

Beyond the Ethics Board: How to Navigate Messy Moments, Ethical Reflections and Uncertainty When Communicating With Participants

"In the field, the researcher navigates cultural norms, political precarities, human emotions, and ground realities that do not necessarily fit the technical checklist in ethics approval..."
(Syed, 2026, p. 6)

Study overview

Institutional ethics approval establishes a foundation for researcher accountability and procedural compliance, playing an important role in fostering ethical responsibility and minimising potential trauma or distress for research participants. The paper draws on the researcher's experiences conducting doctoral research on Female Genital Cutting (FGC) among Dawoodi Bohra women using a Pakistani lens (Syed, 2024, 2025), presenting a guide to how ethical practice may continue long after formal approval has been granted.

The guide examines ethical uncertainty, "messy moments" and the ongoing journey and labour of using one's moral compass as a researcher. It reiterates that ethical practice is a continuous, reflective and reflexive process and that the researcher's ethical journey of navigating the field and connecting with communities can come with confusion, uncertainty and unpredictability.

موجودہ تحریر اخلاقی غور و فکر کی اہمیت اور تحقیق کے دوران پیش آنے والے بعض چیلنجز کو اجاگر کرتی ہے۔ یہ اخلاقی غور و فکر کو ایک مسلسل سفر کے طور پر بیان کرتی ہے اور کمیونٹیز سے رابطے کے دوران تحقیق کی پیچیدہ حقیقتوں پر بات کرتی ہے۔
چیلنجز - challenges
کمیونٹیز - communities

The current 'Evidence Bits' is based on the publication: **Syed, H. 2026. *Beyond the Ethics Board: How to Navigate Messy Moments, Ethical Reflections, and Uncertainty When Communicating With Participants*. SAGE Publications Ltd.**

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Toolkit: Beyond Ethics as Procedure

The paper unpacks the necessity of ‘human-ness’ in the research process, leading to questions surrounding ethics, care and discomfort. The table below summarises the researcher’s insights regarding various conventional research terminology beyond basic procedural understandings.

Key Term	What the Guide Highlights
<i>Ethics approval</i>	Researchers continue to make ethical judgements throughout fieldwork, beyond the ethics approval and after the end of research.
<i>Participant attrition</i>	Self-questioning that prompts reflection on communication, responsibility and the labour of participants.
<i>Transcript clarification</i>	Clarification can strengthen accuracy, but may require further labour from participants.
<i>Researcher reflexivity</i>	Honest self-assessment of one's own power, privilege, positionality and ethical decision-making.
<i>Messy moments</i>	Unexpected situations that may prompt moral dilemmas and do not traditionally fall within the confines of an ethics board review.
<i>Researcher labour</i>	Ethical reflection is ongoing emotional and intellectual labour that deserves recognition in research practice and institutions.
<i>Participant contribution</i>	Participants are not only research subjects but contributors of valuable knowledge, time and emotional labour.
<i>Research culture</i>	Universities and ethics review processes should create spaces where researchers can discuss uncertainty and ethical dilemmas.

Practical Implications

Procedural technicalities can fall short when the researcher deals with discomfort or doubt in research interactions and conversations. Several practical implications can be extrapolated from the paper's insights and applied to institutional ethical review processes to accommodate these complexities.

1. **The journey of ethical decision-making and reflection is ongoing and extends beyond institutional ethics board reviews, protocols and processes**

The journey of ethical reflection and decision-making remains continuous and often moves beyond paperwork and institutions. Researchers working on sensitive topics, such as FGC, may encounter participant withdrawal, communication dilemmas, emotional discomfort and situations that have no obvious procedural solution. These "messy moments" require careful judgement and a reflexive moral compass, rather than reliance on institutional protocols alone.

2. **Ethical reflection is an ongoing form of research labour**

The guide recognises that researchers continually question their decisions, assumptions and responsibilities during and after fieldwork. Researchers should engage in honest self-assessment (and reflexivity), transparency and continuous learning by critically reflecting on their own power, privilege, assumptions and positionality, even when this generates uncertainty or discomfort.

3. **Messy moments require the researcher to have a moral compass for accountability**

The guide frames "messy moments" as situations where researchers may experience confusion, ethical unease or uncertainty in the research journey. These moments require the researcher to morally assess their approaches and help to recognise the labour and knowledge of participants when engaging in conversations or clarifications of transcripts or participant accounts.

4. **Researchers need support and preparation for ethical realities**

The researcher's emotional labour should be acknowledged by creating caring spaces in institutions to help them navigate the confusion, uncertainty and doubt that comes with such "messy moments." The guide calls for the sharing and discussion of these moments to be recognised as an important part of ethical research, alongside positionality statements and ethics applications.

5. **Promote context-sensitive ethics and transparent reflection**

Research institutions should support ethics processes that recognise local cultural and social realities while encouraging researchers to openly discuss and write about ethical uncertainty, self-questioning and "messy moments" to strengthen ethical practice and support future researchers.

Further Related Reading

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Daku, M. (2018). Ethics beyond ethics: the need for virtuous researchers. *BMC Med Ethics*, 19 (Suppl 1), 42, 21–28. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12910-018-0281-6>.

Giez, M., Barlösius, E., & Philipps, A. (2025). Learning to manage emotions in research: Dealing with problems and setbacks. *Emotions and Society* (published online ahead of print 2025). <https://doi.org/10.1332/26316897Y2024D0000000067>

Gobena, E. B., Hean, S., Heaslip, V., & Studsrød, I. (2024). The challenge of Western-influenced notions of knowledge and research training: Lessons for decolonizing the research process and researcher education. *Journal of Ethnic & Cultural Diversity in Social Work*, 33(5), 276–287. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15313204.2023.2197272>

Syyed, H. S. A. (2024). *"It is a secret": Narrations about female genital cutting among Pakistani Dawoodi Bohra Muslim women (Doctoral dissertation, Charles Darwin University)*. Charles Darwin University. <https://doi.org/10.25913/64hz-yh11>.

Syyed, H., (2025). How to conduct intersectional feminist research with sensitive data in a precarious setting. *Sage Research Methods*, 1-22 <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781036222772>.

Syyed, H. (2026). Beyond the Ethics Board: How to Navigate Messy Moments, Ethical Reflections, and Uncertainty When Communicating With Participants. *SAGE Research Methods*. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781036252427>.

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