

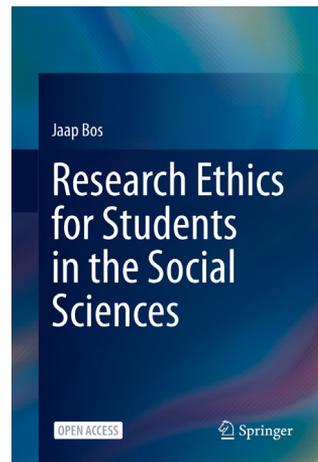
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Jaap Bos, with contributions by Ruud Abma, Friso Hoeneveld, Dorota Lepianka, Toon van Meijl, and Naomi van Steenbergen, *Research Ethics for Students in the Social Sciences*, Springer, 2020; XVI, 287 pp.: ISBN: 978-3-030-48415-6.  
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Reviewed by BERT THEUNISSEN<sup>1</sup>

This book is the first guide to research ethics for students in the social sciences, and it is laudably published as open access. It aims to provide students with an overview of the basic notions of research ethics and to illustrate these with concrete examples of ethical issues that students may encounter in practice. The ten chapters are structured similarly, first identifying the issue at hand, then outlining different perspectives and approaches to it, and finally offering concrete examples for reflection. Chapters 2 and 3 provide short introductions to the nature of science and research ethics; Chapters 4 to 6 cover the basic 'sins': fabrication, falsification and plagiarism (FFP); Chapters 7 and 8 discuss confidentiality and conflicts of interest; Chapter 9 zooms out to the science system and university politics; and finally Chapter 10 provides a step-by-step guide through the process of ethical research design in light of current codes and regulations. The online version of the book offers additional material in the form of video clips that briefly explain the chapters' contents.

The authors hope their book will empower students to effectively deal with issues of research ethics and integrity in practice. They assert that their approach is not theory-driven but practice-based, meaning that the explanation of each chapter's subject matter is mostly based on concrete examples taken from real cases. Moreover, the authors consistently invite the reader to reflect on these cases by offering questions for discussion. As far as student empowerment entails providing knowledge and raising awareness, the authors definitely



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contribute to it. The book's greatest strength is that it makes clear the indispensability and centrality of ethical reflection in the social sciences. Research ethics is not about ticking boxes on preprinted forms; rather, it is part and parcel of the research process as a whole and defines and determines to a considerable extent what can be researched and how. The authors provide a wealth of real-life cases to illustrate the complexities of research and the dilemmas that confront researchers. They do not shy away from pointing out the manifold ways in which researchers have gone wrong, either in the distant or the recent past. Breaches of integrity, from p-hacking and spurious data handling to unethical experimentation and ghostwriting, are mentioned, but the authors also address the systemic factors at work at the university and government level that create an unhealthy research environment in which researchers' moral standards may be challenged by the pressure exerted by the relentless struggle for life in academia. Students cannot fail to come away with a notion of research ethics as an absolute requirement for trustworthy and ethical social science research.

The authors stop short of declaring their field to be in a 'crisis'. For instance, is there really a replication crisis in the social sciences? Perhaps there is, perhaps there is not, they intimate, adding that getting reliable research outcomes in heavily context-sensitive experimental settings just happens to be extremely difficult. Thus, the authors walk to the edge of the cliff but do not look down into the abyss of questioning the hypothesis testing method in the social sciences *per se*. Here and elsewhere, they have decided against delving into philosophical issues concerning the nature of (social) science and its methods. Their cursory definitions of science (gathering objective knowledge about the world) and of the scientific method (mainly null hypothesis testing) also suggest this. This decision is understandable because this is a book for students that aims to be practical.

I find another aspect of the authors' approach more debatable. Ethics and integrity issues are categorised in their book as either FFP, which amounts to clearcut misconduct, or Questionable Research Practices (QRP), indicating practices that may not be fraudulent but are not quite right and must be avoided. While this division is still common practice, the QRP category has come under considerable scrutiny in recent years. The authors seem to acknowledge this by noting that, in between ethically responsible research and FFP, there is a rather broad grey zone in which it is less clear what is right or wrong. By adopting the acronym QRP, however, they still treat the grey zone as contiguous with the negative pole of FFP and as clearly distinct from the positive pole of ethically responsible research. This ignores the nuances in how issues in the grey zone are increasingly being perceived. The point is that it is simply not clear, in

a great many cases, what the best or the correct way to proceed might be; in the grey zone, the researcher is confronted with veritable dilemmas that cannot be solved by rule-following or adhering to principles. The denotation 'Questionable' misses the point because what is at stake here is not how to avoid breaches of integrity but how to do things right.

This brings me to a point which I think the authors will agree with but which might have been addressed more explicitly in the book. The authors state that their book is just a starting point for those who want to familiarise themselves with research ethics. Furthermore, they emphasise that theirs is not a 'how to' book. I fully agree, but what are students supposed to think about what follows next? The authors remain largely silent on this point. While they do provide questions for reflection about the cases they present, they do not explain how to reflect on ethical issues or how to arrive at acceptable solutions. I take it, however, that they agree with me that research ethics cannot be learned from books. It takes ethics and integrity education to enable students to implement what they have learned from their reading. There are many ways to design such education, but in my view, indispensable elements are discussions with peers and experts (and, ideally, supervisors) and some basic instructions about ethical deliberation. I would add that the focus should not be on avoiding grave misconduct (FFP), which is relatively rare, but on the much more common issues in the grey zone. I would also venture that a positive approach works best, focusing on how to do it right and that virtue ethics may be a helpful starting point for such an approach. Whatever approach is believed to be best, learning to become an ethically responsible researcher is learning by doing, and it requires several practice hours. It would have been helpful if the authors had pointed this out more explicitly, if only to prevent students (and teachers!) from thinking that, after having absorbed this book, they are fully prepared to tackle integrity issues on their own.

I recommend this book as a helpful guide to both learning and teaching the basics of research ethics. Students will experience that research ethics is not only essential but also highly interesting as it is at the heart of their discipline, and teachers will find ample, well-structured information and materials for their classes here. The writing may not be impeccable, but the spirited and engaging style adds much to making the subject interesting. I congratulate the authors for producing a good read on research ethics.