



# Challenge of Research Ethics Committees to the nature of operations research<sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

This article is concerned with operational research (OR) practice in light of growing concerns about ethical conduct. It asks whether OR, in the context of increasing regulation through Research Ethics Committees, should consider whether there are certain ethical issues that are affected by the specific context of OR. The article sets out some of the central concerns about Research Ethics Committees and the nature of OR.

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## 1. Introduction

Recent decades have seen a number of debates and comments attempting to delineate the ethical dilemmas faced by operational researchers [1–6]. These dilemmas tend to be complex and only hazily definable. They reflect debates in other areas of management as to whether unethical behaviour or practice is more a function of “bad apples” or of “bad barrels” [7]. The bad apple argument attributes unethical behaviour or practice to the personal characteristics of individuals. The bad barrel argument, in contrast, refers to organisational or societal issues influencing the behaviour of organisational members.

While this article is essentially about ethics and OR, it has to be borne in mind that ethical issues connect with other contexts, for example, where ethical reviews occur, such as Research Ethics Committees (REC) (or institutional review boards) and research governance frameworks. There has been a rapid growth in such committees over the last few years in the UK [8,9], and the relevance of these to OR will be the main focus of this paper. The interest in REC is

raised here because, like other occupational groups, OR is applied to problems that affect people, and there are not many areas in OR that can be considered to escape from ethical consideration [5]. It also seems that the emergence of REC may be fruitful to focus on, specifically in terms of the fact that the ethical agenda is increasingly set by national and international institutions. To that end, this paper will address the nexus between the debates on ethics and OR and the discussions on REC, where it is suggested that ethical practice involve a complex interaction between individual and organisational factors. The paper will review whether OR, in the context of increasing regulation through REC, needs to consider whether there are certain ethical issues that are affected by the specific context of operational research. The article begins by contextualizing the discussion in relation to the recent debate on ethics in OR. Following this, some of the central concerns about REC and the nature of OR are set out.

## 2. Background

As mentioned, a path that seems to run through the debates on ethics and OR reflect ones in other areas of management; that is, whether unethical behaviour or practice is more a function of “bad apples” or of “bad barrels”. The first argument focuses on unethical behaviour or practice of

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the practitioner/researcher. In relation to OR, this centres mainly on the operational researcher as modeller [4–6]. In particular, the focus is on the behaviour of the researcher/professional within his/her activity, such as methodological rigour, objectivity, no advocacy, results emerging from analysis and not vice versa, and correctness and honesty in relations with clients (see [4,10]). Responses to this aspect of ethical conduct can be theoretically explained by deontology, which is concerned with duty or moral obligation [11,12]. This view focuses on the rightness or wrongness of actions themselves and sees a sharp difference between self-interest and morality, and proposes that an action only has moral value if it is performed from duty. The deontological perspective underlies much of the discussion on self-regulation in OR [4] shown by the continuing debates on codes of conduct and the professionalisation of OR [13–16]. Deontological ethics is uncompromising by definition, and has been commonly contrasted with consequentialist ethical theories for its complete disregard for circumstances which can lead to morally dubious requirements. This perspective also fails to specify which principles should take priority when rights and duties conflict. Thus, a deontological approach cannot offer complete ethical guidance [11].

The second argument, in contrast, refers to organisational or societal issues influencing the behaviour of organisational members. This focuses on the practitioner/researcher responsibility towards the client or, more importantly, towards all those affected by the actions and decisions which are taken based on models and towards society. The argument focuses on not only the clients but also towards all those people affected by the actions and decisions which are taken based on his/her models, and towards society and the external world at large. Thus, the practitioner/researcher cannot ignore the consequences of his/her action and will bear full ethical responsibility for them. The effort to act responsibly is then presented as a consequentialist responsibility which judges the rightness or wrongness of an act by its consequences [11,12,17]. For example, as well as the debates on the social responsibility of OR [2,3,5], there are concerns relating to the whole process of OR, which connects the real world and models, where ethical issues are raised in terms of the consequences for those not participating but are affected by the process in which professionals (and others) are taking part [6].

Thus, it appears that commentators have sought to clarify how far individual ethical theories and principles are applicable to operational research dilemmas, although the discussions appear to have been limited to consequentialist and deontological theories [11]. A helpful contribution to the above debate is a recent article by Gallo [5]. He distinguished two levels of ethical discourse; *rules* and *principles and values*. Deontology falls into the former category, while the consequentialism, identified through our self-comprehension, and self-reflection and experience, relates to the latter. However, he claims that the shaping of our principles and values should be emergent and be a sense making process—or a ‘quest’, as Weick puts it [18]. Gallo also warns against an over-reliance on rules and to place a strong emphasis on developing values. Other commentators have also extended

the discussion on ethics beyond consequentialist and deontological principles. For example, Le Menestrel and Van Wassenhove [6], following Habermas [19], suggest building communicational ethics, while Mingers [20] and Midgley [21] suggest a critical approach.

The call for more attention to be given to ethics within operational research [6] is a sign that there is need to debate the ethical considerations in OR in a way which continues to allow for diversity in the field. However, the increased emphasis on OR and ethics in social problems and the burgeoning of REC means that operational researchers are likely to face pressure to address ethical issues with regards to their conduct where deontological and/or consequentialist reasoning may not be appropriate. This connects to recent attention to ethics and OR which has focused on the process of OR (e.g. [22]). The process of building or structuring models is an on-going process or dialogue where ethical concerns can and ought to be addressed. This issue has been much discussed in the UK, particularly in relation to problem-structuring methods or Soft OR [23], and more recently in connection with the issues of values and the participation of the different stakeholders in the structuring process [24]. But what would a REC make of this practice? The next section will look at the rise of RECs, and their rationale and principles.

### 3. Research Ethics Committees

In the UK, there has been a growth of RECs that are attempting to institutionalize ethical decision-making to a greater extent than before [25]. Drawing on models developed in the field of medicine [26,27], RECs have now become well established in the health and social care fields which may seem of limited relevance to readers of this journal. But given that some operational researchers seek to conduct investigations in organizations with responsibilities for health and social care and that the process of OR is sometimes offered as a model for research in areas where poor practice could have a direct consequence on the health or well-being of the public, its implications may turn out to be greater than is immediately apparent.

The UK’s Economic and Social Research Council’s (ESRC) has developed a Research Ethics Framework [28]. Developments of frameworks such as the ESRC’s are likely to give rise to ethical governance administrations that will be less ‘light touch’ in orientation. It appears that there is afoot a ‘globalisation of ethics’ whereby the ethical agenda is increasingly set by national and international ethics committees, conventions, protocols and the like. The rationale for this derives from changes in public attitudes and expectations of research, through increased concern about the nature of research and transparency, and the implications of changes in the context of social science research in relation to advances in globalisation, information and communication technology. There is also a concern for the investigators on research projects (including those on OR projects) who inherently have multiple legitimate interests—i.e., to conduct high quality research, to complete the work expeditiously, to protect participants, to obtain funding and

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