

ETHICAL DIMENSIONS OF PARTICIPANT SELECTION IN SENSITIVE SOCIAL RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT: This conceptual review examines the ethical frameworks and principles that guide participant selection in sensitive social research contexts. Through a critical review of existing literature on research ethics, sampling methodologies, and the protection of vulnerable groups, it identifies key ethical tensions in sample selection and proposes a framework for ethically responsible participant recruitment. Sensitive research, characterised by studies involving vulnerable populations, stigmatised behaviours, or emotionally charged topics, presents unique ethical challenges in determining participant eligibility and recruitment methods. This paper synthesizes ethical principles from the Belmont Report, institutional review board guidelines, and current scholarship to demonstrate how informed consent, beneficence, justice, and cultural sensitivity influence sampling decisions. The analysis reveals that ethical sample selection necessitates balancing scientific rigor with participant protection, ensuring inclusivity without exploitation, and maintaining confidentiality while achieving representative samples. This study contributes to the discourse on research ethics by offering a comprehensive ethical framework focused on the often-overlooked issue of participant selection in sensitive research, along with practical guidance for researchers, ethics committees, and institutional review boards.

Keywords: Research Ethics, Participant Selection, Sensitive Research, Vulnerable Populations, Sampling Methodology, Informed Consent

INTRODUCTION

Since the establishment of the Nuremberg Code in 1947, the protection of human research participants has been the cornerstone of ethical scientific practice, leading to the formulation of comprehensive ethical standards. Contemporary guidelines underscore the imperative for researchers to prioritise the welfare of individuals involved in or affected by research and its outcomes (Rivera et al., 2022). However, ethical considerations extend to the preliminary stages of the research, particularly the selection and recruitment of participants. The process of sample selection represents a critical yet frequently neglected ethical dimension of the research methodology. The repercussions of careless or ethically dubious sampling decisions are profound and extensive, potentially harming participants, compromising research integrity, misguiding policy development, and resulting in significant resource wastage (Rivera et al., 2022). These concerns are especially pronounced in research areas characterised by sensitivity, such as studies involving vulnerable populations, stigmatised behaviours, or emotionally charged subjects, including mental health, trauma, abuse, sexual health, end-of-life issues, or experiences of marginalisation (Knot et al., 2020; Pascoe Leahy, 2022). Despite the substantial body of literature

on research ethics, specific ethical considerations related to participant selection in sensitive research contexts remain dispersed across disciplines and are insufficiently integrated. While scholars have explored informed consent procedures (Karunaratna et al., 2024), confidentiality protections (Raji et al., 2020), and vulnerability assessments (Liamputtong, 2007), there is a paucity of systematic analyses on how these ethical principles should specifically inform sampling decisions. This gap is particularly concerning given that sampling choices directly influence who bears the burdens of research, who benefits from participation, and whose perspectives are represented in the production of knowledge.

Purpose and Significance

This study examines the application of established ethical frameworks in guiding participant selection for sensitive research. It emphasises the influence of the core principles of respect for persons, beneficence, and justice, as outlined in the Belmont Report (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioural Research, 1979), on practical sampling decisions involving vulnerable or marginalised groups. By integrating ethical guidelines, methodological literature, and empirical studies on sensitive research, this analysis provides researchers and ethics committees with a comprehensive framework for evaluating the moral dimensions of sample selection.

This analysis is particularly pertinent in light of the increasing acknowledgement of historical injustices in research participation, the heightened emphasis on community-engaged research methodologies, and the expansion of research on previously understudied vulnerable populations. Understanding the ethical considerations of participant selection is essential for conducting research that is both scientifically rigorous and socially just, while upholding human dignity.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research deemed sensitive encompasses studies that investigate topics likely to elicit emotional responses, disclose personal information, or expose participants to potential harm (Pietylä et al., 2020). Knot et al. (2020) propose a valuable typology, categorizing sensitive research into three domains: studies involving inherently vulnerable groups (such as individuals with mental illnesses, survivors of abuse, and marginalized communities); research on taboo subjects (such as sexual health, racial discrimination, and end-of-life issues); and investigations concerning conditions associated with stigma, oppression, or discrimination. This classification underscores that sensitivity may arise from participant characteristics, research topics, or the potential consequences of participation. The ethical implications of conducting sensitive research are substantial. Participants may experience psychological distress when recounting traumatic experiences (Mathews et al., 2022), face social or legal repercussions if confidentiality is compromised (Raji et al., 2020), or be susceptible to coercion due to power imbalances with researchers (Liamputtong, 2019). Mwambari et al. (2022) emphasise that sensitive research conducted in conflict-affected or post-colonial contexts introduces additional ethical complexities, including historical trauma, community distrust of researchers, and the risk of perpetuating existing power structures. These factors necessitate heightened ethical vigilance throughout the research process, commencing with participant selection. Foundational Ethical Principles in Research

The Belmont Report (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioural Research, 1979) delineated three fundamental principles for the ethical conduct of research involving human subjects: respect for persons, beneficence, and justice. The principle of respect for persons requires acknowledging participants' autonomy and providing additional safeguards for those with diminished autonomy. Beneficence obligates researchers to optimise benefits while minimising harm. Justice demands the equitable distribution of research burdens and benefits across populations.

While these principles are widely endorsed, their application to sampling decisions in sensitive research contexts remains theoretically underdeveloped. Shamoo and Resnik (2009) argue that respect for individuals necessitates ensuring that participants can make truly voluntary decisions regarding participation, free from coercion or undue influence—a particularly challenging task when recruiting vulnerable groups who may feel compelled to participate due to power imbalances. Ross et al. (2018) demonstrate that beneficence in sampling involves a careful assessment of whether potential participants are more likely to benefit from participation or encounter research-related burdens, extend the principle of justice to sampling, asserting that researchers must ensure that vulnerable populations are neither systematically excluded from research (thus denying them potential benefits) nor unfairly burdened with participation.

Informed Consent and Participant Autonomy

Informed consent is the primary mechanism for respecting individuals in research contexts. Karunarathna et al. (2024) define informed consent as a voluntary agreement to participate, contingent upon receiving comprehensive information regarding the study's objectives, procedures, risks, and benefits. Nonetheless, obtaining meaningful informed consent in sensitive research presents distinct challenges. Sánchez et al. (2001) underscore the tension between providing detailed risk information and avoiding unnecessary alarms that could deter participation. Zhao et al. (2018) discovered that participants in sensitive health research often struggle to comprehend complex risk information, particularly when experiencing emotional distress.

These challenges in obtaining consent have direct implications for sample selection. Suppose specific populations consistently encounter difficulties providing informed consent due to literacy levels, cognitive impairments, or language barriers. In that case, researchers face the decision of whether to exclude these groups—potentially contravening principles of justice—or to develop enhanced consent procedures that require additional resources and may introduce selection bias. Gordon (2021) addresses this dilemma in research involving minors by proposing developmentally appropriate assent procedures that respect emerging autonomy while acknowledging limited decision-making capacity. Rangel and Valdez (2017) advocate for culturally appropriate consent materials that consider language, literacy, and cultural context, thereby facilitating more equitable participation across diverse populations.

Confidentiality and Privacy Protection

In sensitive research contexts, safeguarding participant confidentiality is of utmost importance, as breaches may lead to stigmatisation, discrimination, or legal repercussions. Raji et al. (2020)

underscore that confidentiality considerations should guide sampling decisions, given that specific recruitment strategies inherently entail greater privacy risks. For example, snowball sampling, wherein participants recruit others, may inadvertently reveal identities within social networks (Li et al., 2022). Conversely, recruitment through healthcare providers may raise concerns about the privacy of medical records (Bruynseels, Santoni de Sio, and Van Den Hoven, 2018).

These privacy considerations intricately interact with sampling methodologies. Braun and Clarke (2023) note that accessing 'hidden populations,' such as individuals engaged in stigmatised behaviours, often requires sampling methods that compromise some degree of anonymity, thereby creating ethical tensions between research feasibility and participant protection. Newman, Guta, and Black (2021) examined how the transition to digital research methods during the COVID-19 pandemic introduced new confidentiality challenges in sample selection, as online recruitment and data collection heightened concerns regarding data security and participant verification.

Vulnerability and Power Dynamics

Vulnerability represents a central concern in sensitive research ethics, yet it remains a contested concept. Shaver (2005) defined vulnerable populations as groups susceptible to coercion, undue influence, or exploitation due to cognitive, social, or economic circumstances. However, Liamputtong (2007) critiques deficit-based vulnerability frameworks that position certain groups as inherently incapable of autonomous decision-making, arguing instead for contextual vulnerability assessment that recognises how research design and social structures create or exacerbate vulnerability.

This reconcept has important implications for sample selection. Instead of categorically excluding vulnerable populations, Jiménez (2021) argues that researchers should address power imbalances through research design using trauma-informed methodologies and reflexive practices that consider how researcher positionality impacts sampling decisions. Carter et al. (2021) discuss ethical approaches to recruiting marginalised populations—including homeless individuals, people with addiction, and unemployed persons—highlighting the importance of avoiding exploitation while not assuming incapacity. This scholarship indicates that ethical sample selection requires a case-by-case evaluation of how specific recruitment strategies might either create or reduce vulnerability rather than applying blanket exclusions based on group membership.

Cultural Sensitivity and Community Engagement

Cultural insensitivity in sample selection can perpetuate research injustices and yield invalid results. Silverio et al. (2022) identify cultural biases, stereotypes, and ethnocentrism as significant ethical concerns in participant recruitment, particularly in cross-cultural research. Indigenous research scholars have been particularly vocal about the necessity for culturally appropriate sampling approaches that respect community sovereignty and knowledge systems (Jiménez, 2021). Community-based participatory research (CBPR) has emerged as a methodological response to these concerns. Wallerstein and Duran (2010) demonstrate that CBPR approaches—which involve community members in research design, including sampling decisions—can enhance both ethical standards and research validity by ensuring recruitment strategies reflect community values and

priorities. However, Liamputtong (2019) noted that meaningful community engagement demands significant time and resources, which can conflict with funding deadlines and academic incentive structures that may pressure researchers to adopt quicker but less ethical sampling methods.

Synthesis and Gaps in Current Literature

The reviewed literature underscores the general principles of research ethics and the specific ethical challenges inherent in conducting sensitive research. Nonetheless, several gaps are apparent within the existing body of literature. Firstly, the majority of scholarly work prioritises ethical considerations in data collection over those related to sample selection, despite the significant ethical implications of sampling decisions. Secondly, the literature often addresses individual ethical principles—such as consent, confidentiality, and vulnerability—in isolation, rather than examining their interactions within the context of sampling decisions. Thirdly, most ethical guidance is derived from Western, high-income contexts, with limited attention given to ethical sampling considerations in low-resource or non-Western settings. This represents a notable gap, particularly given that much sensitive research pertains to global health and development issues. This study seeks to address these gaps by providing an integrated analysis of how multiple ethical principles should inform sample selection decisions in sensitive research, accounting for diverse research contexts and methodological approaches.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a conceptual analysis methodology, synthesising and critically evaluating existing literature on research ethics, sampling methodologies, and sensitive research practices. Conceptual analysis is considered appropriate when the research objective is to elucidate concepts, explore interrelationships between ideas, and develop theoretical frameworks, rather than to generate empirical data (Jaakkola, 2020). Given that this study aims to examine how established ethical principles apply to the specific domain of participant selection in sensitive research, a conceptual approach facilitates a systematic analysis of ethical frameworks and their implications for sampling practices.

Analytical Approach

The analysis was conducted in several stages. Initially, I performed a comprehensive review of foundational texts in research ethics, including the Belmont Report, the Declaration of Helsinki, and institutional review board guidelines from prominent research institutions. Subsequently, I examined the scholarly literature on sampling methodologies in social and health research, identifying key sampling approaches along with their methodological strengths and limitations. Furthermore, I explored the empirical and theoretical literature on sensitive research across disciplines, including public health, psychology, sociology, and anthropology, with a focus on scholarship addressing ethical challenges in researching vulnerable or marginalised populations. From this literature, I identified key ethical principles related to participant selection and highlighted specific sampling scenarios that present moral dilemmas.

Scope and Limitations

This conceptual analysis explicitly addresses the ethical considerations pertinent to sample selection in sensitive social research. It does not encompass all facets of research ethics, such as those related to data analysis or dissemination, nor does it provide empirical evidence on how researchers make sampling decisions. The framework developed herein is intended to serve as normative guidance, illustrating how ethical principles should influence sampling, rather than offering a descriptive account of current practices. Furthermore, while I have endeavoured to incorporate diverse perspectives, the literature predominantly draws from Western research contexts and English-language publications. Ethical considerations in sample selection may vary across cultural and institutional settings in ways not fully represented here. Researchers operating in specific environments should adapt this framework to align with local ethical norms and regulatory standards.

DISCUSSION

The fundamental ethical principles of respect for persons, beneficence, and justice serve as crucial guidelines for sample selection in sensitive research. Nevertheless, their implementation necessitates careful interpretation within specific contexts.

Respect for Persons in Sample Selection

Respect for individuals necessitates that participants exercise autonomy in determining their level of involvement in research. Regarding sampling, this principle requires recruitment strategies that facilitate voluntary participation, free from coercion or undue influence. However, defining "voluntary" participation in sensitive research contexts remains a complex issue.

Consider the recruitment of trauma survivors for mental health research. Direct recruitment through trauma treatment programs may inadvertently exert pressure on patients to participate, as they might perceive that refusal could impact their care (Liamputtong, 2007). Conversely, community-based recruitment through advertisements safeguards autonomy but may result in samples biased towards individuals who are publicly comfortable identifying as trauma survivors. This scenario exemplifies the trade-offs between protecting autonomy and ensuring representation inherent in different sampling approaches.

Furthermore, respecting individuals necessitates offering additional protection to those with diminished autonomy, such as children, individuals with cognitive impairments, or those in coercive environments. When selecting samples, researchers must assess whether including these groups is scientifically imperative and identify the necessary safeguards. Gordon (2021) contends that the blanket exclusion of minors from research contravenes justice by denying them potential benefits and excluding their perspectives from the development of knowledge. Instead, using appropriate, developmentally suitable consent methods can facilitate their respectful inclusion. This ethical consideration extends to other vulnerable groups; the emphasis is not on whether to include them but on how to do so respectfully.

Beneficence and Non-Maleficence in Sampling

The principle of beneficence involves optimising benefits while minimising potential harms. In the context of sample selection, this principle requires recruiting individuals most likely to benefit from participation while avoiding unnecessary risks. The evaluation of potential benefits and harms requires consideration of both individual and collective effects. On a personal level, involvement in sensitive research may offer therapeutic benefits through the sharing of experiences, access to support services, or a sense of contributing to the advancement of knowledge (Huallpa, 2023). However, participation may also lead to psychological distress, time commitments, or privacy concerns (Mathews et al., 2022). Therefore, sample selection should prioritise individuals for whom the benefit-to-risk ratio is favourable..

Justice in Participant Selection

Justice requires an equitable distribution of research burdens and benefits. Historically, research injustices have been evident in the exploitation of vulnerable populations, as demonstrated by the Tuskegee Syphilis Study, and in the systematic exclusion of certain groups, such as the underrepresentation of women and minorities in clinical trials. Ethical sample selection must navigate between these extremes. Mastroianni et al (1994) identify three dimensions of justice relevant to sampling: distributive justice, procedural justice, and recognition justice. Distributive justice involves the fair allocation of participation opportunities, ensuring that no groups are disproportionately burdened with research participation or excluded from potential benefits. This may necessitate proactive recruitment of underrepresented groups, even when such efforts are resource-intensive. Procedural justice requires transparent, equitable, and non-discriminatory selection criteria. Researchers should be able to clearly articulate their rationale for including or excluding participants, demonstrating that these decisions are scientifically justified rather than based on convenience or bias. Recognition justice involves ensuring that diverse perspectives are represented in samples, particularly when research addresses issues impacting multiple communities.

Purposive Sampling

Purposive sampling, which entails selecting participants based on specific characteristics relevant to the research question, is frequently utilised in sensitive research contexts (Palinkas et al., 2015). This approach facilitates the recruitment of individuals with specific experiences or perspectives, thereby generating rich, detailed data. From an ethical standpoint, purposive sampling acknowledges participant expertise by recognising that particular individuals are uniquely positioned to address the research questions. However, purposive sampling may raise fairness concerns if the selection criteria disproportionately favour more privileged voices. For instance, selecting "articulate" trauma survivors might inadvertently exclude those whose trauma affects their ability to verbalize, thereby rendering their experiences invisible. Cash et al. (2022) recommend that researchers employing purposive sampling should explicitly consider how their selection criteria might privilege specific perspectives and implement strategies to include marginalised groups within the population.

Snowball Sampling

Purposive sampling, which entails selecting participants based on specific characteristics relevant to the research question, is frequently utilised in sensitive research contexts (Palinkas et al., 2015). This approach facilitates the recruitment of individuals with specific experiences or perspectives, thereby generating rich, detailed data. From an ethical standpoint, purposive sampling acknowledges participant expertise by recognising that specific individuals are uniquely positioned to address the research questions. However, purposive sampling may raise fairness concerns if the selection criteria disproportionately favour more privileged voices. For instance, selecting "articulate" trauma survivors might inadvertently exclude those whose trauma affects their ability to verbalise, thereby rendering their experiences invisible. Cash et al. (2022) recommend that researchers employing purposive sampling should explicitly consider how their selection criteria might privilege specific perspectives and implement strategies to include marginalised groups within the population.

Stratified Random Sampling

Stratified random sampling, which involves dividing the population into subgroups and conducting random sampling within each, enhances representativeness and ensures adequate inclusion of smaller subgroups (Heumos et al., 2023). This approach aligns with the principles of justice by preventing the dominance of majority groups within the sample. Nevertheless, the application of stratified sampling in sensitive research contexts presents both practical and ethical challenges. The process of defining strata necessitates assumptions about pertinent social categories, which may inadvertently perpetuate stereotypes or impose researcher-defined categories upon communities (Bitter et al., 2020)

Furthermore, achieving adequate sample sizes within each stratum can be challenging, particularly when subgroups are small or highly stigmatised. Researchers must carefully balance the justice-related benefits of ensuring diverse representation against the potential harms of categorisation and the risk of imposing burdensome participation requirements on small subgroups.

Special Considerations for Vulnerable Populations

Sampling decisions involving vulnerable populations require meticulous ethical analysis. Vulnerability should be conceptualised within a contextual framework rather than as an inherent characteristic of specific groups. Decisions concerning sample selection should assess how specific recruitment and research methodologies may create or exacerbate vulnerability, rather than resorting to categorical exclusions. For example, individuals experiencing homelessness are often perceived as vulnerable due to economic instability and potential cognitive or mental health challenges. However, Shaver (2005) argues that excluding these individuals from research perpetuates marginalisation by omitting their perspectives from policy discourse. Instead, researchers should implement safeguards, such as ensuring that participation is genuinely voluntary (not incentivised to the point of coercion), providing clear information about data use, and connecting participants with support services.

Children and Adolescents

Research involving minors necessitates a careful balance between respecting their emerging autonomy and acknowledging their developmental limitations. The selection of participants should be guided by the scientific necessity of including minors and the relevance of the research to their well-being (Gordon, 2021). Ethical recruitment of minors requires obtaining both parental consent and child assent, with assent procedures appropriately tailored to the child's developmental stage. However, in certain circumstances, such as studies on child abuse or adolescent sexual health, parental consent may be waived if parental involvement could introduce additional risks. Ethics committees must rigorously evaluate the justification for such waivers and establish necessary alternative safeguards.

Individuals in Institutional Settings

Individuals residing in correctional facilities, psychiatric institutions, or nursing homes are particularly susceptible to vulnerabilities due to their limited autonomy and potential power imbalances with researchers or institutional staff. Sample selection must ensure participation is genuinely voluntary and not influenced by expectations of institutional benefits or fears of adverse consequences. While recruitment through institutional gatekeepers can facilitate access, it also poses risks of coercion if individuals perceive that staff will be aware of their participation. To mitigate these risks, strategies include having researchers, rather than staff, approach potential participants, ensuring that staff remain uninformed about who participates, and clearly communicating that participation does not impact institutional status—cultural Sensitivity in Sample Selection. Culturally insensitive sampling may reinforce research injustices and lead to invalid results. Silverio et al. (2022) outline multiple aspects of cultural sensitivity that are important when choosing samples:

Language and Communication

Recruitment materials and consent procedures must be presented in the preferred languages of participants and tailored to their literacy levels and cultural communication norms. This process necessitates more than mere literal translation; it requires cultural adaptation to ensure that concepts are meaningful within local contexts (Rangel & Valdez, 2017).

Community Engagement

When conducting research with Indigenous peoples or communities that have been historically marginalised, it is crucial to incorporate ethical considerations in the selection of research samples through community consultation. This process ensures that the community can contribute to decisions on the research's relevance, participant selection criteria, and the implementation of necessary safeguards (Jiménez, 2021). This consultation must take place before the research design is finalised, rather than being treated as an afterthought.

Researcher Positionality

Researchers should routinely consider how cultural backgrounds, assumptions, and power dynamics influence sampling decisions. For instance, researchers from dominant groups might inadvertently set criteria that favour participants aligning with mainstream norms, potentially excluding culturally diverse individuals. Regular reflexive practices can help identify and mitigate such biases.

Practical Challenges and Ethical Trade-offs

Resource Limitations

Implementing ethical sampling strategies, such as comprehensive community engagement, culturally adapted materials in multiple languages, or additional support for vulnerable populations, requires substantial resources. Researchers operating under budgetary constraints may need to balance their ethical objectives with practical research considerations. Although resource limitations do not excuse ethical violations, they may necessitate difficult prioritisation decisions. For example, a researcher might have to choose between recruiting a larger, more diverse sample using standard methods or a smaller sample with enhanced ethical safeguards. Ethics committees should evaluate whether the proposed strategies appropriately balance ethical principles in the context of resource constraints, rather than insisting on ideal solutions that may be impractical.

Recruitment Challenges

Research involving sensitive topics frequently encounters recruitment challenges, as potential participants may be reluctant to discuss stigmatised experiences or may harbour distrust towards researchers. This situation can result in pressure to compromise ethical standards, such as by offering excessive incentives that may become coercive or by minimising perceived risks to enhance participation rates. Upholding ethical standards in the face of recruitment difficulties requires creativity and perseverance, rather than ethical compromises. Effective strategies include building trust through community partnerships, utilising peer recruiters who share experiences with the target populations, and allowing for extended recruitment timelines. If adequate recruitment cannot be achieved through ethical means, researchers must be prepared to modify the research questions or accept that the study cannot be conducted ethically with the available resources.

Balancing Inclusion and Protection

As previously discussed, there exists an inherent tension between safeguarding vulnerable populations and ensuring their inclusion in research. Excessive protection may perpetuate marginalization, whereas insufficient protection can result in harm. This necessitates a case-by-case evaluation rather than blanket rules. Key considerations include: Is participation likely to benefit this population? Are there alternative methods to address the research question that involve less risk? What enhanced protective measures could facilitate ethical inclusion? Does the population wish to participate in this research? Meaningful community engagement is essential for making such determinations.

Conclusion

This study investigates the role of ethical principles in guiding participant selection within sensitive social research. The analysis reveals that sampling decisions entail intricate ethical considerations that transcend mere procedural compliance, addressing fundamental issues of justice, respect, and beneficence.

Key Contributions

Several key insights emerged from this analysis.

1. Sampling is an ethical issue, not merely a methodological one. Decisions regarding participant selection directly influence who bears the research burden, whose perspectives are represented in the production of knowledge, and how the benefits of research are distributed. These considerations are fundamentally ethical and require explicit ethical analysis.
2. Ethical principles often conflict when making sampling choices. Protecting autonomy can clash with ensuring diverse representation; maximising benefits may conflict with minimising risks; and including vulnerable populations may conflict with safeguarding them from exploitation. Ethical sampling involves explicitly recognising these conflicts and making thoughtful judgments on how to balance competing principles.
3. The context is of significant importance. There are no universal rules for ethical sampling in sensitive research. What constitutes ethical recruitment depends on the specific research question, the population, the cultural context, and the available resources. Ethical frameworks offer principles for guiding sampling decisions rather than providing strict formulas.
4. Community engagement enhances both ethics and validity. Involving communities in sampling decisions helps ensure that research is culturally appropriate, addresses community priorities, and employs recruitment strategies that respect local values. Such engagement is not merely an ethical formality but is vital for conducting meaningful research.

Practical Implications

The analysis suggests the following:

Explicitly incorporate ethical considerations into the research design concerning sampling. Avoid treating sampling solely as a methodological decision; instead, systematically evaluate how sampling strategies align with the moral principles of respect, beneficence, and justice. Engage communities early and authentically, particularly when researching marginalised or vulnerable populations, by involving community members in decisions regarding the appropriateness of the research, participant selection, and necessary protections. Practice reflexivity concerning power dynamics and positionality by examining how social location, assumptions, and privileges influence sampling decisions. Solicit feedback from diverse perspectives to identify potential blind spots. Be transparent about ethical trade-offs: when resource constraints or practical challenges

necessitate compromises between ethical ideals, explicitly acknowledge them in ethics applications and publications rather than obscuring them. Prioritise participant welfare over research convenience; when conflicts arise between what would facilitate research and what would better protect participants, prioritise the latter.

Ethics committees and IRBs

Transition from a checklist-based review to a substantive ethical dialogue. Engage researchers in discussions concerning sampling rationales, alternatives, and trade-offs, rather than merely verifying procedural compliance.

Cultivate expertise in community-engaged research. It is imperative to include Institutional Review Board (IRB) members with experience in participatory research methodologies and cultural competence in evaluating sampling ethics for diverse populations.

Encourage ethical flexibility. Recognize that ethical sampling may necessitate iterative adjustments based on community feedback, and establish processes that facilitate responsive protocol modifications.

Provide resources for ethical guidance. Develop institution-specific guidance documents that address common ethical dilemmas in sampling within sensitive research contexts, including examples of ethically sound approaches.

Directions for Future Research

1. Empirical Investigations of Sampling Ethics in Practice: There is a need for research that examines how researchers make sampling decisions in sensitive research contexts, the ethical considerations they prioritise, and the obstacles they encounter in implementing ethical ideals.
2. Comparative Ethics Across Cultural Contexts: Most ethical frameworks have their origins in Western contexts. Research is needed to examine how ethical principles should be interpreted and applied across diverse cultural settings, particularly in non-Western and Indigenous contexts.
3. Ethics of Digital Recruitment: As research increasingly utilises social media and online platforms for recruitment, new ethical questions arise concerning privacy, consent, and representation. A systematic analysis of these emerging issues is necessary.
4. Long-term Impacts of Sampling Decisions: Research should investigate the downstream consequences of sampling approaches, specifically how sampling decisions affect research validity, community trust, policy impacts, and participant well-being over time.
5. Ethics Education for Researchers: Studies should assess the effectiveness of various approaches to teaching research ethics, particularly in relation to sampling decisions, and identify best practices for ethics education.

Final Reflections: Selecting ethical samples in sensitive research requires ongoing vigilance, reflexivity, and a strong commitment to participant welfare and social justice. There are no simple

formulas or universal rules; ethical sampling involves carefully applying core principles suited to each specific context. It calls for humility about our own limitations and a genuine willingness to meaningfully engage with the communities we seek to study. Ultimately, the goal of ethical sampling goes beyond merely avoiding harm or obeying regulations; it is about conducting research that respects human dignity, promotes justice, and produces knowledge that benefits participants and those impacted by our studies. By prioritising ethical considerations in sampling choices, researchers can help create a more just and trustworthy research environment that honours the experiences and rights of all participants, especially those from vulnerable and marginalised communities.

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