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Inquiring to Benefit Society While Protecting Subjects: The Debates, Complexities and Moral Obligations of the IRB Review Process

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Abstract

Whitney's text *Balanced Ethics Review: A Guide for Institutional Review Board Members* highlights and problematizes pertinent issues in the Institutional Review Board (IRB) review process with a focus on the USA. The book, which is meant for "IRB member or chair" engages readers in exploring in-depth and from multiple perspectives the debates on the roles and responsibilities of IRBs. Within this context, the author demonstrates the need for the IRB process that balances the protection of human subjects with the benefits of research to the society. Furthermore, the book engages readers in exploring and reflecting on the intersections between power relations, and the moral obligations of IRBs. Moreover, insights are provided into the work of federal agencies that "control the IRB system."

Keywords

IRBs, Power Relations and IRBs, Evaluating Research Protocols, Efficient IRB Review Process, Ethical Considerations

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Inquiring to Benefit Society While Protecting Subjects: The Debates, Complexities and Moral Obligations of the IRB Review Process

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In the text *Balanced Ethics Review: A Guide for Institutional Review Board Members*, Whitney contributes significantly to what it means to conduct the IRB review process that balances the protection of human subjects with the benefits of the research to the society. In his own words: "Your IRB should consider both the subject and society" (2016, p. 14). For Whitney, the IRB process that considers these two factors is not only acting ethically but also manifesting its moral obligations. In his endeavour to demonstrate the importance of a review process that balances these two equally significant considerations, the author engages readers in a discussion that raises issues that are controversial, complex and often contested in the work of IRBs. Indeed, the maxim that research is not a value-free intellectual endeavour and process is manifestly illustrated. Of note is that the issues are situated within biomedical and social sciences research instead of just focusing on one of these disciplines.

Whitney is concerned that "Many contemporary IRBs have lost balance and focus" (2016, p. viii) on the two considerations aforementioned. Consequently, IRBs often engage in practices and processes that overshadow their key mandate because of the play of unequal power relations in the assertion of gatekeeping authority. He significantly attributes this to what he refers to as the "curse of power" that IRBs have in exercising judgement derived from or based on expertise of professional knowledge canons. In this context, he convincingly explains and justifies the power of IRBs in reviewing and approving research protocols. Furthermore, he provides informative examples on how the intricacies of the "curse of power" are often realized in activities that suggest that IRBs are pursuing the goals of other people and thus expanding the scope of their power. Examples include IRBs averting controversy, preventing lawsuits as well as protecting scientists, research assistants, companies and communities. Justification on why IRBs should not engage in such activities is provided. Within this context, views of diverse scholars, some of whose perspectives differ from what the author is advocating for, are utilized. This is commendable since it might encourage IRB members like myself to engage with the issues critically and in the process make informed choices and decisions.

As a resource that targets IRB members, this text has an organizational structure that is informative. The main content of each of the nine chapters is concisely captured through

chapter titles and sub-headings that are used in the list of contents that is provided. In addition, an insightful Preface highlights among others, the aims of the text and its structure. The latter focuses on the terminology used in the text, IRB related knowledge or information/knowledge that is included and excluded as well as the system of citing authors that the author utilizes. More than that, the Preface has the section “Where to start reading.” Within this context, a guided reading or exploration of the text is provided for various IRB members such as chairs, community members as well as new and experienced members. Hence, implying that the text does not have to be read in a linear manner starting with the first chapter and following through the last chapter. This type of reading is unique in that, to the best of my knowledge, most authors do not normally suggest to readers where they should start reading their texts. Closely related to all this is that, the author uses the first chapter to summarize the text. He explains that, “the manual is summarized in the introductory chapter” (2016, p. 1). Furthermore, the links between this chapter and subsequent ones is not only explained but also realized.

The significant role that the IRB system can contribute to the society is given precedence in this text. Hence, *Balanced Ethics Review: A Guide for Institutional Review Board members* is packed with information pertaining to the IRB process. This includes information on the (a) intersections between censorship and the review of research that is sensitive, controversial or politically charged; (b) main principles that should be embodied in the operations of IRBs including their interactions with researchers; (c) informed *consent* process; (d) the IRB review process; (e) ethical considerations and (f) intersections between the FDA, OHRP and the IRB system. Of note too is the chapter that focuses on “biomedical research topics” which exemplifies the epitome of ethically challenging research. The fact that Whitney recognizes and appreciates the contribution that the IRB system can make to society is also evident in his encouragement to IRB members to make informed decisions and choices that they can support with published data or evidence. This is further evident in the insightful examples that are provided on how IRBs can contribute to the knowledge production and reform processes for purposes of “optimal IRB functioning.” Not only is the information on all these issues problematized, it is also situated in the research literature. This indeed provides an in-depth understanding of the IRB process. As an IRB member, I find the topics/issues raised and their analysis compelling because I can relate to some of them.

The use of personal pronouns to address readers, also contributes to the pragmatic impact of this text. In addressing readers, they are referred to as “you” and “your” and thus making it possible for IRB members like myself to personally identify with the text and in the process reflect on our roles and responsibilities. In all, this style of writing makes it possible for the author to give practical advice and guidance to IRB members in a positive, compelling tone that has the potential of making them to visualize and locate themselves in the given scenarios for ethical reflection.

With its emphasis on the IRB process, this text contributes significantly to the field of research ethics. IRB members can further contribute to this field if they act on Whitney’s invitation for IRBs to contribute to the knowledge production process by partially addressing the questions that he suggests in the last chapter. The fact that the questions are linked to specific parts/sections of the text matches the author’s view that the work of IRBs should be dynamic, a phenomenon that he explains can be achieved, among others, through participation in relevant reform initiatives as well as the knowledge production process. In all, Whitney’s style of writing makes the text easy to read and immerses the reader into what it means to be an IRB member. Reiterating some of the information throughout the text in ways that emphasize key information as well as signalling how various parts of the text are linked, makes the text appealing. This text can certainly appeal to novices as well as experienced IRB members in various parts of the world. It can also be beneficial to research methods course instructors.

Reference

Whitney, S. N. (2016). *Balanced ethics review: A guide for institutional review board members*. New York, NY: Springer International Publishing.

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