma Gandhi, and Martin Luther King Jr. are all names of historical pioneers that pushed the issue of humanity to the forefront through their workings. Yet, “the greatest unethical disasters have happened in this world because of discrimination based on race, gender, color, accent, religion, and citizenship” (Macha & McDonough, 2012). Although many advances in clinical research have occurred regarding clinical ethics, unethical incidences continue to occur in our global communities.

Research ethics exist in response to unethical practices in early historical research studies involving humans. The question of ethics arises when conscience and thoughts fail to agree (Macha & McDonough, 2012). The events in the movie occurred in the 1950s, the same time period that began to pioneer research ethics. Before the 1960s, there were few to no rules, standards, or guidelines in place for research using human subjects, that is, until the establishment of the institutional review board (IRB) system following the National Research Act of 1974.

Present-day regulations of research involving human subjects are robust and multidimensional. Polit and Beck (2021) outlined the requirements governing current IRB decisions. Requirements include the risks to participants being minimized and reasonable in relation to the anticipated benefits, the selection of participants being equitable, informed consent will be sought and appropriately documented, adequate provision is made for monitoring the research to ensure participants’ safety, privacy, and confidentiality of the data and when a vulnerable group is involved, appropriate additional safeguards are included. There are further

definitions as to the number and affiliations of members composing the IRB as well as the actions, they must take based on the amount of risk the proposed study presents.

The study practices shared in the movie were not approved or monitored by any type of regulatory body such as the Institutional Review Board (IRB), Research Ethics Board (ERB), ethical review board, or independent ethics committee (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2023). Based in the 1950s, the research conducted by Truman Capote occurred prior to the establishment of the Institutional Review Board. The gathering of information swiftly occurred immediately after Capote shared the desire to bring life to the story with his mentor and financier. The next day he and co-researcher, Harper Lee found themselves on a train bound for Kansas.

The study participants in the movie were subject to discomfort and psychological distress. Those interviewed were grappling with grief and all the emotions involved with the trauma surrounding the murders. There were two murderers identified in this case, but only one (Perry Smith) became the focus of the movie and research conducted by Truman Capote. Detective Al Dewey was the primary investigator of the murders. He was also a good friend to the victim and his family. The effects of the research arguably caused psychological effects on all the involuntary participants. Capote did not take steps to remove, prevent, or minimize harm. In fact, he had total disregard for the effects his actions would have on any of the participants. From disregarding Perry's request to not visit or contact his sister to her request to not provide Perry with photos he received from her. Perry, himself, was forced to relive traumas from his childhood due to the line of questioning Capote enlisted upon him.

The risks to a particular group or participants should never outweigh the risk of harm. There was no benefit to the participants in this study. Conversely, there was risk and discomfort experienced by the participants. There could be a fair argument made that the benefits of

researching the thoughts and actions of a murderer may outweigh the risk of discomfort experienced by participants regarding public safety and awareness.

Coercion was a predominant method of involvement used throughout the movie. From manipulating Detective Dewey's wife to get into their home to bringing an autographed book to the housekeeper, coercion was evident throughout the movie. There was further manipulation using money, attention, and lying about the amount of progress being made on the work. Attaining a "proper attorney" for the appeal of the conviction early in the movie was self-serving as Capote needed more time to "get the story" from his subject only to turn around and refuse to assist in the same way as the death penalty swiftly approached to get the end of the story. Bribery money was paid to the jail officials to allow Capote immediate and unlimited access to his participants. Consent was never witnessed.

Participants were not aware they were participating in a study. They were never provided with the purpose or nature of the research. There were no steps taken to safeguard the privacy of participants. Quite the opposite, Capote used names and details to manipulate participants into giving him the information he wanted. Capote and his antics were the topic of discussion across the entire community. It was never made apparent to the viewer what the purpose of the study truly was other than penning a written work. His purpose shifted as often as the person he was talking to.

There was no evidence of informed consent. Informed consent means participants have adequate information about the research, understand that information, and agree or refuse to participate voluntarily (Polit & Beck, 2021). Comprehensive informed consent is now required for enrolling participants in a study. The nature of the study in this movie is that of a qualitative study. Polit and Beck stated that qualitative studies requiring repeated contact with participants

may have difficulty obtaining fully informed consent prior to the gathering of data. Ongoing and evolving consent as part of a qualitative study is defined as process consent. This consent practice allows participants to have a role in making decisions about ongoing participation. By the given definition of process consent, it would be justifiable that appropriate informed consent was not obtained. However, there was no structure of consent at any point in the film.

The primary subject in this movie, Perry Smith, was a vulnerable participant related to his status as a poor prisoner, of minority status. Literally grappling with his own mortality, Perry Smith saw Capote's efforts to stay alive. There were no special precautions used to protect his vulnerable status. There was disregard for his vulnerable status and an intimidation approach utilized by Capote to gain information. According to Polit and Beck (2021), prisoners who have lost autonomy in many ways may feel constrained in their ability to refuse consent. This was likely the case for Perry Smith.

There was a certain amount of hospitality evident in the movie, however, as the observer, much of that hospitality is viewed as manipulation. Capote abused the sense of community in this small town to his benefit. Respect for persons, a guiding principle identified in the Belmont Report in addition to the Benedictine values, was not upheld. Participants' requests were not honored, nor were their confidence or identity. Prayer was not evident in the movie. Capote displayed much gluttony from his lavish lifestyle to his seismic demands of those around him. Moderation was not evident. Service was also lacking, perhaps most notably at the end when Capote declined the opportunity to help in preserving the life of Perry Smith through his vast resources.

I had not previously watched this movie. I chose to watch it twice. I watched it for the first time after receiving the syllabus, but prior to starting the coursework for this class. I then

watched it again after starting the course and reviewing the assignment and had a different view and understanding of the ethics involved in research including the assignment itself. I think my approach was beneficial as the second viewing offered the opportunity for a very different understanding of the lack of ethics as they are now defined. The ANA lists Respect for Human Dignity as Provision 1 in the Code of Ethics and is the expectation that “the nurse practices with compassion and respect for the inherent dignity, worth, and unique attributes of every person”. That was not evident in the movie. The common theme was manipulation. Provision 3 of the ANA Code of Ethics identifies The Right to Privacy as “the nurse promotes, advocates for, and protects the rights, health, and safety of the patient” (ANA Code of Ethics, 2015). The fundamental ethical principles identified by the Belmont Report include respect for persons, beneficence, and justice (Macha & McDonough, 2012). Truman Capote showed a complete lack of respect for persons throughout the movie. His investigative journalist approach was that of getting the story at all costs. Beneficence is defined as the ethical principle that seeks to maximize benefits for study participants and prevent harm (Polit & Beck, 2021). Beneficence was not practiced as part of the research. According to Macha and McDonough (2012), justice is the ethical principle that includes the concept of fairness. Benefits and risks should be equally distributed across participants. ▀

In conclusion, it is important to acknowledge that current policies and procedures in place regarding clinical research and research ethics are present in direct relation to historical ethical dilemmas that human subjects were victims of. The human element in research needs to be at the forefront of research design with special attention given to the ethical principles of beneficence, respect for persons, and justice. Witnessing such inadequate considerations in the movie, Capote through the lens of a researcher, make it difficult to watch. ▀

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