

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Exploring the Ethical Dimensions of Nursing Research: A Systematic Review

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ABSTRACT

Ethical principles are fundamental to nursing research, ensuring participant protection, study credibility and public confidence. Despite existing guidelines, challenges remain in the consistent application of ethical practices in different clinical settings. This systematic review examines the impact of ethical frameworks on the quality of nursing research and explores strategies to improve ethical rigour. A systematic review was conducted according to PRISMA (2020) guidelines. Studies published in English since 2014 were retrieved from Scopus, Web of Science and ScienceDirect using the keywords "Research Ethics" AND "Nursing Research". After applying inclusion and exclusion criteria, 11 studies were selected. Data were extracted, categorised thematically, and analysed to identify key ethical challenges, best practices, and recommendations. The systematic review highlights critical ethical concerns, including informed consent, transparency, and the dual role of nurses and researchers. The findings emphasise the need for standardised ethical guidelines, ongoing training and structured support to address ethical dilemmas. Ethical compliance was also shown to enhance research credibility, patient safety and methodological rigour. However, variations in study methodology and the exclusion of non-English literature may limit generalisability. The key to maintaining integrity in nursing research is a strong ethical framework. Improving ethical education, policies and transparency enhances research quality and public trust. Future research should focus on the impact of ethical training and interdisciplinary collaboration.

INTRODUCTION

"Ethics is neither a science, nor a technique, nor a system of rules, nor know-how. That's why it can't be taught" (1)

Ethics are of paramount importance in nursing, both in everyday practice and in research. They protect the rights of participants and ensure the reliability of results. Ethics guide researchers by establishing moral principles to distinguish between acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. In research, this involves respect for informed consent, confidentiality of data, and balancing scientific objectives with the well-being of participants(2).

Research ethics have a fundamental role to maintain clear standards that combine scientific rigour, integrity and moral principles. It seeks to ensure that scientific research does not compromise social responsibility or ethical values, while maintaining public trust. Its historical development enables us

to better understand current issues and anticipate future challenges, thereby ensuring that the production of knowledge meets ethical and societal expectations(3).

Nursing ethics have deep roots in history, stretching back to ancient times with great figures such as Hippocrates, who established principles such as compassion and confidentiality. Throughout history, codes of ethics, such as that of the International Council of Nurses, have been created to guide the profession (4).In the 19th century, Florence Nightingale revolutionised nursing ethics by placing hygiene, empathy and respect for patients at the heart of care, thereby laying the foundations for professional and humanist practice (5).

Nowadays, in the light of contemporary challenges such as globalisation and technological advances, ethical principles continue to evolve, although essential values such as respect for human dignity, benevolence and confidentiality remain at the heart of nursing science(6).

Despite efforts at standardization, challenges persist in the application of ethical practices due to the diversity of clinical contexts. Emphasis is placed on the importance of ethics, patient safety, and interactions, while highlighting the need for greater awareness of ethical issues to strengthen the credibility of research and improve care (7).

This systematic review aims to:

Explore how the implementation of a rigorous ethical framework in nursing research will improve the quality of studies and enhance public confidence in their results;

Identify best practice by highlighting gaps and challenges related to the diversity of clinical settings and technological advances;

Formulate recommendations to promote ethical, relevant and impactful nursing research, adapted to contemporary needs.

MATERIALS & METHODS

This systematic review was conducted to assess the influence of strict application of the ethical framework on the quality of nursing research and to provide suggestions for improving practice. The analysis followed the PRISMA (2020) recommendations and focused on studies developed in English since 2014, covering a range of study types including case studies, qualitative, quantitative, mixed methods and clinical trials. Conference abstracts, letters, textbooks and studies prior to 2013 were excluded to ensure that only recent and relevant research was included.

Research strategy

The research was conducted in November 2024 using online scientific databases accessible through IMIST/CNRST, including Scopus, Web of Science and ScienceDirect, with the search terms: ("Research Ethics" AND "Nursing Research"). The selection process is detailed in Figure 1.

Initially, 1,690 articles were identified. After applying the inclusion and exclusion criteria, 99 articles were retained. Following an analysis of titles and abstracts, 11 articles were selected after a second in-depth reading to refine the final set.

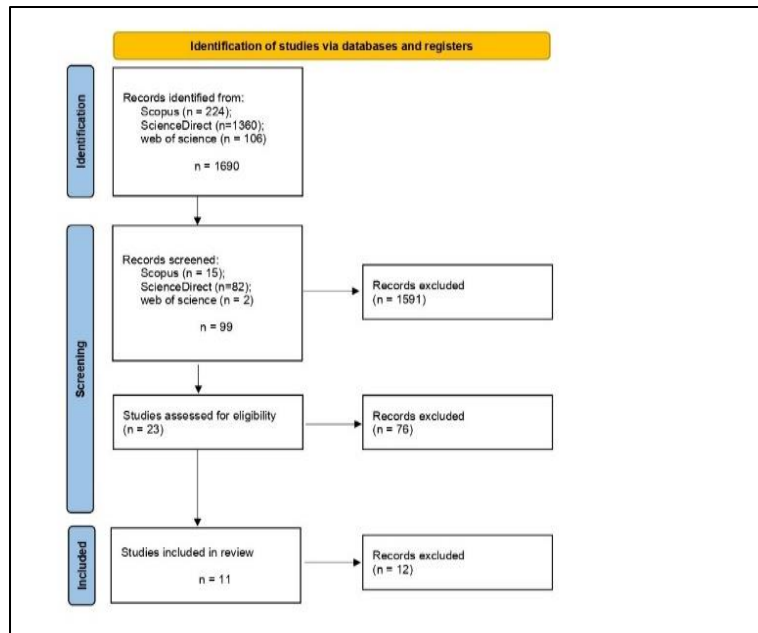


Figure1 : PRISMA Diagram flow

Data extraction

To minimise the risks associated with data collection, three biases were assessed: selection bias, by applying inclusion and exclusion criteria to avoid random selection; detection bias, by ensuring comprehensiveness of articles and inclusion of all relevant studies by using multiple databases; and interpretation bias, by involving a review committee to ensure objective assessment and synthesis of the studies.

Data analysis

The extracted data were carefully sorted and categorised according to pre-defined themes, in line with the objectives of the study. Each thematic category was designed to reflect the key aspects of the research and to enable a thorough and structured analysis of the information collected. This process directly linked the data to the central questions of the study, to facilitate comparison and interpretation of results within a coherent and methodological framework.

RESULTS

A total of eleven articles were included in the review (Table 1). These encompassed a range of study designs, including qualitative studies, mixed methods, cross-sectional studies, formal investigative research, clinical trials, non-sensitive surveys, observational studies (surveys), and studies based on constructivist grounded theory. The research was conducted across multiple countries, including the United States, Australia, Denmark, Finland, Spain, the United Kingdom, and Lebanon. The data was organized using Zotero, which facilitated efficient management of sources by categorizing the titles, authors, publication dates, abstracts, and full texts of the articles.

Table 1: Characteristics of included studies

Title of the article	Author, year	Study subjects/population	Objective	Methods	Results
Valid informed consent in research: An introduction	Jayne Hardicre 2014	The methods for obtaining informed consent involve providing written information on risks and benefits, assessing participants' understanding and decision-making ability, ensuring voluntariness, and obtaining consent from a legal representative if necessary.	To ensure valid informed consent by confirming participants' understanding, voluntary participation, and decision-making competence.	Clinical Trials Surveys	The article stresses the importance of informed consent in research and clinical trials, focusing on the need for clear information about risks and benefits, and adherence to principles like voluntariness and understanding. It highlights that obtaining valid consent is a complex process that prioritizes patient rights and safety, while cautioning against coercion or undue influence in the nurse-patient relationship.
A practical field guide to conducting nursing research in low- and middle-income countries	Virginia LeBaron, Sarah Iribarren, Seneca L. Perri, Susan L. Beck 2015	The authors provide practical strategies for conducting research in LMICs, focusing on data collection, cultural context, and ethics, using a descriptive and ethnographic approach with anecdotes, surveys, and interviews.	The study provides practical guidance for nurse researchers in LMICs, focusing on cultural sensitivity, respectful collaborations, and ethical considerations in international research.	Ethnography, mixed methods, and intervention studies.	The authors offer recommendations for conducting international research in LMICs, highlighting the need for planning, cultural humility, and respectful partnerships. Key challenges include cultural and language barriers, limited resources, and ethical issues. The article stresses the importance of cultural sensitivity, language proficiency, and logistical solutions, while noting that nurse scientists often lack adequate training. It concludes that careful planning, flexibility, and support are crucial for overcoming challenges and making meaningful contributions to global health.
Ethics and the Reporting of Research Findings	Constance L. Milton 2018	The document discusses formal inquiry studies, which are theory-based, coherent, question-driven, replicable, and may involve quantitative research designs.	The article examines the importance of ethics in healthcare research, particularly nursing, emphasizing ethical integrity, critical thinking, and thorough evaluation throughout the research process.	formal inquiry research	The article highlights the importance of ethics in research and publication, stressing transparency, honesty, and rigorous evaluation to maintain trust. It defines ethics in nursing, addresses misconduct like plagiarism and falsification, and concludes that ethical practices are crucial for advancing knowledge and ensuring research integrity.
NURSES' knowledge, skills and personal attributes for providing competent health education practice, and its influencing	María Pueyo-Garrigues; Miren Idoia Pardavila-Belio; Ana Canga, and al 2021	A cross-sectional study with 458 nurses used the Nurse Health Education Competence Instrument and self-report questionnaires, analyzing data with statistical methods like t-tests, ANOVA,	The study explored hospital nurses' health education competence, focusing on knowledge, skills, personal attributes, and the impact of socio-demographic factors, work characteristics, and self-efficacy.	A cross-sectional study	The study found that while nurses reported some relevant skills and attributes for health education, they lacked sufficient knowledge for competent practice. Nurses with health education training, more experience, and higher education levels scored better in knowledge, skills, and personal attributes. Self-efficacy and working in intensive care units also influenced scores. The study concluded that tailored education programs and supportive organizational cultures are essential to improve nurses' health education competence.

factors: A cross-sectional study		and regression to examine associations between competence and personal/work-related characteristics.			
Ethical dilemmas embedded in performing fieldwork with nurses in the ICU	Monica Evelyn Kvande; Charlotte Delmar; Jette Lauritzen, and al 2021	The study used a qualitative design with close observation and in-depth interviews of 11 ICU nurses, employing thematic analysis, hermeneutic phenomenology, ethnography, and interpretive inquiry for data interpretation.	The studies focus on exploring the experiences, challenges, and emotional aspects of caregiving, patient care, and the roles of healthcare professionals.	Qualitative research	The study highlights the ethical challenges in nursing research, particularly in the researcher-participant relationship, emphasizing the need for clear boundaries, reflexivity, and sensitivity to suffering. It concludes that ICU research requires careful ethical considerations and future education to address these challenges.
“Undergraduate students’ perceptions of learning nursing theories: A descriptive qualitative approach”	Nancy Helou; Julie Aoudé; Gina Sobral 2022	The study used a descriptive qualitative approach with a five-question survey and group discussions. Participants selected their preferred nursing theory individually, then discussed their choices in groups, with narratives summarizing these discussions collected for analysis.	The study aimed to explore undergraduate students' perceptions of learning nursing theories and their contributions to nursing practice.	Descriptive qualitative	The study found that nursing students value pluralism in nursing theories but struggle to apply abstract theories in practice. Four main themes emerged: pluralism in theories, dualism in practice, monism in views of the person, and learning based on personal values. The study suggests nursing educators should rethink how theories are taught, emphasizing their practical relevance and integrating them into clinical training to bridge the theory-practice gap.
Exploring the SPHERE Nursing and Midwifery Clinician Researcher Career Pathway: A qualitative study	Maree Johnson; Caleb Ferguson; Anna Thornton, and al 2023	The study used a qualitative descriptive design, collecting data through online focus groups and semi-structured interviews with senior nursing leaders, academics, and clinician academics with PhDs. Content and thematic analyses were used to identify key themes and subthemes.	The study aimed to examine the perspectives of senior nursing leaders, nursing academics, and clinician academics on the SPHERE Nursing and Midwifery Clinician Researcher Career Pathway.	Qualitative ; descriptive	The study supported the SPHERE Nursing and Midwifery Clinician Researcher Career Pathway, highlighting its potential to bridge the gap between clinical and research roles. Four key themes emerged: role disintegration, implementation needs, balancing responsibilities, and building a stable researcher cohort. The Pathway is seen as transformative for developing a research-capable workforce, though its success depends on cultural change, collaboration, and a shared vision among stakeholders.
Nursing and midwifery research	Carrie Janerka; Melissa Mellan;	The study used a mixed-methods approach with	The study aimed to identify nursing and midwifery research priorities for a	Mixed-methods	The study identified the top 10 nursing and midwifery research priorities for an Australian health service, including patient care, interpersonal skills, education,

priorities for an Australian health service: A priority-setting partnership approach	Robyn Wright, and al. 2023	surveys, content analysis, and a consensus workshop to identify and prioritize research topics, gathering 333 statements from clinicians and consumers through snowball sampling.	metropolitan health service in Australia using a priority-setting partnership approach.		staffing, and patient safety. Involving clinicians and consumers ensures relevance, and the findings align with international research priorities, informing strategic planning.
Contextual determinants impacting final year nursing students' emergency team communication during deteriorating patient simulations: A grounded theory study	<u>Sharon L. Bourke, Lisa McKenna, Simon Cooper, Louisa Lam</u> 2024	The study used a constructivist grounded theory approach, combining interviews and video observations of students in simulated emergencies with PPE, which may have limited nonverbal and emotional cue observation.	The study aimed to explore how final-year undergraduate nursing students communicate during simulated team emergency situations.	Constructivist <u>grounded theory</u> approach	The study identified that factors like simulation context, student characteristics, team dynamics, and leadership influence communication in nursing student teams during emergencies. It highlighted "navigating uncertainty" as the core theme and emphasized the need for curriculum development that addresses leadership, communication, and diversity, particularly for students from diverse backgrounds.
Improved professional competencies and leadership in PhD-prepared nurses and doctoral students after participating in the cross-national and web-based Nurse-Lead program	Lisa van Dongen; Lisa Suidman; Maria Adriana Henriques, and al. 2024	The study evaluated a leadership program's impact on competencies and career development using a mixed-methods approach, including surveys and online modules with mentoring, while observer assessments were canceled due to COVID-19.	The study aimed to assess changes in leadership practices, competencies, and career development among PhD-prepared nurses and doctoral students after participating in the Nurse-Lead program, and to explore participants' perspectives on these changes.	Mixed methods	The study highlighted improvements in leadership, professional, and research competencies through the Nurse-Lead program, which also enhanced career development and teamwork. It concluded that the program effectively supports professional growth and emphasized the potential of web-based international programs for PhD-prepared nurses and doctoral students.
Methodological and strategic insights for online survey studies: an analysis based on the CHERRIES checklist	María-Carmen Torrejón-Guirado; Isabel San Martín-Erice; Leticia San Martín-Rodríguez, and al. 2024	The article discusses online survey methods, emphasizing context, survey design, and techniques like randomization, vertical scales, and incentives.	The text examines the limitations and biases of online surveys, providing guidance on design and conduct to improve validity and generalizability.	An observational study that uses surveys as its data collection method.	The article highlights the importance of using guidelines like CHERRIES to ensure online survey validity, addressing factors like response rates, biases, and design elements, and emphasizing the need to tackle challenges such as recruitment and data protection.

Informed consent and Ethics:

The three studies by Hardicre (2014) (8), Kvande et al. (2021) (9) and LeBaron et al. (2015) (10) converge on the imperative of scrupulously respected informed consent, although their methodological approaches differ significantly. Hardicre advocates for exhaustive written communication of risks and benefits (8), while LeBaron explores cultural and linguistic issues specific to low-income contexts and argues for local adaptation of consent (10). Kvande, meanwhile, looks at the emotional vulnerability of researchers working in intensive care, highlighting the moral tensions inherent in these environments (9).

Confidence and transparency:

Milton (2018) and Torrejón-Guirado et al. (2024) insist on the need for rigorous transparency in the conduct of research. Milton defends an irreproachable presentation of results and firmly denounces the risks of plagiarism and falsification (11). Torrejón-Guirado uses the CHERRIES protocol to illustrate how standardised methodological practices, such as the randomisation of questions and the use of precise evaluation grids, increase the credibility of results and reduce bias (12).

Dual roles and ethical dilemmas:

The studies by Kvande et al. (2021) and Ferguson et al. (2023) explore the dual role of the nurse and the researcher. Kvande highlights the ethical dilemmas observed in intensive care units where emotional proximity makes it difficult for the researcher to maintain impartiality (9). Ferguson recommends providing protected time for research as part of the SPHERE model to limit these role conflicts (13).

Impact of ethical practices on quality:

Milton (2018), Janerka et al. (2023) and Bourke et al. (2024) highlight that impeccable ethical practices significantly improve the quality of research. Using a participatory approach (11) (14), Janerka identifies key priorities such as patient safety and continuing education (15). Bourke highlights the impact of contextual factors on nursing students' communication during simulations, emphasising the importance of enhanced training in interprofessional skills (14).

The role of training and education:

The contributions of Pueyo-Garrigues et al (2021) (16), Van Dongen et al (2024) (17) and Helou et al (2022) (18) emphasise the crucial importance of training in improving nursing practice. Van Dongen demonstrates how the Nurse-Lead programme, through mentoring modules and interactive training, helps to develop leadership skills and ethical competencies (17). Pueyo-Garrigues highlights the effectiveness of continuing education in developing health education skills, emphasising its role in improving clinical practice (16).

DISCUSSION

The development of a rigorous ethical framework specific to nursing research is inseparable from the scientific validity and social legitimacy of studies. As Fouka and Mantzorou (2011) outline, this framework goes beyond administrative procedures and embodies an ongoing reflection on the balance between scientific objectivity and the preservation of the nurse-patient relationship (19). The imperatives of autonomy, non-maleficence and justice, set out in the Belmont Report (1979) (20), find practical application here, particularly through dynamic informed consent, which must be adapted to the realities of vulnerable populations (Grady, 2015) (21).

This process, far from being a legal formality, is a pillar of dignity for participants, recognising their role as informed partners in the production of knowledge (Fouka & Mantzourou, 2011 (19); ICN Code of Ethics, 2021 (22)). Such an ethical approach, reinforced by the systematic involvement of independent committees (Emanuel et al, 2000), directly enhances the reliability of the conclusions by minimising the methodological biases associated with the dual roles of nurse and researcher (23).

Moreover, as these studies highlight, public trust is not only built on the transparency of the protocols, but also on proactive communication about the mechanisms for the protection of human rights, thereby consolidating the social acceptability of the outcomes (Fouka & Mantzourou, 2011) (19).

Hardicre (2014) highlights the need for a structured and clear process to ensure that participants' rights are respected throughout the study (8). This is particularly crucially important in sensitive contexts, where participants may be in vulnerable situations, as emphasised by Kvande et al. (2021) (9). Their work underlined the need for a specific approach that takes account of these vulnerabilities while ensuring scrupulous respect for ethical principles. In this regard, LeBaron et al. (2015) also highlight the importance of adapting informed consent practices to the cultural specificities of participants in order to ensure a truly inclusive and respectful ethical approach (10).

From the same point of view, transparency has a fundamental role to play in nursing research. Indeed, clarity and honesty in the design, conduct and communication of results enhance the credibility of research. Milton (2018) and Torrejón-Guirado et al. (2024) insist that rigorous methodologies and absolute adherence to standards, such as those defined in the CHERRIES guide, are necessary to limit bias and ensure valid results (11).

Transparency is not limited to the publication of results, but also includes the way in which data are collected, analysed and interpreted, thereby contributing to greater confidence in the studies conducted among health professionals and the general public (12).

Ethical dilemmas, particularly those related to the multiple roles of nurse researchers, are another major challenge. These professionals need to balance their clinical responsibilities with their obligations as researchers, which can create significant ethical tensions. Kvande et al (2021) provide a good description of these dilemmas, where the imperatives of care can conflict with the demands of research (9). To manage these conflicts effectively, it is essential to have robust organisational support and an ongoing training framework in place, as recommended by Ferguson et al (2023) (13). Clear policies and appropriate training will enable nurse researchers to balance their responsibilities most effectively, ensure high quality research and maintain their professional integrity.

Furthermore, there is evidence that ethics play a crucial role in improving the scientific quality of research. Milton (2018) and Janerka et al. (2023) show that rigorous studies aligned with real clinical needs are more likely to produce reliable and relevant results (11) (15). Bourke et al (2024) go further by highlighting the impact of contextual factors such as team dynamics or communication within clinical environments on the quality of research (14). These factors, which are often overlooked, are crucial in guaranteeing the validity of studies and their ability to respond effectively to clinical issues.

Finally, in order to embed a sustainable ethical framework in nursing research, continuing education and training are essential levers. Pueyo-Garrigues et al (2021) and Van Dongen et al (2024) emphasise that appropriate training programmes help to develop researchers' methodological skills as well as their ability to integrate ethical principles into their daily practice. This training enables professionals to carry out rigorous research and increases the confidence of the public and other healthcare professionals in the results (16) (17).

To conclude, the elements explored in this analysis demonstrate that implementing a rigorous ethical framework in nursing research is essential to improving the quality of studies and restoring public confidence in their results. This framework is not limited to abstract principles, but must be translated into concrete practices that can be adapted to the specificities of each context in order to ensure research that is reliable, relevant and respectful of participants' rights.

Strengths and implications

This systematic review highlights the essential role of ethical frameworks in nursing research, shaping study credibility, methodological rigour and public trust. By analysing diverse study designs across multiple countries, it provides a comprehensive understanding of key ethical challenges, including informed consent, transparency, and the complexities of balancing clinical and research roles. The findings highlight the importance of strengthening ethical education and establishing structured guidelines to reduce bias and role conflict. Integrating these ethical principles into nursing curricula and policy reforms can strengthen research integrity, improve patient care, and enhance the broader impact of nursing science.

Limitations

This review has several limitations. Studies published before 2014 were excluded, which may have led to the omission of relevant data on the evolution of ethical frameworks in nursing research. In addition, the diversity of methodologies used in the selected studies may limit the comparability of results and influence their interpretation. Finally, the selection of English-language articles may exclude research conducted in other cultural and linguistic contexts. Despite these challenges, our review highlights the importance of continuing research and developing practical recommendations to strengthen the application of ethical principles in nursing research, a fundamental issue for ensuring scientific quality and public trust.

CONCLUSION

The objective of this systematic review was to examine the fundamental role of ethics in nursing research and to evaluate the practices necessary for establishing a rigorous and reliable ethical framework. Such a framework is crucial not only to protect the rights and well-being of participants but also to ensure the credibility and validity of research findings.

By emphasizing transparency, consistency, and adherence to ethical principles, studies can achieve higher scientific rigor and greater clinical relevance. Furthermore, the effective management of ethical dilemmas, coupled with continuous professional education, is essential to maintaining research integrity and minimizing potential biases. Ultimately, a well-structured ethical framework serves as a cornerstone for strengthening public trust, enhancing the quality of nursing research, and promoting its long-term impact on both healthcare practice and policy.

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 systematic review, developed the research protocol, conducted the literature search, screened and selected studies, extracted and analyzed data, interpreted findings, and drafted and revised the manuscript.

JOUNAIDI Khaoula, as a co-author, contributed to the study selection process, data extraction, quality assessment, and participated in drafting and revising the manuscript. GANTARE Abdellah supervised the research process, ensured methodological rigor, provided critical feedback on the data synthesis, and reviewed the manuscript for important intellectual content. All authors have read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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