Ethical Principles in Holistic Nursing Research - by: Nel Thomas, PhD, RN

Nursing scholars must be committed to maintaining the highest standards of ethics in holistic nursing research as detailed in the American Nurses Association (ANA) Code of Ethics, the Holistic Nursing: Scope and Standards of Practice, and the Belmont Report. In the United States, the Biomedical and Behavioral Research Code of Ethics, developed in 1978 by the National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects, provides a model for research, which is applied to many disciplines, including nursing (Polit & Beck, 2014). This model, developed to respond to unethical and deplorable research practices from the 1930’s to the 1970’s, established protocols and practices to protect research subjects/participants. Its objectives were to examine the overall risks of research to individuals, to determine the benefits of research to society, and to assess research activities for its overall soundness (Grove, Gary & Burns, 2015). The Belmont Report proposes three broad principles: beneficence, justice, and respect for persons. The ANA Code of Ethics (ANA, 2015) provides the guidelines for protecting human subjects in biological and behavioral research based on these principles.

Beneficence: Protection from Harm

Beneficence seeks first “to do no harm,” and proposes to maximize benefits to research subjects/participants and society. Non-maleficence dictates the exclusion of intentional harm and the minimization of potential harm. The researcher must consider all possible consequences of the research, especially identifying the potential risks and making necessary provisions when there are risks, as well as balancing these risks with proportionate benefits. Harm to humans can be physical discomfort, social changes, emotional distress, or financial loss. In qualitative research, sharing one’s experiences can be beneficial for its cathartic effects, but subjects/participants can also be at risk for increased stress with unique consequences. All aspects of potential risk should be carefully assessed, including anticipated risk, temporary risk, or permanent risk. These should be addressed individually and for society at large (Doody& Noonan, 2016).

Justice: Fair Treatment and Privacy

Subjects/participants are entitled to fair treatment and have a right to privacy. The burden is on the researcher to abstain from exploitation of the underprivileged, as well as persons unable to protect their own interests, such as the mentally ill or disabled. Fair treatment requires the full respect of each subject/participant and no judgments should be made for withdrawal from research studies. It also requires equal responsibility in fulfilling promises on time as mutually agreed upon. The right to privacy is mandatory and a priority. No information can be shared without consent. It is imperative to maintain anonymity intentionally, so data cannot be linked to subjects/participants. Data must be protected by using coding or a pseudonym. These confidential data should be stored in a locked cabinet, with only authorized access. Results should be reported in the aggregate using a code or pseudonym to mask identity.
Respect for Person: Self-determination & Autonomous Agent
"Respect for person" refers to treating individuals as autonomous agents, providing adequate information and allowing individuals to make their own intelligent choices. It also means providing extra protection for individuals who have reduced autonomy. A person's right to self-determination includes freedom from coercion; requiring that any incentive should have minimal value. Subjects/participants always have the right to refuse to participate, to decline giving requested information, to withdraw participation at any time, and to ask questions about the research study. When individuals decide, by their own free will, to become a subject/participant in a research study, the researcher must present an informed consent document with full disclosure and details of the study, and provisions for follow-up when risks are involved. Essential components of the informed consent include: description of the nature of the research study; a statement indicating that the research is voluntary and participants can withdraw at any time; identification of risks and benefits; details about how confidentiality will be protected; description of what information researchers will share with subjects/participants; and identification of the person responsible for the research study with contact information (Grove et al., 2015). Consent must be written in common clear language, using layman's terms, and must be signed by the researcher and the subject/participant.

Implications for the Holistic Nurse Researcher
An understanding of ethical principles is essential and an obligation when determining research methods, data collection, and analysis. Be aware that meeting the requirements of an Institutional Review Board (IRB) mandated when conducting research, does not ensure that ethical standards are followed as outlined in the researcher's proposed study. The responsibility of being honest, respectful, just, and thorough always remains with the researcher, whose integrity when conducting research guarantees the protection of subjects/participants and honors the principles and practices of the nursing profession.

References