

The ethics of sexual assault research

April 6 2017, by Bianca Fileborn



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Thirty-nine Australian universities will now [individually release the findings](#) of a national research project on sexual assault and harassment on campus.

The ["Respect. Now. Always."](#) project, launched in February 2016, has

involved two phases:

- an open call for submissions from the [Australian Human Rights Commission](#) (AHRC)
- an online survey with a randomly selected sample of current university students.

This announcement follows intense criticism from [student bodies](#) and [sexual assault activists](#) after it was initially announced that the findings for individual universities would not be made public.

The project has also faced considerable controversy over the [submission process](#), which did [not receive ethics approval](#) before starting the research. The AHRC said this was because it was not required.

But the commission confirmed it did receive ethics approval for the survey component of the research.

Insufficient distinction between the two strands of the project, however, appears to have created confusion over whether correct ethics protocols have been followed – and over the nature of the research that participants were taking part in.

The project has also suffered from [poor communication with participants](#). The AHRC has [acknowledged](#) that its use of the phrase "areas for action", rather than "recommendations", was confusing and misleading.

In response to this, journalist and anti-sexual assault advocate Nina Funnell [commented](#) in The Guardian: "They don't have to get ethics approval, that is true, but they do have to treat survivors with respect and they haven't."

Clearly, this case raises some substantial questions about what constitutes "ethical" research on sexual assault.

Why does it matter if research is ethical or not? And what steps could or should have been taken to ensure that issues such as those the AHRC now faces are avoided?

Research ethics 101

Ethics procedures are in place as a way to safeguard and protect research participants from harm, while ensuring that research has the potential to benefit the broader community.

In Australia, strict [codes of conduct](#) govern research involving human participants. These codes set out the responsibilities of individual researchers and the institutions they work for.

All research involving human participants is subject to review by a [human research ethics committee](#). Researchers cannot start their work until approval has been granted.

Broadly speaking, [ethical research](#) is guided by the following [principles](#):

Respect

All participants must be treated with respect for their rights and autonomy as human beings. This includes, for example, ensuring that they are informed as to what participation in research will involve, and what the potential risks are.

Merit

Research is methodologically sound and rigorous. Any potential benefits of a project are balanced carefully against the potential to cause harm.

Justice

The research does not disadvantage any particular segment of the community and the benefits of research are shared across the community.

Beneficence

Research should seek to benefit the community.

The ways in which these principles are achieved will, of course, vary depending upon the nature and goals of a [specific research project](#).

Conducting research on sexual assault

Obtaining ethics approval and conducting research in an ethical manner is vital for all research involving human participants.

Research with sexual assault victim-survivors can present [heightened ethical challenges](#). This means that research on this topic must be handled with particular skill, care and respect.

Although it is important not to generalise the experiences of victim-survivors, it is fair to say that sexual assault can be a [difficult and sensitive](#) topic to discuss with a researcher.

The potential for participants to experience harm or retraumatisation in sexual assault research is very real – although victim-survivors also report [many benefits](#) from participating in research.

This does not mean that we cannot or should not undertake research with sexual assault victim-survivors.

It does, however, mean that we need to have processes in place to support participants and minimise the likelihood that taking part in a project will cause them distress.

This potential for harm places a considerable onus on sexual violence researchers to ensure that our projects are designed with care and rigour to ensure that our participants' contributions carry the weight and authority they deserve.

Poorly designed research has the potential to cause [direct harm to victim-survivors](#) – for example, it might underestimate the actual prevalence of sexual violence.

Sexual assault involves a loss of autonomy and control. Because of this, it is vital that our research aims to provide victim-survivors with control and choice over [how they participate](#) and what information they share.

A key aspect of affording participants control is communicating to them, prior to the research, how their contributions will be used and represented in research outputs, such as publications.

Victim-survivors often face the very real fear of being identified by their perpetrator and facing ramifications, as well as the stigma associated with experiencing sexual assault.

For these reasons, ensuring that participants cannot be identified, and that their responses are stored securely and confidentially, is of utmost importance.

Victim-survivors often participate in research out of a [desire to help](#)

[others](#). They share their experiences in the hope that doing so will contribute towards meaningful change, and ultimately prevent others from experiencing [sexual violence](#).

Given this motivation, it is unsurprising that the AHRCs' poor communication regarding whether recommendations will be made from the research has been a [distressing one for some participants](#): it may undermine their very purpose in participating in the first place.

Negative encounters with research have the potential to [undermine public trust](#) and faith in research, and may contribute towards a reluctance to participate in the future.

Getting it right

How can we best ensure that all research with sexual assault victim-survivors engages in appropriate practices to protect and maintain participants' rights and wellbeing, as well as the integrity of the research?

[Best practice guidelines](#) on [sexual assault](#) research include, but are not limited to, [the following](#):

- prioritising the safety and wellbeing of participants at all times
- ensuring the research methodology is sound
- ensuring all members of a research team have been extensively trained in undertaking research sensitively with victim-survivors, and are aware of relevant ethical issues
- providing support, such as access to counselling, for victim-survivors both during and after their participation in the research
- having procedures in place to minimise the potential for participant distress, and to support participants should they become distressed during the research
- maintaining the confidentiality of participants' contributions at

all times

- affording participants control over how and when they participate
- ensuring that [participants](#) are fully informed about the nature of the [research](#), and how their contributions will be used, prior to taking part.

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