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The Ethics of Access: Institutional Gatekeeping and Researcher Agency in Youth-Focused Studies

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ABSTRACT: Educational Institutions are responsible for maintaining and ensuring ethics in the form of honesty and integrity during the research process. These ethics play a crucial role and require regular monitoring and oversight by institutions to enhance ethical practices, particularly in youth-focused research. But this oversight restricts the intellectual innovations by reducing the autonomy and flexibility of researchers. Ethical gatekeeping involves an institution's participation in deciding the topic, voices, and methods. The topics will be selected that institutions deem acceptable. This paper, based on participatory ethics, critical youth studies, and Foucault's notion of power/knowledge, aims to explore the influence of excessive control over the ethical approval process that only results in hierarchical studies, fewer possibilities of innovations, and critical agendas. This undermines the principle of empowerment fostered in participatory studies. The paper redescribes the viewpoint of ethical research in the form of a collaborative and shared process, thus shifting the focus from a regulatory perspective to a more reflective approach. This will highlight the importance of a balance between control and freedom in youth and early-stage researchers.

KEYWORDS: Ethical Gatekeeping, Institutional Control, Researcher Agency, Youth-Focused Studies.

INTRODUCTION

In contemporary research environments, ethics serve as a protective means to offer protection mechanisms(Aguinis, H., & Henle, C. A., 2004). Research ethics are the fundamental base for social research, which ensures that human subjects receive all the possible benefits and are away from all possible harms and risks (Gostin, 1991). In the context of youth-focused research, the possibilities of ethical concerns are more as, as young people are more likely to get neglected because of their vulnerable state (Graham et al., 2013). That makes them need more protection. The institutional review boards and ethics committees provide this safety by safeguarding the rights and providing an independent evaluation to the researchers(Grady, 2015). The research integrity and public trust are maintained by these boards, which protect them from any harm (Shekelle et al., 2012). But now this mechanism that aims to protect the researchers has become over formalized, which results in a change of focus from protection to bureaucratic procedures.

Institutional review boards have become control and regulation centres, involved in maintaining research integrity, but simultaneously acting as gatekeepers, which block the flow of information (Lin, 2012). The board decides which topic will be accepted and limits the innovation, autonomy, and acceptance scope of researchers. These bureaucracies have shifted the focus from researchers to centralised power (Boden et al., 2009). Consequently, due to these control mechanisms by review boards, meaningful but challenging innovative topics often face rejection because of their ability to harm the institutional comfort zone (Boden et al., 2009).

This dynamic is concerning when conducting participatory and youth-centered research. Participatory Research is a kind of collaborative research where people are involved in creating and applying knowledge about it (Pain, Whitman, & Milledge, 2022). These types of research involve empowering young people to participate as researchers rather than just being passive (Kellett, 2012). The involvement of young people as researchers guides the process of participatory as well as action research (Finch & Quecchia, 2025), which emphasizes trust, reciprocity, and knowledge co-construction. instead of playing the role of final arbiters, researchers invariably mediate the selection and depiction of narratives in the context of research (Theobald, 2017). But when institutional review boards enforce strict guidelines, it unintentionally results in hierarchical relationships. This over-controlling

behaviour by review boards silences young voices in the name of safety. Thus, the moral framework that is responsible for protecting the researchers becomes a roadblock in innovation and empowerment.

The work of Foucault (1980) on knowledge/power helps in understanding this tension. Foucault recognises that institutions contribute to normalising and creating subjectivity (Poorghorban, 2023). Institutions exercise power by controlling and deciding what is considered valid and acceptable. Subjects are vulnerable to deceit and manipulation, and the knowledge generated in discussions is subject to particular restrictions, guidelines, exclusions, and decisions (Poorghorban, 2023). Accordingly, institutional ethics serve as a governance mechanism that establishes what subjects or topics are appropriate for study and will be acceptable, resulting in conventional and old perspectives instead of critical thinking and innovations.

Thus, ethical gatekeeping by institutional review boards is a form of power that restricts the participatory ethics, blocks researcher's flexibility and autonomy. The paper advocates a change in perspective of ethics from a control mechanism to ethics as a dialogue. The paper aims to construct a reflective conception of ethics in youth-focused research that ensures a safe collaborative co-space between researcher and institution, which aims to uphold protection as well as empowerment.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Literature Review

The story of ethics begins with the study by **Thomas and O'Kane (1998),** who studied children in England and Wales, highlighting the importance of participatory approaches in addressing ethical dilemmas in research. They demonstrate how these designs enhance ethical integrity and methodological validity by allowing children to influence research design, data interpretation, and dissemination. The study also highlights the role of institutional gatekeepers in obstructing and facilitating children's participation, highlighting the politics of access and protection in applied research contexts. **Homan (2001)** discusses the ethical dilemmas of gatekeeping in social research, focusing on the principle of assumed consent. He argues that researchers often rely on institutional permission from gatekeepers, such as school administrators or social workers, to access participants, especially in studies involving minors or vulnerable groups. This practice undermines voluntary participation and informed consent, as it often prioritizes organizational reputation over participants' rights. Homan calls for a reflexive ethics of access, recognizing participants as moral agents rather than subject to bureaucratic protection. This work provides a theoretical foundation for understanding participatory politics in youth-focused research. The framework **Shier (2001)** for understanding children's and young people's participation in decision-making processes focuses on three key dimensions: openings, opportunities, and obligations. Participation involves a complex negotiation of power between adult gatekeepers, institutional settings, and young participants. The model emphasizes the ethical responsibility of researchers and institutions to move from theistic consultation to genuine engagement, aligning with debates on research gatekeeping and the politics of access in youth studies. Shier reframes gatekeeping as a potential ethical obligation that can either hinder or enable young people's voices. **Chabot et al. (2012)** explore participatory action research involving Canadian youth in sexual health, emphasizing ethical principles of autonomy, beneficence, and justice. They challenge institutional gatekeeping from Research Ethics Boards, school boards, and parental consent that limits youth participation and marginalizes voices. The authors argue for a competence-based framework for informed consent, highlighting that many youth misunderstand consent and confidentiality due to ethical failures in research governance. They view gatekeeping as structural control that reinforces paternalism and exclusion, advocating for inclusive ethics education, youth representation on ethics boards, and collaborative approaches to support justice-oriented research practices. **Tripathy (2013)** examines the ethics of gatekeeping in Indian schools, emphasizing that gatekeeping involves a network of figures (principals, teachers, parent committees) rather than a single individual. This network's concerns regarding reputation, safety, and community norms influence research access and informed consent. The paper critiques novice researchers' reliance on institutional permissions as proxy consent, highlighting the ethical dangers of equating administrative clearance with genuine youth agency. Tripathy's analysis illustrates how institutional control can limit youth participation from the outset and connects procedural gatekeeping to broader cultural and institutional dynamics that affect youth voice. **Harger and Quintela (2017)** analyze the role of Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) as significant gatekeepers in qualitative research involving children and youth. Their case studies reveal how IRB processes, initially intended to protect participants, can hinder youth-centered research. The authors note that IRBs often apply biomedical risk assessment models and are influenced by biases related to race, class, and researcher identity, which misinterpret qualitative methods. They provide examples where cultural assumptions by IRB members affected research design and methodology. The study emphasizes how institutional oversight may suppress youth voices and limit researcher's freedom. Harger and Quintela advocate for reforms that include greater transparency, researcher involvement in IRBs, and the development of ethical frameworks that protect participants while allowing academic inquiry. **Aaltonen and Kivijärvi (2018)** explore a Finnish research project involving marginalized young adults not in education or employment, examining how youth workers function as both facilitators and restrictors of access. Their study, grounded in field notes and interviews, identifies various forms of gatekeeping—formal,

comprehensive, and informal—and reveals their impact on information flow, participant recruitment, and research knowledge creation. The authors argue that gatekeeping is a social process influenced by power dynamics, ethics, and competing knowledge forms, challenging the view of it as merely obstructionist. Instead, they frame it as part of ethical partnerships and knowledge democratization, highlighting how institutional constraints and funding pressures can affect collaborative engagement. **Williams (2019)** highlights that self-advocacy groups, while beneficial for access, may lead to biased samples by favoring participants with stronger social skills. The study addresses power dynamics in gatekeeping, where those with limited institutional power can have significant influence as access mediators, contrasting with those in formal authority who may avoid responsibility. **Bagga-Gupta et al. (2021)** examine gatekeeping in an ethnographic study focused on participation and institutional accessibility in Sweden. They define gatekeeping as integral to social interactions and institutional settings that determine access to participation, emphasizing that both formal and informal dynamics contribute to inclusion and exclusion. Their findings stress the importance of reflexivity and equity within institutional policies, recognizing them as moral agents in shaping access. **Patel et al. (2021)** examined gatekeeper training as a preventive ethical intervention among medical professionals and undergraduate students in Gujarat, India, positioning gatekeepers as crucial in identifying and referring individuals at risk of suicide. The study suggests that with proper training, gatekeeping can transform from a barrier into a facilitator for care and moral responsibility. By integrating ethical capacity building in educational institutions, it proposes a model that enhances collaboration and trust, addressing power imbalances in youth-focused research ethics. **Spancey (2021)** highlighted the emotional and practical labor involved in gatekeeping, emphasizing the need for researcher reflexivity. This reflexivity is crucial for documenting access negotiations, acknowledging marginalized voices, and reinforcing the ethical integrity of youth-focused research. **Street (2021)** identified four key influences on gatekeeping practices through qualitative interviews with 13 experienced field instructors: role identification, ethical obligations, commitment to students, and institutional support. Strong support from institutions enhanced gatekeeping effectiveness, while a lack of collaboration led to inconsistent enforcement. The study emphasizes that gatekeeping is a moral and relational process intertwined with power dynamics and professional accountability. Similarly, **Fecke and Feher (2022)** explored how educational gatekeepers, like principals, selectively control access to youth participants, framing research questions and establishing ethical boundaries. Their findings reveal that this selective process creates systematic biases, impacting representativeness and the legitimacy of research outcomes.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The paper outlines Foucault's theory of power/knowledge, Participatory Ethics, and Relational Ethics to provide a comprehensive understanding of the manner in which institutions influence the researcher's autonomy.

Foucault's Theory of Power/Knowledge :

A study by Michel Foucault (1980) provides a concept of power and knowledge, showing that institutions regulate and control the distribution of knowledge. He argued that power defines the legitimate knowledge and what is permitted to produce and represent. Israel and Hay (2006) point out that regulators and social scientists are in a state of conflict, mistrust, and hostility. Ethics committees are now acting as gatekeepers and are concerned about avoiding any controversy (Cannella and Lincoln, 2007); (Halse and Honey, 2007) (Tierney and Blumberg Corwin, 2007); (Sikes, 2008); (Sikes and Piper, 2008). Ethical review committees deciding the ethical research and determining the researcher's actions involve ethical gatekeeping, leading to a risky culture that hinders critical inquiry, innovations, and the freedom of the researcher (Sikes & Piper, 2010). This creates an illusion of ethical practices where perceived risks outweigh actual risks.

Participatory Ethics :

According to Walker's (1998:10) claim that "morality is collaborative." Participatory ethics encourages young researchers or youth to participate as co-creators of knowledge rather than passive subjects, but institutional ethical frameworks frequently find it difficult to support such participatory ethics and limit their agency in research decision-making, because of their vulnerable state. According to Kotzé, Myburg, & Roux (2002), an ethical conscience is necessary for participatory ethics, which stresses the involvement of everyone, especially the oppressed and silent ones. It is required for institutions and review boards, who have power and authority, to hear the voice of the silenced and vulnerable ones without making decisions for them (Cochrane, 2001:74)

Relational Ethics :

Relationalism is a theory that tells about the moral status being determined by the quality of the interaction and relationship between people(Metz & Miller, 2013). Relational ethics focuses on mutual respect, dignity, and closeness between researchers and their subjects, as well as between researchers and the communities in which they reside and operate (Lincoln, 1995, p. 287; Brooks, 2006; Reason, 1993; Tierney, 1993). Usually, institutions do not concentrate on these relational and practical difficulties (Denzin, 2003). In the context of youth-focused research, it supports a flexible, trust-based approach to adolescent research that

values agency and develops critical capacities. By presenting ethics as a continuous negotiating process rather than a one-time permission, this method challenges the rigidity of institutional review systems (Pain, Whitman, & Milledge, 2011). Governance creates specific types of researchers, which it defines as ethical, and makes people cautious, obedient, and risk-averse (Blackman, 2017). Institutions used care language to justify control, referred to as "institutional effect" (Ahmed, 2012). This approach frames ethics as a continuous negotiation process rather than a one-time permission, challenging the inflexibility of institutional review procedures.

These theoretical perspectives show how institutional power structures influence ethical behaviour, which could compromise the participation goals of youth research. Foucault's power/knowledge framework informs about the mechanism of institutional control, Participatory ethics shows the importance of inclusion and agency, and Relational ethics shows the practical ways to offer ethical engagement and interaction. Together, they provide a theoretical framework for comprehending and opposing ethical gatekeeping and redefining ethics as a dynamic, empowering interaction between institutions, researchers, and young people rather than as a limiting mechanism.

Conceptual Development

Despite the popularity of youth-focused research, institutional frameworks that put regulation over reflexivity influence ethical governance, which increases the gap between the moral concept of protection and ideals of empowerment. The paper aims to describe the way institutional review boards or institutions restrict the researcher's autonomy and young agency through ethical gatekeeping, thus creating an imbalance. Based on a theoretical background, the paper views ethical gatekeeping as a mediating mechanism between institutional power and possibilities of critical inquiry.

Key Constructs

The proposed framework is based on institutional ethics, ethical gatekeeping, researcher autonomy, and youth agency. Institutional power allows one to work within the framework of rational choice (Sieberer, 2011). It is kind of an official power to control the approval, research design, and distribution. The power is exercised by ethics committees, review boards, and policy frameworks that decide the value and acceptability of research (Page, 2025)

The process of controlling the flow of information is referred to as gatekeeping, and this power is practiced by institutions(Barzilai-Nahon, in press) to control the research acceptability and its techniques. This shows a deep concern with risk management, institutional convenience, and researcher autonomy.

Individual autonomy is an intellectual freedom (Moshman, 2017) in the context of individual academics, which guarantees freedom and the right to choose their own study topics, goals, techniques, and methodologies without interference (Niemczyk & Rónay, 2023). When ethical gatekeeping becomes overly intrusive, it hinders the researcher's autonomy and flexibility, which blocks innovation.

Young people participate as co-researchers, decision makers, and knowledge producers through youth agency. When the restrictions become strict, it silences young voices and reduces agency. This impacts the agency to inform and co-design research (Askins, 2007; Cahill, 2007; Pain, 2008). While restricted oversight tends to mute adolescent voices and diminish their agency, high degrees of researcher autonomy usually allow for more authentic youth participation (Graham, Powell, & Taylor, 2013).

Conceptual Framework and Relationship

Based on the framework and theoretical discussion, Institutional power serves as the antecedent that influences the way research and the ethical environment. Thus, the organisations that prioritize risk avoidance and bureaucratic accountability are more prone to exercise control and rigidity, and hinder the flexibility of research. This power imbalance leads to ethical gatekeeping.

In response, ethical gatekeeping plays the role of a mediating mechanism that converts institutional control into limitations and restrictions on autonomy and flexibility. A shift is required from a compliance culture where "ethical" means to conform to the "prescriptions and proscriptions" to a situated ethics (Ekberg, 2012), which gives importance to flexibility and gives researchers the confidence and support to make decisions in situations without the need for further validation (Morris, 2015, pp. 229–230). Overly protective environments prevent co-creation, and researcher autonomy gets hampered when researchers accept the institutional norms just for the sake of the acceptability of the research.

The framework proposes the sequential order, which shows:

Institutional Power → Ethical Gatekeeping → Researcher Autonomy → Youth Agency.

This path can be overturned with the help of reflexivity, which helps in handling ethical tensions instead of requiring specific responses to research situations (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). It shifts the focus of ethics from compliance to collaborative process, which makes it a tool for empowerment rather than a control system.

The paper conceptualizes ethical gatekeeping as a dynamic mediator whose influence depends on the ethical practice chosen, which can restrict the autonomy and flexibility or foster flexibility and promote empowerment. It lowers the autonomy and hinders the youth voice if dominated by institutional authority and power, or can be a productive conversation between researchers, organisations, and young people under relational and reflexive ethics. Ethics thus becomes a transformational activity that maintains a balance between flexibility and protection.

Implications

This study has some important lessons for how we think about ethics in research with young people.

First, ethical oversight shouldn't just be a rigid, rule-following process. Instead, it can be a collaborative and reflective space where researchers, participants, and review boards work together. When ethics becomes about trust, dialogue, and co-creation, it moves away from control and toward meaningful engagement.

Second, young people should be seen as capable and knowledgeable contributors, not just subjects. Involving them in designing research makes the work more authentic and empowers them to learn and grow. One way to do this could be participatory ethics committees, where youth, researchers, and institutional authorities sit together to discuss ethical questions. This ensures different perspectives shape decisions and makes research more inclusive.

Third, ethics can't be one-size-fits-all. Many current models come from biomedical research and don't always fit social or educational studies. Applying them without adjustment can accidentally silence important voices, especially in places like India, where institutional hierarchies already make inclusion harder. Ethics processes need to consider the cultural, social, and disciplinary context of each project.

Fourth, there's a clear need for training and policy changes. Educators, administrators, and ethics board members should learn how to balance protection with participation, understand cultural sensitivities, and support young people in meaningful ways. Ethical oversight should focus on respect, dialogue, and shared responsibility—helping young people feel safe, valued, and empowered.

Finally, this study contributes to bigger conversations about power, knowledge, and fairness in research. It reminds us that ethics can either reinforce hierarchies or create spaces where everyone shares responsibility. By rethinking how we approach ethics, we can make research more just, inclusive, and empowering.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined how institutional control, researcher freedom, and participation politics shape the ethics of youth research. While ethical oversight is vital for protecting participants, it often functions as a form of power—deciding what can be known, who can speak, and how research is conducted. In some cases, this can unintentionally undermine the very goals of youth research, turning protection into exclusion.

Drawing on Foucault's (1980) ideas about power/knowledge and principles of participatory ethics, this study argues that ethics should be reflective, collaborative, and context-sensitive. Gatekeeping doesn't have to be an obstacle; it can be a space for dialogue among researchers, institutions, and young participants. When grounded in mutual respect and shared decision-making, ethics can enhance both protection and empowerment, balancing institutional responsibility with researcher autonomy.

Ultimately, youth-focused research benefits when ethics move beyond mere compliance to become relational and reflexive. Recognizing young people as active participants in research democratizes knowledge production and strengthens the integrity of social inquiry. Institutions can safeguard participants without stifling innovation, and researchers can uphold ethical standards without losing their independence. This balance leads to research that is more inclusive, just, and impactful.

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