Ethics in Educational Research

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Abstract:

The ethical dimension of research in adult education is deeply connected to the real, substantial quality of research. The ethical dimension of adult education research, mostly neglected, is analysed from an epistemological perspective. We assume that ethical conduct of educational research is more complex than adhering to a set of rules and procedures as it has to deal with the meaning and purpose of adult education research, the distribution of pedagogical powers and the control over them to put individual and collective answers in practice. The analysis is based upon the specialised multidisciplinary literature as well as upon the pluriannual experience of the author being one of the members of the research ethic committee at higher education level.

Keywords: Ethics in Adult Educational Research; Research Ethic Committees; Research Quality Discourse; Substantial Quality

1. Ethics Matter. The Global Principle in Academic Research

1.1 Ethics: Principles and Sources in Higher Education Research

1.1.1 Seminal Documents on Ethics in Research

Ethics in academic research help protect individuals, communities, environments. It also offers the potential to increase the sum of good in the world and avoid doing long-term and systematic harm to individuals, communities, environments (Diener and Crandall 1978; Mitchell and Draper 1982; Peach 1995; Kass 2001; Israel and Hay 2006).

We may wonder how ethics in academic research is conceived. It is something that reflects the values of a collective subject: it can be a population, at their most general, or a professional group or even other kinds of aggregations. We should bear in mind that ethics is considered to be unconstrained by regulatory

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[*] The reflections of this paper are based on the study experience carried out within the University Ethics Committee in the field of Humanities and Social Sciences (Careus, University of Siena), of which the author was a member from November 2019 to February 2023.

prescriptions; it may exist (codes, regulations, conventions, etc.) but may also be lacking. This is because ethics and law are considered as two different issues (Horner 2003): the law is not necessarily the primary source in which ethical principles for research are elaborated, since they may represent the product of historical, cultural, social, and educational developments of which professional groups or associations or communities are the bearers who formalise them in sources that are not transposed into legally relevant acts, even though they have social recognition (Weinbaum et al. 2019).

The relationship between ethics and law can sometimes be difficult as each falls under its own system: of morality the former, of rules the latter (Greenawalt 1989; Hazard 1995; Tzafestas 2018; Tsosie et al. 2021). Ethics has to deal with what is good for both individuals and society. It has to do with how people should and should not behave. And this is different from societies, cultures, beliefs that have different ideas of ethical behaviour. Law is a set of rules and regulations that are meant to be separate from ethics and are enforced through social institutions like courts and law enforcement. This difficult relationship between ethics and law is described in the American Medical Association's Code of Ethics:

> The relationship between ethics and law is complex. Ethical values and legal principles are usually closely related, but ethical responsibilities usually exceed legal duties. Conduct that is legally permissible may be ethically unacceptable. Conversely, the fact that a physician who has been charged with allegedly illegal conduct has been acquitted or exonerated in criminal or civil proceedings does not necessarily mean that the physician acted ethically.
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> In some cases, the law mandates conduct that is ethically unacceptable. When physicians believe a law violates ethical values or is unjust they should work to change it. In exceptional circumstances of unjust laws, ethical responsibilities should supersede legal duties (American Medical Association 2016, Preamble).

The core documents that represent a solid benchmark of ethics in academic research are the Declaration of Helsinki (1964, DoH[1]) and the Nuremberg Code (1947).

The Declaration of Helsinki is a historical document in the field of clinical research and was produced and adopted by the World Medical Association (WMA[2]) at its annual General Assembly in Helsinki in 1964. The DoH is one

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[1] The Declaration of Helsinki was set up in 1964, revised several times, and the latest revision is dated from 2013. In April 2022 a working group was established to start an additional revision of this important Declaration. The American Medical Association is leading the process.

[2] The WMA was founded in Paris in 1947 as an association for national medical associations. Its mission, as currently stated, is «to serve humanity by endeavouring to achieve the highest international standards in medical education, medical science, medical art and medical ethics, and health care for all people in the world» (<https://www.wma.net/who-we-are/about-us/>). It was set up alongside other relevant events: the Nuremberg doctors' trial (1946-1947), the establishment of the United Nations (1945), the adoption of the Universal

of the most influential documents and a crucial milestone in research ethics as it fixes a universal set of ethical principles with the goal of protecting research subjects, including vulnerable populations, from physical and non-physical harm (Sprumont et al. 2007; Wiesing and Ehni 2014). These are principles that are widely accepted by virtually all scientists, clinician researchers, industry representatives, Contract Research Organisation professionals and others involved in today's clinical trial efforts. Ethical principles like those in the DoH are addressed to physicians and others «involved in medical research involving human subjects» (WMA 2013, paragraph 6). The well-being of human subjects and careful consideration of the risks and benefits that can derive from research are basic DoH principles: «Medical research involving human subjects may only be conducted if the importance of the objective outweighs the risks and burdens to the research subjects» (WMA 2013, paragraph 12). Ultimately, the DoH represents an effort on the part of the physicians' community to regulate its own behaviour by striking a balance between patients' rights and demands of advancement of medical research.

Before the DoH, the best-known ethical research principle was the Nuremberg Code (1947). It defined a set of guidelines that were created as a result of the dreadful human subject experimentation carried out by Nazi Germany and its allies. Principles are set up to allow clinical research to be carried out. The core principle is the informed consent by which the subject voluntarily gives his or her consent to be subjected to a medical experiment. For a free and informed expression of consent, the subject must know the nature, duration and purpose of the clinical trial, the method and means by which it will be conducted, the possible effects on health and well-being, and the possible risks involved. The code also draws a dividing line between licit and illicit experimentation, which lacks scientific and ethical foundations.

Compared with the Nuremberg Code, the DoH dealt with clinical research more directly, but was portrayed as a weakening of the stringent protections of Nuremberg (Goodyear et al. 2007). Nonetheless, it became engrained in the international culture of research ethics and evolved over many years (seven revisions, two clarifications, one revision in progress), a sign of the drafters' willingness to consider research ethics and practice in their dynamic dimension. Ethics are created, change and evolve due to historical and political events, social and legal considerations, continuous medical and technological advances, innovations, in response to changes in cultural values and behavioural norms that change over time (Artal and Rubenfeld 2017).

One last important historical document in the field of research ethics relates to the medical field. It is the Belmont Report, published in 1979 by the United States Department of Health and Human Services, entitled *The Belmont Report:*

Declaration of Human Rights (1948). These were years that witnessed the social initiative to promote respect for human rights whose violations had taken place in Germany and elsewhere during the Nazi period.

Ethical Principles and Guidelines for the Protection of Human Subjects of Research (The National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research 1979). The Report defines three ethical principles that should guide the participation of human subjects in research: respect for people and their autonomy, beneficence and non-maleficence, and justice. These are principles that, according to the authors of the Report, form the basis for establishing and evaluating specific rules for conducting clinical research (Emanuel et al. 2011; Mikesell et al. 2013; Friesen et al. 2017; Brothers et al. 2019; Siddiqui and Sharp 2021).

The reference to the three documents has enabled the scientific community to share internationally the principle that clinical research on humans is only permitted if it respects the cardinal principles already present in the Nuremberg Code, namely:

- participants must give their informed and voluntary consent;
- the research design must be such that risks are minimised and there is an acceptable balance between risks and benefits;
- participants must be carefully selected to avoid any form of exploitation or unfair exclusion;
- the privacy of participants must be protected in every way.

Most unanimous consensus in the research world is also expressed regarding the need for approval of the research by an independent body (e.g. ethics committee) before the research project begins.

The reason why we cite these three specific documents is because, ultimately, modern medicine and the humanities and social science are confronted with a dilemma, namely, that research involving human subjects allows to gain knowledge about the efficacy and safety of research interventions. This is true for research that involves both medical trials and social and educational activities/actions (Leont'ev 1979). On the other hand, research involving human subjects is fraught with ethical conflicts that cannot be completely prevented. If one conducts research *on* and *with* human subjects, there will always be the risk of harming them (Wiesingand and Ehni 2014). The type and intensity of damage suffered by the individual depends on the type of research. In the field of adult educational research, the potential harm is the 'educational harm', i.e. the exposure of human subjects to adverse learning actions (Federighi 2016) from which arise behaviours, actions, pre-assumptions that determine the quality of people's lives and work and their exposure to the arbitrary power of learning action.

To question the ethical issues involved in the conduct of research, whether in the medical field or in the humanities and social sciences, is to ask the question of what sense it makes in relation to individuals and society. In the field of clinical and medical research the topic has been debated since the end of the Second World War and has been the subject of attention by science and politics. Less copious are the reflections and even normative prescriptions in the field of educational research concerning adult education. On the other hand, the reflection deserves a space that has yet to be cultivated: in addition to the principles enabling medical research, already mentioned, also applied to research *in* or *on*

education in adulthood – albeit less regularly and meticulously by researchers and scientists – ethics in this field of investigation raises questions related to the very meaning of research and its epistemological framing. Educational research for the transformation and emancipation of the individual and collective subject is in itself an ethically oriented research because it is inspired by

- principles of distributive justice;
- principles of equality;
- ways of uncovering the negative learning values that are embedded in the totality of human relationships and prevent human subjects from constructing responses to their own aspirations for growth and development.

1.1.2 Ethics in Legal Acts

As a result of the process of reflection and elaboration described above, there has also been a regulation of ethical guiding principles for the conduct of scientific research. At an international level and in most countries, there are regulatory prescriptions that allow scientific research to be carried out, seeking to safeguard the autonomy of the human subjects involved and their rights.

We provide a partial list below and define four categories of documents dealing with research ethics. For each category we select one relevant document:

a. *Legal acts*, where general guiding principles are defined; they are also guiding research activities. In the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (European Convention 2000) they are conceived as «common values» (Preamble, paragraph 1) and expressed as «universal values of human dignity, freedom, equality and solidarity» (Preamble, paragraph 2) to protect «fundamental rights in light of changes in society, social progress and scientific and technological developments» (Preamble, paragraph 4);

b. *Codes*, like *The European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity* (ALLEA 2017) that serves the research community as a «framework for self-regulation» and as a tool to realise their responsibilities to «formulate the principles of research, to define the criteria for proper research behaviour, to maximise the quality and robustness of research, and to respond adequately to threats to, or violations of, research integrity» (ALLEA 2017, 3);

c. *Guidelines*, such as the Ethics in Social Science and Humanities (European Commission 2021). It aims to «give practical advice on integrating ethics into the planned research by providing, wherever possible, checklists for points at which a pause is needed to reflect and plan the action to be taken». The European Guidelines focus on two ethical dimensions of research: «'procedural ethics', pertaining to the aspects of compliance in performing research, and 'ethics in practice', the everyday ethical issues that arise while doing research» (European Commission 2021, 4);

d. *Charters*, an example is the Commission Recommendation on the *European Charter for Researchers and on a Code of Conduct for the Recruitment of Researchers* (European Commission 2005), which associates the ethical dimension of research with the 'accountability' of researchers able to efficiently use

taxpayers' money and for the purposes of research seen «for the good of mankind and for expanding the frontiers of scientific knowledge, while enjoying the freedom of thought and expression, and the freedom to identify methods by which problems are solved, according to recognised ethical principles and practices». The call is also to «adhere to the recognised ethical practices and fundamental ethical principles appropriate to their discipline(s) as well as to ethical standards as documented in the different national, sectoral or institutional Codes of Ethics» (European Commission 2005, 4).

Research ethics principles underpin the legal acts, codes, guidelines, charters encompass not only minimising harm to research participants, but also
- respecting their autonomy, dignity and integrity;
- protecting vulnerable groups;
- ensuring honesty and transparency towards research subjects;
- protecting their privacy;
- ensuring informed consent for them and privacy;
- ensuring equity, inclusivity and diversity;
- sharing the benefits with disadvantaged populations;
- demonstrating social responsibility of researchers and institutions promoting, developing, funding research activities (Hammersley and Traianou 2012; BERA 2018; Brown et al. 2020; European Commission 2021; ESRC 2021).

1.2 Ethics in Adult Educational Research

Specific to the adult educational research context, the question of ethics and its content has been faced by prominent bodies that defined well-structured ethical guidelines that apply equally to quantitative and qualitative research: i) American Educational Research Association (AERA 2011, 1992). ii) British Educational Research Association (BERA 2018). iii) Scottish Educational Research Association (SERA 1997, 2005). They all refer to ethical principles related to the different actors involved in adult educational research in various capacities:
- participants;
- sponsors, clients and stakeholders in research;
- community of educational researchers;
- 'users' who will benefit from research dependable findings (i.e. policy makers).

Depending on the type of research, the same subject may play different roles: e.g. in educational research analysing institutional learning processes connected to the policy transfer they aim to support, policymakers are both participants and users of the research (Torlone 2018).

Other ethical dimensions of andragogical research concern peculiar aspects of the entire research process, some still poorly investigated, others worthy of further development (Cohen et al. 2000). Here are some of those that literature has helped to define and that, in some cases, deserve further action and intervention:

- The risk of corruption in the performance of research activities in the andragogical field.
  Education is one of the sectors where corruption is most prevalent (Poisson 2010). «Corruption can be found at macro, meso and micro levels in the education sector. So-called 'grand corruption' involving large sums is found essentially in the field of procurement (school buildings, textbook production, etc.), while 'petty corruption' is found in the other areas» (Ochse 2004, 3). Such widespread corruptions reduce the quality and effectiveness of investments and increase exclusion from lifelong learning. They also hinder the achievement of learning outcomes by the adults involved (European Commission 2013).
- A further ethical aspect, linked to the economic-financial dimension of educational research, points to the researcher's responsibility for the way in which research funds are spent.
  Researchers have to take decisions about how to carry out research that makes the process as ethical as possible including budgets of time and finance, the way finance is used and allocated, and the amount of public funds that are devoted to specific research activities (ESRC 2005).
- Some areas of adult educational are being subjected to too much research while many others are neglected.
  There are certain areas that have been intensively explored, others that are still being explored and many others that have been neglected in the past and still remain neglected. The ethical dimension invokes the need to explore useful, unexplored andragogical fields of study for the benefit of adults and society (Govil 2013; Baykara et al. 2015).
- Ethics in adult education research can reinforce the complexity of the phenomena investigated and the contexts in which they take place.
  Adult educational research, ethically oriented, does not reduce its validity and reliability but highlights the contextual complexities within which it has been carried out (Kelly 1989).
- The ethical dimension of andragogical research helps to question the transferability of results.
  The transferability and generalisability of the results of andragogical research are strongly related to compliance with ethical principles that influence the results and their adaptability to different contexts, organisations, targets by those for which the research is designed (Bassey 1998).
- Extension of the ethical principles of clinical research to adult education research.
  Adult educational research that is not inspired by the principles of informed consent, confidentiality of information, and voluntary participation in the research activities exposes to dangers with respect to the positioning of researched subjects in the research process (ESRC 2005). In adult educational research, researchers need to consider whether it is worthwhile to undertake a project by weighing up the balance of harm and benefit that arise to participants and to society from carrying it out (Marlene de Laine 2000).

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- Adult educational research must be conducted by researchers who are aware that they are the appropriate individuals to undertake the specific educational research at hand (Gregory 2003).

  Researchers with organisational roles of leadership and scientific coordination of research activities have the task of recruiting researchers who are appropriate with respect to the topics and areas of investigation and to the ethical posture that the study activity requires. Researchers may not be selected on the basis of career development criteria or the attainment of qualifications or certificates that can be used in the workplace.

- The ethical dimension of research in the field of adult education conditions the growth and training processes of the researchers themselves.

  The conduct of research activities promotes and activates self-directed learning processes on the part of the researchers involved. These are processes embedded within the research. The fields of study, the theoretical paradigms that the researcher decides to adopt, and the ultimate goal that the researcher decides to assume as research purpose, are all elements that nourish and promote processes of self-directed learning and orient the identity choices of the researcher (what kind of researcher one intends to be and what kind of researcher vice versa one does not want to be) (Kumashiro 2014). In this conceptualisation of ethics in adult educational research, the dominant aspect is the process of researcher formation through the ethical orientation of his/her research (Head 2018). So codes, rules, procedures, principles formally established diminish their relevance and are superseded by identifying, addressing and resolving emerging and, in most cases, neglected ethical dilemmas.

- Ethics in adult educational research is deeply connected to the meaning of research.

  Ethics force virtuous researchers to be concerned that their research should aim at improving the quality of life and work of researched subjects and communities (Pendlebury and Enslin 2001). The ethical dimension of andragogical research is related to its transformative potential and to the principles of distributive justice: which learning opportunities for which people, who are able to change their current and future living and working conditions as a result of the research findings (Federighi 2019).

As a consequence, ethics in adult educational research is embedded in the construction of the Public (Dewey 1927). An ethically oriented andragogical research, which espouses the emancipative-transformative paradigm, assumes, as its epistemological foundation, the task of forming the Public, i.e. of orienting and nurturing the process of constructing the collective subject, historically positioned, capable of controlling the learning processes induced by authorities, institutions, and contexts and of elaborating the response to realise its own developmental objectives.

In conclusion, there is an urgent need for well defined ethical paradigms for andragogic research so that quality of adult education may improve and researchers may contribute to emancipation processes of individuals, organisations, in-

stitutions, communities and they can continuously nurture their identity as ethically rigorous researchers. One point of attention deserves to be noted: an ethics-oriented approach to andragogical research is in danger of being countered by a regime of power to control researchers «by compelling them to conduct their research according to the norms, practices and protocols of principalism approved by institutional, state and/or national guidelines» (Halse 2011, 244). Research Ethics Committees (RECs) that act in the frame of a solid and shared ethical framework contribute to the ethical sense of adult educational research. RECs that, on the other hand, fulfil their assigned tasks by «interpreting and enforcing normative behaviours in a disciplined and approved way» (Brown et al. 2020, 751) act a covert imposition by reproducing, even in the reality of university research, the control of the dominant (academic institution) over the dominated (researchers).

1.3 Research Ethic Committees in Higher Education. A Critical Analysis

Further to the DoH, the protection of human subjects is an ethical mandate for all contemporary research involving human beings. This is the reason why universities and institutions, that are responsible for conducting research with infant, young, and adult human beings, have instituted Research Ethics Committees[3].

The RECs are a key element of higher education governance and administration. They gained an increasing importance as a review mechanism for academicians who want to «conduct responsible research, along with safeguarding research ethics standards, scientific merit and human rights of participants» (Davies 2020, 1). The RECs serve as an advisory board for the assessment of policies, standards, programmes, research, education, guidance and awareness-raising among academicians about the university's ethical values, ethics culture, and ethical decision-making practices. Recommendations and guidelines, although needed, are not always formally developed by all RECs. They mostly develop ethics reviews, procedures and dashboards, whilst specific guidelines for human and social sciences protocols are not always clearly shared. Most often they refer to general ethics guidelines as set up in documents related to the specific areas of research they are expressing their assessment about. However, it is a common practice that many universities and research institutions require a review of all human and social science research involving human participants by an independent REC prior to data collection, and some have separate RECs for human and social science protocols (Wassenaar 2006). This concerns – as mentioned – any kind of research involving human beings in various ways, be they children, adolescents, young people, adults or elderly, in whatever condi-

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[3] The establishment of ethics committees with the task of «evaluation, comments, guidelines and approval» of the research protocol is provided for in the DoH (WMA 2013, paragraph 23).

tion and territory they find themselves involved in research activities (e.g. in the administration of survey instruments, with or without forms of remuneration[4]). While it is true that the dominant discourse and development of regulatory frameworks have been driven by health and biomedical disciplines, it is important to recognise that, in spite of research methodologies, paradigms and approaches that may differ, all research, including educational and social science research, must be judged against the same ethical principles (Department of Health, South Africa 2015, 2004; Davies 2020).

Research ethics regulation is not only a requirement for higher education institutions, but it is also required by many editors of journals when publishing research. Editors are increasingly requiring proof of ethics review prior to acceptance of data-based publications. They require researchers to submit applications seeking approval from ethics committees to conduct research (Cleaton-Jones 2007; Head 2018). The approval of ethics committees is a condition for the feasibility and conduct of the research.

The use of ethics committees and ethic review procedures, also for publishing research purposes, has raised quite a few questions. RECs have been criticised and conceived as bureaucratic, behaving in an arrogant manner, being a hindrance rather than a help to research and even as being unnecessary, as social and educational scientists have always done this kind of research (Breckler 2005; Sikes and Piper 2010). Moreover, they have been accused of controlling, limiting or even preventing research from being undertaken. Consequently, the decisions they make act to determine what makes research ethical and what ethical researchers can and cannot do (Velardo and Elliot 2018). We take up the critical issues recurring in specialised literature, analysing them in light of the experience gained within a research ethics committee at higher education level:

- RECs as well as the rules and procedures they define and apply for ethics review are seen as obstructive (Parsell et al. 2014), unnecessarily bureaucratic and restrictive (Henderson and Esposito 2017; Velardo and Elliot 2018). Doing ethically oriented research is a cultural issue, both of individual researchers and research teams and of the academic body that researches, promotes, finances, and evaluates. The weaker this cultural dimension is, at every level (organisational, group, individual researcher), the more frequent is the absence of an ethical posture of research activities and products. It therefore happens that researchers themselves often do not consider the ethical implications of their work until it is time to fill out the various forms required by the ethics committees. It is only at that time that they become familiar with this dimension of research and the way they approach it really depends on the organisational culture of research ethics. To this regard, RECs may play a key role in making the academic community aware of the relevance of the ethical dimension of research in the framework of the research quality dis-

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[4] By means of – often symbolic – sums of money or the issuing of vouchers, depending on the research software used and the research project's budget.

course and the authentic meaning of ethically oriented research. We are far from study approaches that look at the quality of academic activity, including research, from the perspective of total quality management or standards for the continuous improvement of production processes (ISO). RECs, on the other hand, have the opportunity to play a very compelling educational function with respect to the academic community of which they are the expression, provided that this role is not hindered by the cultural, academic and individual values of the researchers, the researched, and the society where research is taking place. RECs in some cases eschew the role of mere offices in which stamps or marks of a certifying power are affixed; they conceive themselves as collegial bodies whose mandate is fuelled by the assessment of the added value that submitted research projects or products are able to produce.

- Ethical research review is not an administrative process. It is not even a formal check on the existence of requirements prescribed by codes or legal norms (e.g. the regulations of GDPR 2016/679 prescribing the requirements and conditions for requesting informed consent: European Parliament and Council 2016).
  Author' experience confirms the need to discuss within the REC the meaning of regulatory prescriptions in the light of the mandate given by the university to the body overseeing the ethical dimension of research. The normative dictate, which from the perspective of the legal-administrative specialists, members of the REC, risks to become the sole guiding principle in the assessment of compliance with the principles of informed consent – also in the differentiation of protection measures for the most vulnerable or incapacitated –, is in reality a device for protecting the social (as well as the individual) value of the consent given by those participating in research. «Consensus promotes the consistency of values between researchers and researched in relation to the object of the adult educational research, its aims and objectives, the methodology in use. Moreover, consensus fuels trust in research activity by emphasising its transparency at all stages» (CNR 2017, 2). To the extent of the wording of the informed consent document, the type of researched subjects to whom it is administered for signature, and the manner in which the documentary support is shared with them, allow the verification of the adult subject's full, free, conscious determination as to his or her involvement in certain phases of the research in question, the ethical principle may be considered satisfied. This question deserves continuous investigation and discussion as much depends on the specificity of the research and the subjects asked to give their consent and their positioning with respect to the research topics.

- Members of RECs are often lacking knowledge and expertise of particular ethical contexts, including education (Sikes and Piper 2010). Moreover, «whilst ethics review boards are common they are not universal» (Head

2018, 4). The majority of institutions appear to have specific ethics committees for educational research but others do not as they may only have one committee with oversight of all disciplines, sometimes without an education representative (Sikes and Piper 2010).

This aspect is mitigated by the criteria adopted for the composition of the Research Ethics Committee: the more diverse the area of origin of the individual members, the less the knowledge gap with regard to specific aspects of the research submitted to the committee represents a serious obstacle to the preservation of the ethicality of research in all its multifaceted dimensions. The reference areas under consideration are the ERC ones[5].

In addition, in most of the research institutions, there is the establishment of a 'list of Experts' who may be involved in the activities of RECs, when required by the ethical issue specifically addressed by the research project or product under consideration.

A further mitigating device is represented by practices in use that allow consultation with other research ethics committees responsible for specific study and research activities (e.g. pharmacological clinical trials; medical, surgical, diagnostic and therapeutic protocols and procedures; clinical trials of medical devices; retrospective or prospective observational studies, pharmacological and non-pharmacological; activities involving the use of human organs, tissues and cells for scientific purposes; studies of food products on humans) and ethical and bioethical issues related to health and social welfare activities.

- Critics argue that ethics reviews prior to the conduct of research often constrain research activity and can impose restrictions and conditions that may actually result in unethical research conduct (Parsell et al. 2014; Henderson and Esposito 2017).

Author' experience only partially confirms this critical argument. The preliminary steps carried out by the RECs in the person of the President and its members, preparatory to the study and analysis of the individual application, have a duration that may vary. This involves receiving the materials to be submitted to the Ethics Committee for analysis, checking for completeness and comprehensiveness, and the preliminary assessment by the receiving Ethics Committee (this is because some research issues can be pertinent to other Ethics Committees or can require the combined assessment of more than one Ethics Committee or need to be checked as for the territorial criterion[6]). In addition, there is the time required for the support secretariat to

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[5] Areas refer to the ERC sectors including Physical Sciences and Engineering, Social Sciences and Humanities, Life Sciences.

[6] Applications from researchers affiliated with institutes with their own RECs are usually rejected with an invitation to submit the application to the ethics committee of their research organisation. On the other hand, applications from researchers of foreign nationalities but

carry out any additional preliminary investigations to be requested of the person submitting the opinion to the REC.

It should be noted, however, that in the author's experience the regularity of the monthly meetings, as well as the practice of extraordinary meetings based on the urgencies of the applicant researchers, represent measures to support the RECs' management of evaluation time that cannot be said to hinder the applicants' conduct of research, but on the contrary seek to mitigate the risks of an extension of research time and to incentivise the use of RECs for the promotion of research quality in its ethical dimension. Confirming this motivating purpose is the practice of RECs tending to provide positive opinions with reservations rather than negative opinions.

The ethical conduct of research in education is far more complex than adhering to a set of strict rules and procedures, defined at the international and university level (where they exist). It is rather an issue of resolving ethical dilemmas that are organic, dynamic and dependant on the complexities of research contexts (i.e. regional governments, prisons, welcome centres, manufacturing business, cooperatives) and relations (i.e. between workers, between employers and employees, between citizens and public institutions).

The researched contexts are also places where values, beliefs and experiences of researchers and researched subjects are not always shared and the power relationships between parties involved in research need to be negotiated constantly during the research development. In adult education research the negotiation of pedagogical powers and research interests is framed within the transformative/emancipative epistemology. This amounts to saying that the ethical dimension of research in this area tends to be based on «utilitarian ethical theory» (Brooks et al. 2014; Pring 2003; Stutchbury and Fox 2009). It is based upon the principle that doing something is ethical because it will produce a good result as it will produce transformations of living and working conditions of subjects researched because they will be emancipated as a consequence of the educational research (Federighi 2018). This is far from the 'deontology ethical approach' that is understood as adhering to a general rule of behaviour as a matter of duty, regardless of consequences and results.

2. Ethics Embedded in the Purpose and Substantial Quality in Adult Education Research Process

Ethics encourage researchers in adult learning and education to develop studies *with* the target community and population and other relevant stakeholders research is addressed to and developed for (Emanuel et al. 2008). This

integrated, even temporarily (i.e. as PhD students, visiting researchers), in the research institute that set up the Ethics Committee, are usually accepted and evaluated.

is an ethical characterisation of research in education that questions us about the conditions that delineate its real and material quality.

It is related to the specificity of research in adult education i.e. «its meaning, its raison d'être, its function» (Federighi 2019, 41), in other words its «purpose» (Federighi 2018, 14): to change the educational conditions of the population. These transformations affect both contexts and human subjects involved in the education research. The transformative capacity of the subject, both individual and collective, is connected to the role that the researcher recognises in the entire research process, i.e. the role of being itself part of a transformative process of which it is a conscious and driving actor. The configuration of adults as subjects transforming themselves and the social contexts that originated their need of learning (Federighi 1997, 1999) has within it the ethically relevant conceptualisation of a subject who is granted the power to acquire awareness, responsibility and transformative capacity. The transformative power acknowledged to the adult subject, which research promotes and solicits, is embodied in the ability of human subjects to «imagine, manage and control the processes of tendentially scientific research of the ways in which to effect change» (Federighi 2018, 15) and act to transform the educational valences present in all kinds of experience into motives for the development of their intellectual and material lives. This is why research in adult education has its meaning, its 'purpose' in the ability to socially organise adult demand for knowledge and change, and to formulate the resulting institutional, financial and educational responses. In other words, educational research deals with the powers that in education regulate access to knowledge and the possibility of imagining the unthinkable (Bernstein 1990).

It follows that educational research is born, develops and regulates itself through the ability of researchers to combine the relationship between university and society and to act with «the whole social complex of which men are the expression» (Gramsci 1932)[7] that helps the university to be and live itself as a «social university» (De Sanctis and Federighi 1976). It is a quest that invests society and is nurtured and oriented by the developmental motives and growth aspirations of the adult individuals that make it up, and evaluated by its capacity to transform and remove the «submergent determinants» (Habermas 1984, 194) that prevent people from expressing and realising their aspirations for change. An ethically oriented adult educational research is a research that is able to make this transformative dimension explicit right from its conception, i.e. in the explication of its transformative intent linked to the ability to provide tools to the human subjects involved and the stakeholders to whom it is addressed to tackle problems in society, at work, in people's daily lives with educational tools. It is no longer instrumental research, at the service of the ruling class, but useful for the promotion of processes of emancipation of the people. The constant and privileged reference that such an ethical approach requires in the entire research process is «the Public» (De Sanctis and Federighi 1976, 1981),

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[7]   Unless otherwise stated, translations are by the author.

whose problems and growth aspirations must be known and for whom useful control tools must be prepared to direct its formative processes and construct individual and collective responses. In this ethic dimension of adult education research the «Charter of Rights of the Public» (*Carta dei Diritti del Pubblico*) is particularly significant as it is conceived as an identitarian artefact of the collective subject that is able to react to the diverse forms of hidden persuasion (De Sanctis 1991, 201-3).

Other transformative meanings seem to appear desemantised and at risk of permeating ideological conditioning, false autonomy of researchers, authoritarian drifts.

RECs should be recognised, as part of their institutional mandate, to make transparent the ethical dimension of research in protocols, tools, products and the epistemological criteria that guide it. Failing this, educational research continues to replicate the existing educational and learning conditions, inequalities and heterodetermination of educational processes for large sections of the population, destined to remain deprived of the educational and cultural tools to take control and activate emancipatory processes that researchers declare without a coherent research practice.

3. Conclusion. For an Ethics in Adult Education and Learning Research

Questioning the quality of adult educational research goes far beyond the study and use of engineering devices (total quality management, PDCA, AVA, ISO, etc.). We believe that the actual quality of adult educational research deserves to be framed within the research quality discourse and the authentic meaning of ethical research. This authenticity is characterised by the particular attention that educational research pays to five dimensions:

1. The clarification of the *purpose* of research, which is substantiated in the transformative and emancipatory dimension and in the principle of distributive equity. Equity is expressed in the ability of research to: (i) identify real problems, (ii) define concrete, verifiable and measurable objectives, (iii) contribute to achieving the expected transformative outcomes.
2. The choice of *topics and fields* to research. The themes and fields orientate the ethical dimension because the ability of research to build a democratic society and accompany people's growth in school, work, consumption and 'leisure time' depends on them. The proliferation of topics on which educational research has evolved is undisputed, a sign of a broad and diverse research demand. However, it is research that still struggles to provide adequate answers for the transformation of the educational conditions of the population and its emancipation and to overcome the current stagnation (European Commission-Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion et al. 2020; Eurostat 2021).
3. The focus on the *public* Deweynianly understood, with whom and for whom to do research. It is the public who directs the research because of the prob-

lems they face and it is the public who determines the process by which educational research is carried out.

4. The choice of *transformative methods* that in research practice effectively enable the achievement of improvement goals and expected (or even unexpected) changes in living and working contexts and the people who live and work in them. In this sense, the choice of transformative methods is legitimised by virtue of the criterion of appropriateness with respect to the transformative objectives of the research.

5. The definition of *added value* that encompasses the meaning of adult educational research: what added value can be concretely hypothesised and what are the possible transformations expected from carrying out research activities? The answer to this question provides transparency to the ethical value of the expected results.

These five dimensions invoke the need for researchers to define a *multi-year research programme* that is constantly fed by projects that are consistent with and complementary to the aims of educational research and mirror the interest in the emancipation of the 'modern educational proletariat' and the ethical principle of distributive equity. The ethical principle guiding educational research helps to understand the equivocal nature of syntagmas and expressions, albeit in use, such as learners, participants, audience, inmates, migrants, low skilled workers, women, Neets, elderly, young adults, addicted people, etc. In them prevails a predefined and anonymous identity, incapable of organising itself as a collective subject promoting collective actions, decontextualised with respect to the historicity of problems and aspirations that instead ethically oriented adult educational research considers, analyses, and scientifically tends to overcome by providing educational and cultural resources adequate for the self-determination of the transforming subject and the development of the transformative processes referred to.

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