



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Advocacy for Structured Ethics Training to Improve Understanding and Ensure More Rigorous Research among Nursing Students

Khaoula El Barbi^{1*}, Khaoula Jounaidi², Abdellah Gantare³

^{1,2,3} Higher Institute of Health Sciences, Laboratory of Health Sciences and Technologies in Settat, Morocco

ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Received: Oct 17, 2024 Accepted: Dec 12, 2024	In Morocco, stricter rules on research ethics are becoming more rigorous, but there is a notable gap in understanding how nursing students perceive and respect these ethical standards in their research. We aimed to examine the views of nursing students on research ethics.
Keywords Nursing Students Ethics Research Perception Training	A survey was designed by the research team based on the extant literature. This is a quantitative/qualitative descriptive study based on a survey conducted among nursing students. The study assesses nursing students' grasp of research ethics in Morocco and reveals that limited knowledge is due to insufficient formal training. This leads to an underestimation of ethics and to research being considered low-risk. Nevertheless, students recognize the role of ethics in protecting subjects and guiding decisions. The study also highlights broader issues such as inadequate research policies and calls for better ethics training, recommending simulation and research-based teaching to improve ethical skills and the overall quality of research.
*Corresponding Author: k.elbarbi@uhp.ac.ma	The study highlights the need for structured ethics training to enhance understanding and ensure more rigorous research.

INTRODUCTION

Research involves exploring questions for which answers are not yet known, making the outcomes inherently uncertain while respecting ethical standards (Qu'est-ce que l'éthique de la recherche, pourquoi est-elle importante et comment s'y conformer? - TestSiteForMe, s. d.). Furthermore, the rights of the individuals, communities, and environments involved in research must be considered. (Qu'est-ce que l'éthique de la recherche, pourquoi est-elle importante et comment s'y conformer? - TestSiteForMe, s. d.)

In the same vein, the ethics of research aim to guarantee the protection of those involved in scientific research (Lambert-Chan, 2012). This principle was previously articulated by François Bowen, who highlighted that ethics foster respect for individuals and justice, while also considering their concerns and well-being (Lambert-Chan, 2012).

In definition, according to Stephens and Brighton, it can be defined as the search for a better way to live a moral life (Stephens & Brighton, 2014 in; Berman et al., 2014). In addition, Johnstone describes it as how to conduct one's life according to ethical values and he states that there is no significant philosophical difference between the terms 'ethics' and 'morality', which can be used substitutably

(Johnstone & Crock, 2012 in; Rebecca (Becky) Ingham-Broomfield, 2017). As for Harris et al., they state that ethics refers to the rules and norms that govern behaviour within a community. Moreover, moral principles may be based on social, professional or philosophical considerations (Mosby's Dictionary of Medicine, Nursing and Health Professions - Revised 3rd ANZ Edition, 2018 in; Rebecca (Becky) Ingham-Broomfield, 2017).

Otherwise, Atkins and his colleagues (2014, p.26) argue that ethics differs from morality and claimed that moral principles are expectations or beliefs similar to rules that the individual considers to be ethical (Atkins et al., 2011).

In recent decades, many countries and organisations have addressed the ethical issues surrounding research concerning human subjects, namely, the Belmont Principles in 1979, and the Irish Bioethics Council in 2004 (Rebecca (Becky) Ingham-Broomfield, 2017). Throughout the research process, it is important to emphasise that ethical issues obviously arise during the identification of the problem, the selection of research participants and the dissemination of results (Scott, 2017).

In the field of nursing, organisations have taken the initiative of outlining ethical guidelines to be followed when conducting research. These include the Nordic Nurses Association in 1995, the International Council of Nurses in 1996 (International Council of Nurses, 1996 in; Scott, 2017), the Council of Europe in 1997 (Council of Europe, 1997 in; Scott, 2017), the Royal College of Nurses in 2009 (Royal College of Nursing, 2009 in; Scott, 2017), the Nursing and Midwifery Board of Ireland (NMBI) in 2015 updated in 2024 (issadmin, 2024), and several other nominations.

From a perspective, Ethic is « not a science, a technique, a system of rules or a skill, that's why it can't be taught. (Collange, 1997 in; Lecomte, 2006)» Subsequently, there are no universally recognised methods for teaching ethics. Nevertheless, empirical studies have demonstrated that nursing students and practitioners who have received specific training in research ethics are more comfortable making moral decisions (Polczynski et al., 2019).

Internationally, Gu and colleagues have shown that there is a gap in the way nursing researchers understand the concept of research ethics and how they can maintain ethical standards in their research (Gu et al., 2019). In the same vein, a study carried out in Morocco highlighted that compliance with ethical standards in nursing research, carried out by nursing students, is affected by a number of obstacles (Maamri A., 2015).

A pilot study was carried out by the authors to: (1) explore nursing students' perceptions of ethics in research, (2) examine its application in nursing research, and (3) outline the methods used to teach ethics among nursing students.

MATERIAL AND METHODS:

Study Design

Firstly, this study was conducted in accordance with the recommendations of the STROBE guidelines for strengthening the reporting of observational studies in epidemiology (STROBE, 2024).

This is a pilot quantitative/qualitative descriptive study that was adopted to explore nursing students' perceptions of ethics in research.

Sample and settings

Between March 2024 and June 2024, the study was carried among students specialising in Nursing Sciences, who are educated at the Higher Institute of Health Sciences (HIHS), part of Hassan Premier University, Settat, MOROCCO. In 2013, the HIHS was founded to provide a complete Bachelor's-Master's-Doctorate training programme in the health sciences, including nursing sciences (Jounaidi et al., 2024). In addition, the data was analysed and processed during July 2024.

After establishing contact with the 98 students, the aim of the study was explained. 44 learners gave their consent and took part in the study (response rate is 44,98%). Then, questionnaire was delivered using a Google Forms link.

Data Analysis

For quantitative processing, descriptive statistics through the database was processed and analysed using Microsoft Excel and SPSS.

For the qualitative processing part, we proceeded with a narrative analysis of the information gathered, following the three themes previously established and which meet the purposes of the study.

Data collection tool

A survey was designed by the research team based on the extant literature especially these three studies: (1) Gu et al., which evaluated the importance of ethics in conducting scientific research (Gu et al., 2019); (2) Maamri, which revealed the importance of ethics in nursing research in the Moroccan context (Maamri A., 2015); (3) Gantare, which demonstrated the effectiveness of the simulation as an approach to training ethically competent professionals (Abdellah, 2024).

It includes a part for collecting socio-demographic data and two parts, containing 24 items in total and grouped into two sections that reflect the aims of the study, namely: Section 1: Perception of ethics and research ethics in nursing; Section 2: Training programmes in research ethics in nursing. On average, the survey took between 10 to 15 min to be filled.

Furthermore, it consists of three types of questions: a. Binary question (YES/NO): Item 1; b. Multiple choice question: Items 5,6,7,8,9,10,11,12,13,14,15,16,17,18,19,21,22, and 23; c. Open question: Items 2, 3, 4, 20, and 24.

Ethical Considerations:

This study adheres to the principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki (The World Medical Association, 1964) and complies with Morocco's legal framework law n° 09.08, which ensures the protection of individuals in relation to data processing (Law 09-08 on the Protection of Individuals with Regard to the Processing of Personal Data, 2009).

RESULTS:

This study was conducted to explore the perceptions of nursing students on the importance of ethics in scientific research, its integration into the field of nursing and the value of mobilising ethics training to educate ethically competent nursing health professionals.

The following results were obtained from the survey of the sample population involved in the study:

Socio-demographic data

The study covered 98 HIHS affiliated students, while 44 expressed their interest in participating (44.90% response rate). Their characteristics are grouped in the first table.

Table 1: participants' characteristics

		N	%
Sex	F	31	70,50
	M	13	29,50
Bachelor		10	22,72
Master		26	59,1
Doctorate / PhD		8	18,18

As mentioned above, the survey is divided to three types of questions, their results are as follows:

Closed-ended questions

The following table summarises the results obtained for items whose response options are determined in advance i.e. items 1, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 21, 22 and 23.

Table 2: results of closed-ended questions

Items	selection	N	Rate
I1. Have you ever studied ethics in nursing?	Yes	3 6	81,80%
	NO	8	18,20%
I5. Do you find that research to inform ethical decisions in nursing research and/or nursing practice is:	Very important	4 0	90,90%
	Quite important	4	9,10%
	Not very important	0	0%
	Not important at all	0	0%
I6. Do you feel that teaching ethics in nursing is:	Very sufficient	9	20,50%
	Sufficient	1 5	34,10%
	Not enough	1 7	38,60%
	Not at all sufficient	3	6,80%
I7. Do you think ethics courses in nursing should be compulsory?	Yes, absolutely	4 4	100%
	No, it's not necessary	0	0%
	I don't know	0	0%
I8. How important do you think ethics education is in the training of nursing students?	Very important	4 2	95,50%
	Quite important	2	4,50%
	Not very important	0	0%
	Not important at all	0	0%
I9. Do you think ethics education should be integrated into all nursing courses?	Yes, absolutely	3 4	77,30%
	Yes, but only in certain courses	9	20,50%
	No, it's not necessary	0	0%
	I don't know	1	2,30%
I10. Have you ever been confronted with a difficult ethical situation during your internships or your work as a student nurse?	Yes, several times	2 7	61,40%
	Yes, once	7	15,90%
	No, never	7	15,90%
	I don't know	3	6,80%
I11. How well prepared do you feel to deal with difficult ethical situations as a nursing student?	Highly prepared	9	20,50%
	Quite prepared	1 5	34,50%

	Little prepared	1 6	36,40%
	Not prepared at all	4	9,10%
I12. Do you think ethics education should be a compulsory part of nursing students' training?	Yes, absolutely	4 2	95,50%
	Yes, but as an option	2	4,50%
	No, it's not necessary	0	0%
	I don't know	0	0%
I13. Are you aware of the existence of professional codes of ethics for nurses?	Yes, absolutely	1 8	40,90%
	Yes, a bit	1 4	31,80%
	No, not at all	8	18,20%
	I don't know	4	9,10%
I14. Do you think ethics training could have a positive impact on the quality of scientific research in nursing?	Yes, certainly	3 6	81,80%
	Yes, perhaps	6	13,60%
	No, not really	1	2,30%
	I don't know	1	2,30%
I15. Have you ever attended a course or training session on nursing ethics?	Yes, several times	2 1	47,70%
	Yes, once	1 4	31,80%
	No, never	8	18,20%
	I don't know	1	2,30%
I16. To what extent do you think, ethics training should include practical examples and case studies?	Very important	3 6	81,80%
	Quite important	8	18,20%
	Not very important	0	0%
	Not important at all	0	0%
I17. Do you think healthcare professionals should continue to train and keep abreast of developments in nursing ethics throughout their careers?	Yes, absolutely	4 1	93,20%
	Yes, but it's not essential	2	4,50%
	No, it's not necessary	0	0%
	I don't know	1	2,30%
I18. How would you rate your understanding of the basic ethical principles of nursing research, such as informed consent, data confidentiality and the protection of vulnerable participants?	Very important	2 8	63,63%
	Quite important	1 2	27,27%
	Not very important	4	9,9%
	Not important at all	0	0%
I19. How important do you think ethical knowledge is for carrying out quality nursing research?	Very important	3 7	84,1%
	Quite important	7	15,9%
	Not very important	0	0%
	Not important at all	0	0%

I21. Do you think training should be:	Theoretical.	1	2,27%
	Practical	2	45,45%
	Theoretical-Practical	4	93,19%
I22. What methods can be mobilized for basic ethics training?	Lectures	2 7	61,36%
	Case study	3 7	84,1%
	Simulation	3 7	84,1%
I23. In your opinion, the evaluation of the course is done by:	The pace of training.	1 2	27,28%
	Pre-defined objectives.	2 6	59,09%
	The level of difficulty recognized during training.	2 3	52,27%
	The link between theory and practice.	3 1	70,45%

The table reveals that participants in our study had received ethics training and highlighted its importance in decision-making in research and/or nursing practice. They outlined the need for more in-depth ethics training in nursing, stating that this should be a core part of the nursing program, with more detailed modules on research ethics.

Similarly, the results show the need to diversify teaching methods to acquire ethical competence, considering that 84% of students stressed the role of simulation and/or case studies, and added that the course should be evaluated by the predefined objectives (59%) and/or the level of difficulty recognised during the course (53%).

Open question / assignment question

The results of this study were divided into two categories, which had already been fixed at the beginning: 1) the perception of ethics and research ethics in nursing; 2) Ethics training programmes in nursing research.

The perception of ethics and research ethics in nursing

The majority of participants (82%) reported that they had already completed a module on ethics during their preservice nursing training. These findings emphasize that their reflections are shaped by their academic background, as well as their personal beliefs, experiences, and understanding of ethics. Additionally, six participants identified key ethical principles they had learned, including respect for the individual as a whole, justice, beneficence, and non-maleficence.

"Respect for the patient and their autonomy, confidentiality, beneficence, non-maleficence, justice (equitable and fair service), maintaining the patient's privacy..." E12; Q2

"The fundamental principles of ethics: kindness, justice and respect for the individual". E21; Q2

However, 37% participants have described ethics as the practice of following norms, codes of conduct, and legal requirements, suggesting that ethics forms the foundation of professional conduct. This highlights the persistent confusion between ethics and deontology.

"Laws, deontology, alliance." E2; Q2

"The concepts covered in class: respect for patient privacy and confidentiality of personal data. Respect for human dignity. We learned the four principles of deontology." E14; Q2

"Deontology." E16; Q2

Eight participants have provided a definition of deontology, once again highlighting the persistent confusion between ethics and deontology.

"Deontology serves to regulate the profession and in the field of research to protect human beings." E13; Q3

"Respect the principles of the profession and avoid doing things that are illegal or prohibited." E33; Q3

"The code of conduct for nurses to properly perform their duties." E35; Q3

"A set of deontological rules that ensures the proper continuation of work." E38; Q3

Indeed, a majority (85%) were able to capture the essence of ethics in nursing research. Their definitions consistently emphasized that ethics is an art that, when mastered, leads to a successful career. They also highlighted that ethics forms the foundation of nursing science, involving thoughtful consideration to find the most suitable solutions while navigating various constraints.

"The set of behaviours and rules that govern morality." E3; Q3

"It is a reflective process aimed at finding the fairest solution and adopting the most appropriate behaviour, considering the constraints of specific situations." E21; Q3

"It's the art of knowing what to do and say, and what not to do or say, while respecting the patient's dignity." E22; Q3

"Reflection aimed at finding the most suitable solution and adopting the most appropriate behaviour." E34; Q3

It is noteworthy that two participants were unable to provide a definition of nursing research, despite being expected to be active researchers in the field or to engage in research in the future.

"Currently, I don't have a definition for ethics in nursing science." E8; Q3

"I don't know." E15; Q3

Furthermore, eighty-four percent expressed a positive perception and highlighted the importance of research in nursing science. They explained that this research is crucial because it enables students and healthcare professionals to make informed decisions based on solid scientific reasoning. Furthermore, they emphasized that research in nursing science contributes to the development not only of practice but also of the scientific component of the discipline.

"The aim of nursing research is to improve this field, which directly affects the patient, and so it must be well planned, supervised and follow ethical standards and guidelines." E1; Q4

"For me, nursing research is very important and a great opportunity for improvement and greater competence. So, research in nursing is a very good thing to do." E9; Q4

"Nursing research will develop knowledge about care from the practical and ethical side and this combination will allow evolution in this field which is sincerely in need of evolution." E10; Q4

"It is essential because research is the key to solving many of the problems faced by the public and healthcare professionals, as well as providing evidence to convince decision makers of the severity of situations in the healthcare sector." E37; Q4

Four participants highlighted the crucial importance of research in nursing science while emphasising the need for significant development in this field in Morocco. They explained that nursing research is often overlooked, but still asserted that it is a promising area with considerable future potential in nursing science.

'Needs major development in Morocco' E7; Q4

'I believe that nursing research will become an interesting subject in the health field' E8; Q4

'It is a rather neglected branch of research'. E17; Q4

Indeed, only 3 participants had difficulty answering this question, and here is how they responded:

"I didn't quite understand the question." E40; Q4

"I have no idea." E43; Q4

Ethics training programmes in nursing research

Eighty-nine percent expressed a strong awareness of the positive influence of research ethics training in nursing on their own research work. The participants were very responsive to this question and felt that this training would certainly help them to resolve the ethical issues encountered in data collection, particularly in the field of nursing where they are always involved with human beings. This training in nursing sciences research, ethics would therefore enable them to protect themselves, as well as the participants in the study. In addition, this training would also have a positive impact on the quality of the research, by ensuring compliance with ethical standards in research, which would guarantee its credibility.

"It will positively impact my research as it will adhere to ethical standards throughout the process, as regulated nationally and internationally." E1; Q20

"Training in research ethics will guide my research to protect both myself and the individuals participating in the scientific research." E10; Q20

"A research study that respects ethics is a credible research study and will contribute to the field of health, consequently influencing our work." E25; Q20

"In all nursing research, ethics is a fundamental basis that impacts various stages of the research, such as data collection." E40; Q20

Among the 44 participants, 36 emphasised the importance of providing specific training in research ethics within nursing science. This training could include case studies where each student is required to reflect on ethical issues or dilemmas encountered, in order to make ethically acceptable decisions. This approach would address the students' needs by equipping them with ethical skills to handle potential ethical dilemmas during placements or scientific research.

"Addressing the needs of learners and basing it on situations that learners have experienced during their placements or final projects." E1; Q24

"Creating scenarios that require ethical considerations to see how the student will respond." E9; Q24

DISCUSSION

This study was carried out to evaluate the perception of ethics in nursing research among students at various academic levels (bachelor's, master's and doctoral), with a purpose to promoting and enhancing scientific research in nursing in Morocco.

The results show that the nursing students involved in this study have a limited understanding of ethical principles, largely because they have not received formal training in research ethics during their studies.

This often leads them to underestimate the importance of ethics, in particular by perceiving their research as low-risk. This attitude results from inadequate training, the pressure to make rapid progress with their work, and their personal and professional ambitions.

Nevertheless, the participants recognise the crucial importance of ethics in protecting the rights of research subjects and in guiding the decisions of students and healthcare professionals. They also emphasised that nursing research plays a key role in the improvement of practice and the scientific advancement of the discipline.

These findings were identified in the study by Gu et al. who have highlighted that nursing researchers in China have a limited understanding and application of ethical principles, mainly due to a lack of adequate professional training in ethics, bioethics and research ethics. This gap in formal and continuing education contributes to insufficient consideration of ethical challenges in their research work (Gu et al., 2019). In particular, Nkongho A. Arrey-Ndip has revealed that participants are aware of ethical principles in social research, but their level of awareness and application varies, with a lack of consensus on certain ethical issues (Arrey-Ndip, s. d.).

The results highlight the fact that nursing research has long been underestimated and is now recognised for its promising potential. However, a number of challenges remain, such as the lack of a clear research policy, poor recognition of the role of research, the lack of status for researchers and inappropriate research structures.

Nevertheless, nursing research is crucial to the humanities, social sciences and public health. It enhances knowledge, encourages critical reflection on practice and enables nurses to evaluate and challenge current methods while exploring new approaches. The results of this research have the potential to transform nursing education and practice, by contributing to the theorisation of care concepts and aligning with contemporary trends in nursing science.

This point of view was identified in Maamri's study, which highlighted the importance of scientific nursing research in advancing knowledge and optimising healthcare practices. It also emphasised the need for a defined research policy, sufficient funding and a structured organisation of research (Maamri A., 2015).

Furthermore, Koirala and his colleagues have highlighted the need to strengthen ethics training, foster moral resilience and put in place educational policies focusing on 'preventive ethics'. It also calls for a more robust and focused research agenda to advance ethics in nursing (Koirala et al., 2022).

Otherwise, the participants have emphasised the beneficial effects of applied nursing research ethics programmes on their research. A well-structured pedagogical approach enables students and researchers to develop solid ethical skills and to have the necessary tools to manage complex situations by mobilising diverse resources.

Most participants expressed a preference for specialised training in ethics, highlighting the effectiveness of simulation as the preferred method. This approach has proved effective in developing both technical and non-technical skills, enabling students to analyse case studies and reflect on ethical dilemmas, thereby promoting decisions that are aligned with ethical standards.

The same point of view was emphasised by Gantare, who highlighted the positive impact of simulation on the development of students' ethical skills. The results of the pre- and post-tests demonstrated the effectiveness of this method for mastering ethical principles and making informed decisions when faced with dilemmas. In addition, this approach enhanced their civic skills by encouraging critical thinking, reflection, deliberation and decision-making based on ethical principles (Abdellah, 2024).

In the same vein, a study by Zhang et al. has revealed that research-based teaching is most effective in enhancing professional relationships and ethical decision-making in nursing students, while lecture-based teaching excels in imparting the fundamental theoretical knowledge of nursing ethics. Although both approaches are effective, each differs in particular areas: research-based teaching favours practical application, while lecture-based teaching focuses on theoretical understanding (Zhang et al., 2019).

Another study conducted by Cannaerts et al. showed that students and educators believe that teaching methods such as case studies and group discussions are particularly effective in developing ethical decision-making and critical thinking. However, they also favour more innovative approaches, such as blended learning, problem-based learning, and reflective journaling sessions, which offer additional opportunities to deepen these skills (Cannaerts et al., 2014).

In addition, a study carried out by Megregian et al. recommended the integration of ethical content throughout the midwifery education programme, highlighting the importance of clinical preceptors in this process. Programmes need to deliberately include this content, focusing on in-depth discussions of autonomy, choice, and shared decision-making, and examining it in the context of the relationship between the care system and the midwife (Megregian et al., 2021).

STRENGTHS AND IMPLICATIONS:

The study stated that ethics education for nursing students plays a crucial role in enhancing scientific research and practice. These programmes enable students to acquire a thorough knowledge of essential ethical principles, such as informed consent, data protection and respect for participants' rights, thereby ensuring compliance with current standards and reducing the risk of non-compliance.

In addition, this training improves the reliability of data and the credibility of results by teaching researchers to avoid prejudice and unethical practices such as falsification and plagiarism. It also helps to prevent unethical behaviour by making them aware of inappropriate practices and providing them with tools to manage conflicts of interest, maintain transparency and preserve integrity throughout the research process.

Finally, by encouraging a culture of ethical responsibility, these programmes strengthen confidence in research and public trust in its results.

LIMITATIONS:

The main aim of our work is to report on a pilot experiment carried out with nursing students at the Higher Institute of Health Sciences to illustrate their perceptions of ethical aspects of conducting scientific research.

At this stage of our research, we do not claim that our results are generalisable. The results obtained in this experiment will only serve to test the students' perceptions and their proposals for enhancing the value of ethics in training.

Additionally, the goal is to assess how broadly the study's findings can be applied to other nursing training institutes as part of a multicentre study.

CONCLUSION

The present study provides a new perspective on the perception of ethics in nursing research among students at the Higher Institute of Health Sciences (HIHS). The results reveal that, although the participants recognise the fundamental importance of ethics in research, their knowledge in this field remains limited. However, they emphasised that nursing research is essential for optimising practice and advancing the scientific development of the discipline.

The study also revealed several factors explaining this lack of ethical understanding, such as the absence of specific formal training programmes in nursing research ethics. On the other hand, a majority of participants noted that simulation is perceived as a dynamic and effective method for better training in research ethics.

These findings suggest that well-structured training in research ethics is crucial to remedy this deficiency. Such training would enable researchers to acquire a better understanding and application of ethical principles, which would contribute to more rigorous and reliable research.

DECLARATION OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTION SECTION

EL BARBI Khaoula, as the corresponding author, conceptualized and designed the study, acquired, analyzed and interpreted data, drafted and revised the manuscript.

JOUNAIDI Khaoula, as a contributor to the article and second author, analyzed and interpreted the statistical data and contributed to the drafting and revision of the manuscript.

GANTARE Abdellah supervised the research process, provided guidance throughout the study, and critically reviewed the manuscript for important intellectual content.

All authors have read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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