

## The Ethic of Beneficence: A Critical Overview

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### ABSTRACT

Beneficence is a significant and premier ethical issue that can also be termed as the main goal of any research. It is usually combined with nonmaleficence. Beneficence and nonmaleficence have been included as Principal A under General Principles of American Psychological Association (APA) and imply that any research that is carried out should benefit the participants and should not harm them in any way. Due care needs to be taken in this direction to ensure safety and wellbeing of the participants. Beneficence and nonmaleficence also include safeguarding of the welfare and rights of the participants. The researchers need to be aware about personal (including the physical and mental health of the researcher), financial, social, organisational and political factors that can interfere with ensuring the welfare and safety of the participants. Any research is to be carried out with main goal of benefit to the participants as well as the society in general. However, recently, there has been a shift in this, as many a times research is carried out not for the overall benefit of the participants or the society but for reasons like academic progress and financial benefits. This can lead to research that does not fully contribute the existing fund of knowledge and violates the foremost ethical issue of beneficence and nonmaleficence. A researcher can also come across a number of challenges and dilemmas while practicing beneficence. Some of the challenges and dilemmas that will be covered in this paper deal with autonomy vs beneficence, minimal risk and research with high or moderate risk but high benefits, that can lead to conflict in the researcher about the study. The risk and benefit ratio also needs to be calculated while carrying out any research and the research needs to be designed in such a way as to ensure maximum benefit and minimum risk. Balancing beneficence and nonmaleficence in a research is also a significant challenge faced by any researcher that will be covered in this paper.

**Keywords:** *Ethic, Beneficence*

Research is an integral part of any subject area. However, when research is carried out on human and animal participants/ subjects, we need to focus on an important aspect, that of ethics. Ethical issues need to be considered in order to uphold the rights and ensure safety and

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wellbeing of the participants. Ethics refers to standards of conduct. They focus on principles and standards that govern relationship between the researcher and the participants.

There are various ethical issues that we need to focus on including informed consent, confidentiality, privacy, justice, autonomy and so on. One of the premier ethical issues though is that of beneficence as that mainly has to do with the goal of research. The main goal of research is not only to add to the existing fund of knowledge but also for overall benefit of the society and the participants of the research. The findings of the research should be available for further research or application that will benefit the society at large.

The present paper focuses on the ethic of beneficence and its critical overview that will mainly focus on the challenges and dilemmas that a researcher might face while carrying out research.

### ***Beneficence: An Introduction***

The word beneficence is derived from Latin word 'bene facere' meaning 'to do good to'. Beneficence can be described as actions that are related to mercy, kindness and charity. In research, it mainly deals with actions that are carried out in order to benefit others. Beneficence is usually combined with nonmaleficence. Beneficence and nonmaleficence have been included as Principal A under General Principles of American Psychological Association (APA) and imply that any research that is carried out should benefit the participants and should not harm them in any way. It has been described in APA as follows:

*“Psychologists strive to benefit those with whom they work and take care to do no harm. In their professional actions, psychologists seek to safeguard the welfare and rights of those with whom they interact professionally and other affected persons, and the welfare of animal subjects of research. When conflicts occur among psychologists’ obligations or concerns, they attempt to resolve these conflicts in a responsible fashion that avoids or minimizes harm. Because psychologists’ scientific and professional judgments and actions may affect the lives of others, they are alert to and guard against personal, financial, social, organizational, or political factors that might lead to misuse of their influence. Psychologists strive to be aware of the possible effect of their own physical and mental health on their ability to help those with whom they work”* (<http://www.apa.org/ethics/code/principles.pdf>).

Beneficence also includes safeguarding of the welfare and rights of the participants. Due care needs to be taken in this direction to ensure safety and wellbeing of the participants. The studies need to be suitably designed and risk and benefits need to be calculated before the research is undertaken in order to ensure the ethical issue of beneficence. Further, care also needs to be taken to monitor closely any research in progress for possible risks and harms. So that they can be minimised or eliminated.

Upholding the ethic of beneficence in research is of extreme significance as it is moral responsibility and duty of the researcher to uphold and safeguard the rights and wellbeing of the participants. Further, participants are also an important resource in research and need to be taken care of. Ensuring beneficence will also instate the trust amongst the general public who would be willing to participate in researches. Focusing on beneficence is even more

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important when research is carried out on participants belonging to vulnerable group, like children, women, elderly and so on, as individuals belonging to vulnerable group are more vulnerable (hence the name) to any risks of research. Extra care needs to be taken in this regard to ensure safety and wellbeing of such participants. This can be done by understanding the characteristics of such a group and identifying possible risks and safety issues.

Beneficence can also be related to other ethical issues. Beneficence and nonmaleficence are parallel ethical issues, as stated earlier. Where beneficence discusses about benefit to the participants, nonmaleficence deals with avoiding any harm to the participants. They are in a way related to each other but there can also be issues when a balance needs to be created between beneficence and nonmaleficence. Yet another ethical issue that is closely related to beneficence is informed consent. Informed consent can be used as an opportunity to inform the participants about the research objectives and prepare them for the research. Any minimal risk can also be explained to them. Beneficence and justice are also related as denying of justice would hamper beneficence. Ensuring justice or giving the participants what they deserve and in a fair manner can serve as a first step towards beneficence. Assessment of risk and benefit is also related to beneficence as research needs to be evaluated for its possible risk and benefits that will him/ her ensure beneficence. Beneficence can also be promoted by ensuring confidentiality as in a way it protects the rights of the participants.

### ***Historical developments***

Looking at the historical developments (especially in the context of beneficence), ethics code can be traced to Hippocratic oath, written about 400 BC, that can be termed as the first professional code of ethics. However, ethical issues came in to focus as a result of various studies that were carried out without any consideration of welfare and safety of the participants. One of them was the experiments carried out during World War II by Nazis. These experiments were carried out supposedly to promote scientific research and came in to focus as a result Nuremberg war crime trials of The Nuremberg Code came in to existence as a result of these trials. Nuremberg code is a set of ethical guidelines developed for research with human participants based on information during the They mainly focused on informed consent and coercion. There were other studies as well that were carried out by compromising the safety and wellbeing of the participants. One of them was the Tuskegee syphilis study, that were carried out by the U. S. Public Health Services in 1930s on low income African Americans who suffered from syphilis. These participants were not informed about the illness and were also denied treatment though the cure was available (Penicillin). In 1940s a study was carried out by René Spitz that focused on studying effect of social interactions on development of children. The experiment was carried out on two groups of children from their birth as they grew up. The first group of children were from orphanages and as babies they were deprived of any human contact and received care from a single nurse who also cared for other six babies. The second group of babies were from nursery in a prison and these received care from their mothers who were incarcerated. By one year age the babies from the orphanages aged being in motor and intellectual performances

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In 1979, U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare presented the Belmont Report that laid down three main ethical principles, that of, respect for persons ( treating participants as autonomous and protecting those with diminished autonomy), beneficence (minimising any harms and maximising benefits) and justice (distributing benefits and risk of research). These were later translated as specific regulations by The Department of Health and Human Services and the Food and Drug Administration and then were adopted in 1991 as the Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects.

In 1953, APA Codified its own ethical standards for the field of Psychology that included case examples illustrating each ethical standard. APA has undergone eleven revisions since 1953.

Beneficence is related to various ethical issues as well. In order to ensure welfare and uphold the rights of the participants in the research, the researcher needs to follow other ethical issues like informed consent and confidentiality and so on.

The above developments are mainly from the context of the ethic of beneficence, though they also resulted in development of other relevant ethical issues like informed consent, confidentiality and so on.

### ***Challenges and dilemmas***

In the present paper the challenges and dilemmas that a researcher will come across while practicing beneficence will also be discussed. Some of the challenges and dilemmas discussed are as follows:

#### ***Research for benefit of the society in general and of the individuals/ participants in particular:***

Any research is to be carried out with main goal of benefit to the participants as well as the society in general. However, recently, there has been a shift in this, as many a times research is carried out not for the overall benefit of the participants or the society but for reasons like academic progress and financial benefits. This can lead to research that does not fully contribute to the existing fund of knowledge and violates the foremost ethical issue of beneficence and nonmaleficence.

#### ***Ensuring beneficence of vulnerable section of the society:***

The vulnerable section of the society include children, women, elderly, tribal's, individuals belong to low socio-economic status and so. These are prone to being vulnerable due to their diminished autonomy that can thus make them prone to any harm. When research is carried out on individuals from these sections, extra care needs to be taken in order to ensure their safety and wellbeing. Risk and benefits needs to be adequately assessed before any research is carried out and throughout the research necessary care needs to be taken by following other relevant ethical issues.

#### ***Theory and practice of beneficence:***

There can be a gap between theory and practice of beneficence. In theory it probably would be easy to promote beneficence of participants. But the practice of beneficence can be

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difficult and pose a challenge to the researcher. Steps need to be taken by the researcher in order to systematically ensure beneficence. Concrete and conscious measures need to be taken by the researcher and his/ her team in this direction.

### ***Balancing between beneficence and nonmaleficence:***

Nonmaleficence denotes that during the research the participants should not be subjected to any harm, at the same time the research should benefit the participants. Thus the risk and benefits of the research need to be taken into consideration before the research is carried. Balancing beneficence and nonmaleficence in a research is also a significant challenge faced by any researcher that will be covered in this paper. One of the ethical dilemmas can stem from balancing beneficence and nonmaleficence. The researcher has to ensure that there is no harm to the participants, at the same time the benefits of the research are high. Other ethical issues that promote beneficence and nonmaleficence also need to be adequately followed. Carrying out research that balances both these issues by minimising risk and maximising benefits can be a major challenge.

### ***Autonomy vs. beneficence:***

Autonomy and beneficence are both significant ethical issues. However, sometimes there can be a clash between the two. Autonomy denotes that the participant be respected, given time and an opportunity to take their own decision. However, it can clash with beneficence when certain decisions taken by researcher in view of beneficence may not be agreed upon by the participants. For example, the researcher may decide that a particular therapy or line of treatment would benefit the participant. However, the participant may refuse the same. In this case there is a clash between the ethical issue of ensuring the autonomy of the participant at the same time ensuring that they derive benefits from the research. Further, when researcher comes across such a dilemma, he/ she is expected to uphold autonomy of the participants rather than beneficence (Beauchamp 1994, Edwards 1996, Jensen and Mooney 1990, Wilson-Barnett 1994).

### ***Minimal risk:***

Minimal risk can be described as a risk where the harm that the participant may experience is not greater than the risk/ harm that he/ she may encounter in day today life. Many times, the research is carried out on the pretext that there would be minimum risk involved. However, defining the term minimum risk is difficult as the minimum risk as perceived by the researcher may not actually be minimum risk on the part of the participant. Thus the researcher may go ahead and carry out research thinking that he/she has ensured the ethic of beneficence but in reality that may not be true. Thus when there is expected to be minimum risk in any research, due care needs to be taken to ensure that the participants are subjected to no harm whether physical or psychological. Minimal risks can be incorporated in the informed consent so that the participants are aware about the risks and are free to make decision whether they want to participate or not in the research and also gives them freedom to leave the research if they want to.

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### ***Risk and benefit ratio:***

The risk and benefit ratio also needs to be calculated while carrying out any research and the research needs to be designed in such a way as to ensure maximum benefit and minimum risk. Risks can include physical harm, psychological stress, loss of privacy and confidentiality. The researcher also needs to consider situations when there is high or moderate risk but high benefits that can lead to conflict in the researcher about the study. Again here the researchers need to uphold the ethic of beneficence.

### ***Benefit of individual participants vs benefit to Society at large:***

The ethic of beneficence upholds the safety of the participants and works towards their benefit. However, there are certain researches that aim at greater benefit of the Society. This can again lead to dilemma in the mind of the researcher. However, the researcher in this situation has to work toward minimizing risk keeping in mind the objectives of the research and uphold the safety and wellbeing of the participants.

### ***Ensuring that beneficence is uphold by the staff and others involved in conducting research:***

The chief researcher as such may be aware about the ethic of beneficence and would take measures to ensure beneficence. However, the same may not be true with regard to his/her staff and others who are involved in carrying out the research. In this case due care needs to be taken in order to make the staff and others involved in the research about ethical issues including beneficence. Further, they also need to be trained in how beneficence and other ethical issues can be ensured.

## **CONCLUSION**

To conclude beneficence is a significant ethical issue that needs to be followed while carrying out any research. However, the researchers also need to be aware about the challenges and dilemmas that they may come across while applying beneficence. Such awareness will help them be more alert and take suitable decisions when carrying out research in order to ensure the wellbeing and safety of the participants. Besides the care taken by the researcher, another way of promoting the ethic of beneficence is by having Institutional Review Boards (IRB) that will analyze research on the basis of whether they follow the required ethical issues.

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### ***Conflict of Interest***

There is no conflict of interest.

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