

Examples I Have Encountered

Ethical considerations in information systems research are not some kind of semantic or ephemeral concern. You will, as I have, encounter them in your work. To make the material palpable, I present three cases I have encountered. All involve *potential* ethical conflict rather than an ethical violation. These examples are not black or white: different parties had different viewpoints on the matter, which is common in ethical dilemmas. I encourage you to consider for yourself whether these cases involve strong ethical misconduct, some ethical misconduct, or none at all.

The first case occurred with a study on how novice analysts would conceptualise business processes if we did not train them to use a particular language, notation, or tool for doing so. Process analysts' work is usually done using certain standards and tools, and we wanted to know whether these methods align with how those who carry out this work would intuitively describe business processes if they did not have to follow these standards.

At that time, we taught process analysis as an introductory university course for first-semester bachelor's degree students. They came straight out of high school, so they had received no training that could have influenced or biased them.

Our experiment consisted of giving each student in the class a single blank sheet of paper and a pencil on the first morning of their first semester. We told them the story of a business process involving a person who had to catch a flight to Sydney and asked them to capture this process on their paper in any way they saw fit. We later collected the papers, which contained drawings and/or text, and analysed them for the quality of the information they contained about the business process.

We had not applied for ethical clearance as I did not see the need. At that time, I honestly was not really well trained in ethics. It did not feature as a course in my PhD education. But admittedly, at that time, I had already undertaken other empirical studies that involved ethical clearance, so I was aware of this process and had completed it before.

As in any class, we gave students a blank piece of paper, asked them to perform a task, and collected their responses. We did not manipulate them. We did not experiment on them. They did not have to solve a problem where they were scored in any sense. The activity had nothing to do with the grades they would eventually receive in the course.

As it happened, though, one student notified the ethics committee, which found that we did not have ethical clearance and did not ask for informed consent, so the committee did not allow us to analyse the collected data or to report it. We had to wait one more year to repeat the study with a new cohort of first-year students. Of course, we obtained ethical clearance in advance, all students signed the information and consent form they had to sign, and so forth, and we published the study a year later (Recker et al., 2012). Nowhere in the paper will you read that we had originally worked on the same idea with different data one year earlier but without due ethical diligence. In hindsight, I admit to my mistake even though at that time I was angry that I had to wait one more year before I could proceed with my research. But it was

important: the difference between what we asked these students to do and any other assignment was that we intended to use the data we collected to analyse their responses for the purposes of research and publication.

The second example involves research I carried out in collaboration with a large retail organisation in Australia. We had a collaboration agreement under which we agreed to carry out a variety of studies. As part of this collaboration, the organisation provided us with access to certain data, for which several legal contracts were in place to govern this access. In one situation, they gave us access to their enterprise social networking platform, a type of organisational internal social network that was not unlike Facebook. We received a data file that contained the entire log of that network—all posts and comments made by all members of the organisation on that platform over almost two years.

This access presented us with an ethical dilemma as the data were not anonymous or confidential: we could see who posted what to whom and when. Ethical guidelines would stipulate that we needed written consent from some 180,000 staff who worked in that organisation, which was not really feasible with any reasonable amount of time and effort. In the end, we had to liaise between the organisation in the form of an information technology (IT) staff member who was responsible for hosting the data and making it available to us, the ethics board at our university (which stipulated the conditions by which we could use the data), and our own research team, which had certain requirements for the data to be useful to our research. Through multiple rounds of discussions, we settled on the organisation's anonymising the data prior to giving us access—details like names were omitted, staff IDs were replaced with scrambled codes, and so forth—while still yielding access to data like the posters' role in the organisation and the location of work in terms of a particular retail store (because this information was relevant to our research question). As a result, we received not the raw data but an amended data set that was agreeable to the independent review board and that was both sufficiently confidential and sufficiently descriptive for our research purposes. You can imagine that this process of finding the right balance took several months, but we were eventually able to carry out our research and publish it (Recker & Lekse, 2016).

The third example concerns a situation that was not an ethical mistake or an ethical challenge but perhaps more an example of ethical harm. I once collaborated with researchers from another institution to do some interesting research that we published. We were excited about the outcome and planned to do more research together, so I presented an idea for a study that I had at that time, my thoughts on theory and hypothesis development, and my thoughts about a research design for testing the idea.

We never started that collaboration as we were all busy with other things, but some years later, I stumbled across a paper that was co-authored by one of the collaborators with whom I had shared the idea. That paper reported on research in progress and contained my idea, theory, and suggested research design, plus some initial results they had obtained.

You may imagine I was furious. I felt they had stolen my idea without involving me. The opportunity to collaborate with me was there as I was still collaborating with

them in other ways and in other projects. I brought the matter up, and they decided not to pursue the project further (as far as I know).

This example shows how difficult ethical cases can be. I felt credit was mis-attributed, but I also realise that one can also look at the situation differently: I had shared an idea, but I had not pursued it. I had not written about it. In a way, I exposed intellectual property, but I did not secure it. One view might be that other people have the right to develop an idea further, but the question is at what point would such a behaviour stop being okay and be unethical instead? One good outcome from this case was that we discussed the situation and how we felt about it, and it has not significantly affected our collaboration since.

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