



A narrative review of mentors' roles and responsibilities regarding ethical aspects of student research with human participants

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Abstract: The objective of this narrative review was to systematize different mentors' roles and responsibilities regarding ethical aspects of student research with human participants. The qualitative analysis of eight identified studies published since 2015 depicts the mentors in the roles of guiding, teaching, coaching, protecting, anticipating, modelling, and supporting while standing in direct relations with the mentees, the IRB, and their institution, and indirectly with research participants. Each relation results in different responsibilities for the mentors. The results portray the complex issue of *power vs. responsibility* distribution in the pedagogical relation between various subjects in the research process, as well as the issues of interpreting research ethics as a technocratic *instrument of individual responsabilization* or as a fundamentally *relational, micropedagogical endeavour*. The concluding part offers a comprehensive reflective framework for institutions currently facing challenges in mentoring student research with human participants, which can also serve mentors in guiding students in conducting such research.

Keywords: IRB, ethical review board, master's, mentee, PhD, supervisor.

Introduction

The topic of this paper was shaped by my professional identity. Having been a mentor¹ to student master's theses for more than a decade, and recently also PhD theses, I began to question the vaguely defined responsibility distribution for the ethical aspects of the student research between a mentor, a mentee, and third parties, such as the institution or institutional review board (IRB). A mentor, with an abundance of professional experience, is the strongest safety net the students and research participants have. Yet, principal investigators are students. In that sense, they have a certain level of autonomy in conducting their research, which should be accompanied by responsibility for its ethical integrity. Reflecting upon this, I noticed an interesting personal shift: while being a student, I was convinced that a large portion of the responsibility for research success, failure, and ethics must be, due to my limited experience and modest formal education on research methodology, shared with my mentor. Today, observing this issue from a mentor's perspective, I try (though often failing) to respect the students' (relative) research autonomy. Over the years, I became overwhelmed with the fact that, although students' research protocols are thoroughly reviewed, I cannot be sure that they undertake actions aligned with the IRB approval. I started to ask myself whether checking their "sticking to a plan" is also my responsibility (towards students *and* participants) or a manifestation of trust issues in our pedagogical relation. I also noticed being more restrictive in accepting

¹ For the differences between *mentoring*, *counselling*, and *coaching*, see Zentgraf (2020). As in my previous work, I use *mentoring* instead of *supervising*: "I use the concept of *mentoring*, in line with (...) my personal experience of working at university, where I guide students in their research projects in an intensive, time- and energy-consuming practice with a strong relational and emotional component (...). The differences of meaning attributed to *research supervision* or *mentoring* in different contexts (see Lunsford *et al.*, 2017) are, though relevant, omitted, acknowledging the position of Radha Krishna *et al.* (2019), who claimed that "[r]ole modeling, teaching and tutoring, coaching and supervision lie within a mentoring spectrum of increasingly structured interactions, assisted by assessments, feedback and personalized support that culminate with a mentoring approach" (p. 1; Kušević, 2025, p. 96). Similar is done in Žižak (2014). Based on the analysis of 42 different definitions of mentoring, Nuis *et al.* (2023, p. 12) define mentoring as "a formalized process based on a developmental relationship between two persons in which one person is more experienced (mentor) than the other (mentee). The mentor provides support, more specifically career, emotional, psychosocial, psychological, and academic support, to promote and facilitate student success, competence development, and career development." This understanding of mentoring is compatible with my research. When referring to the other authors, I use their terminology.

certain research proposals. My initial position, that students have to have an opportunity to learn by *doing the research*, was somewhat changed. I began to put the interest of research participants (or perhaps personal/institutional interest?²) *in focus, wondering what could go wrong when inexperienced researchers do the fieldwork. An unwanted implication of that shift was a declining number of field and a parallel rise of desk methods the students were using. Without planning it, I aligned myself with Humphreys's (2008) position that novice students should (with exceptions) do literature-based research, as described in Ashcroft and Parker (2003, as cited in Humphreys, 2008).*

Trying to frame my dilemmas with available data, I found several relevant papers. In research with supervisors the utilitarian position that undergraduate student projects should not undergo full ethics review was described, but “[o]pinions were divided on where responsibility ultimately lay, with some considering it to belong within the educational system and others specifying the supervisor” (Scott et al., 2008, p. 151). Petillion et al. (2017) interviewed students who completed their master’s or doctoral programs in health disciplines and found that one of the characteristics of a supportive supervisor was encouraging students’ respect for research ethics. More concrete mentors’ obligations are described in Richards (2010): in a seminar dedicated to the relationship between ethics and research supervision, it was pointed out that, in addition to carefully reading the research proposal, supervisors should take care of the student’s safety, for example, if they conduct research outside the campus. The similar is emphasized by Willis (2010). Besides mentors’ responsibilities, the responsibilities of institutions for ensuring the supervisors and students research ethics competence were emphasized, and supervisors not knowledgeable on research ethics were recognized as a particular problem (Lotto, 2018).

The next step in my preliminary literature search was various documents that offer a normative framework for the described dilemmas. The *WMA declaration of Helsinki – ethical principles for medical research involving human participants* (The World Medical Association, 1964), *The Belmont Report (The National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979)*, nor *The Professional Charter for Coaching, Mentoring, and Supervision of Coaches, Mentors, and Supervisors* (European Mentoring and Coaching Council, International Coach

² A claim that IRB protects the researcher and institution more than the research participants is documented in Wynn (2016).

Federation, Association for Coaching, Société Française de Coaching, 2021), do not tackle the distribution of responsibility for research ethics. *The European charter for researchers. The code of conduct for the recruitment of researchers* (European Commission, 2005, p. 14) recognizes the responsibilities of senior researchers, but only in a context where they “should build up a constructive and positive relationship with the early-stage researchers.” *Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions Guidelines on Supervision* (European Commission, 2021, p. 7) depicts mentors as role models who perform “research with integrity and high ethical standards,” while the researcher needs to “[k]eep the supervisor informed on the progression of the research, providing relevant information and data related to it.” (p. 8). The same document details the institutional responsibilities, one of which is to raise awareness on the research integrity. One of the core supranational documents for European researchers, *The European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity* (ALLEA, 2023, p. 6), refers explicitly to training, supervision, and mentoring. Adding to the institutional responsibility for education on the ethical aspects of the researcher’s activity, it is also recognized that “[s]enior researchers, research leaders, and supervisors mentor their team members, led by example, and offer specific guidance and training to properly develop and structure their research activities.”

Besides this preliminary literature screening, I was cognizant of the fact that my analysis is immersed in the Croatian context. I therefore wanted to examine to what extent Croatian guides for mentors of master’s/PhD researchers address the described dilemmas. Using Google and the keywords *mentor* [*mentor*] AND *guide* [*vodič*] OR *handbook* [*priručnik*], I identified 11 documents (Appendix 1) and read them in Zotero. Given that the guides hardly mention the distribution of the responsibilities for the research *ethics* with human participants³, I focused on the parts that mention *any aspect of the responsibility* of a mentor/mentee. Novak (2016) claims that this distribution must be discussed, and the mentor is recognized as the one who should pay attention to the use of appropriate research methods and correct the mentee’s work, while conducting quality research is the responsibility of the doctoral student. If a PhD student does not have the necessary competencies, the mentor is seen as responsible for directing attention to that deficit and for planning, in dialogue with students,

³ Some documents address each form of mentoring (Vican et al., n.d.) or are directed to non-research mentors (Sveučilišni odjel za stručne studije, 2024), while others are focused on administrative procedures in mentoring (Turković, n.d.).

how to eliminate it (Čulinović Herc et al., 2016). One document (Odbor za završne i diplomske radove, n.d.) points out that the mentor, and not the student, sends the documentation relevant to students' research to the IRB. As the most relevant, I find the quote that states that mentor's responsibilities (*in the context of nurturing the relationship*, not research ethics) are more significant: "A professional relationship is a structured relationship, which means that the roles of the persons in the relationship are clear, that it is known which role has more influence and responsibility for the relationship, and that it is known when the relationship started and when it will end. As the mentor in this relationship has more influence on the relationship, the mentor is therefore more responsible for the development and quality of the relationship" (Vizek Vidović et al., 2014, p. 19).

This preliminary analysis led me to the tentative conclusion that extensive discussion on the mentors' responsibilities for ethical aspects of student research with human participants is lacking, which indicated the need to synthesize the current knowledge.

Methodology of the narrative review

In this reanalysis⁴, I followed the principles (apart from the appraisal process) of the narrative review described in Green et al. (2006)⁵. I eliminated the scoping and systematic review design options due to the limited available literature and exploratory nature of this study, while the traditional review paper lacked the precision I wanted to demonstrate during the selection and analysis of the literature. The literature search scheme is presented in table 1.

The inclusion criteria were: articles with theoretical, anecdotal, or empirical data, published in English between 2015 and 2024, and relevant to this research. I wanted to include a publication period broad enough to capture thematically focused research, yet recent enough to be relevant for contemporary research ethics conventions. I approached 13 bibliographic

⁴ Using the term *reanalysis* as "the broadest term of the area, including any second (or third, fourth, etc.) look at the previously collected data, regardless of whether they are picked from archives or from other sources," Wästerfors et al. (2014, p. 467) as a form of reanalysis recognize the use of other researchers' data, excerpts, or quotations, from published research reports, with the potential for advancing theory.

⁵ I also used the *Narrative Overview Rating Scale* (Green et al., 2006) to monitor the quality of the paper.

databases to which I have access as an employee of the University of Zagreb⁶. One database included all other databases, one covered domestic journals only, four were field-specific, and two used the **ProQuest/Web of Science interface**, which is why those databases were excluded. Three remaining were included: ProQuest Social Science Premium Collection, Scopus, and Web of Science. **After numerous trials**, I used the query string *title(ethic* AND (research* OR project) AND (mentor* OR supervis* OR student OR university))*. Soon I realized I was capturing papers not focused enough: e.g., the papers that were dealing with researchers' ethical stance, research ethics knowledge, and curriculum, in which mentoring was only marginally addressed. I therefore decided to narrow down the query to *title(ethic* AND (research* OR project) AND (mentor* OR supervis*))*. In other words, I decided to include *mentoring (supervision)* as an obligatory title concept.

Table 1: Literature search scheme.

Inclusion criteria	article published in last ten years (between 2015 and 2024) in English relevant for this research		
Database	Query string	Articles retrieved	Eligible after reading <i>Abstract</i>
ProQuest Social Science Premium Collection	title(ethic* AND (research* OR project) AND (mentor* OR supervis*)) Publication date 2015–2024; Document type Article; Language English	13	6
Scopus	title(ethic* AND (research* OR project) AND (mentor* OR supervis*)) Range: 2015–2024; Limited to Article; Limited to English	15	12
Web of Science	ethic* AND (research* OR project) AND (mentor* OR supervis*) (Title) Document Types: Article; Languages: English; Publication Years: 2015–2024 (manually marked)	13	8
Number of texts after removing the duplicates			12
Included after full text screening			10
Included after full text reading			8

This strategy, although obviously missing the papers in which mentoring is marginally addressed, resulted in a limited number of relevant articles I could thoroughly examine. First, I read the abstracts of all retrieved articles (September 2024) and stored those that appeared potentially relevant as full

⁶ <https://knjiznica.ffzg.unizg.hr/baze/>

texts (if a full text was not available in a particular database, I searched it elsewhere). In this phase, paper elimination was highly conservative. In the next step, I screened all retrieved full texts and decided whether they should be included in further analysis. I stored those suitable for further analysis in *Zotero* and read them line by line, after which the final decision on the text inclusion was made. At this point, I removed two articles: one in which supervisors were only mentioned as having a positional authority (Hopman, 2021), and the other, in which *researching* research supervision was in focus (Hamid et al., 2024).

The final corpus consisted of 8 studies, presented in table 2. I stored them in *Taguette*, where I also manually checked reference lists, which did not result in additional papers. During the second round of reading, I set a focused objective, which was to *systematize different mentors' roles and responsibilities regarding ethical aspects of student research with human participants*.

Table 2: Included studies.

Annota- tion in Refer- ences	Country	Study type	Method, participants and theme
[1]	cross- country	Examples from authors' professional experience	"This study explores four specific mentoring case scenarios commonly encountered in the global health research field in low- and middle-income institutions" (p. 42).
[2]	Australia	Empirical research	Semi-structured interviews with 18 higher degree research students and supervisors; "The project addresses the following research questions: 1. What micro-ethical issues do HDR students and supervisors encounter when researching in fragile contexts? 2. How do supervisors encourage the development of micro-ethical reflexivity during HDR candidature? 3. What key supports assist HDR students and supervisors to navigate micro-ethical complexities in research and what additional supports are required?" (p. 839).
[3]	Germany	Vignettes	Qualitative case vignettes focused on authors' "experiences as lecturers and supervisors in qualitative healthcare research in medicine, public health research and sociology, and the role of research ethics in guiding students in their qualitative studies" (p. 1).

Annota- tion in Refer- ences	Country	Study type	Method, participants and theme
[4]	Australia & Aotearoa / New Zealand	A dialogue between post-graduate student and supervisor	"This article outlines the experiences of a postgraduate student conducting research on drug use and 'wild self-care' in the format of a dialogue with their supervisor" (p. 1094).
[5]	United Kingdom	Review paper	"This article considers some of the ethical issues that can arise for novice researchers in institutions that do not have a firmly established qualitative research tradition, with particular reference to research with young people and in some instances sensitive topics" (p. 1).
[6]	Norway	Document study	"This document study seeks to illuminate the role of the supervisors in facilitating research ethics in these projects. Specifically, we describe and discuss the supervisor role associated with five approaches to doctoral supervision of qualitative research, namely those described as 'Functional', 'Enculturation', 'Critical thinking', 'Emancipation' and 'Developing a quality relationship'" (p. 1).
[7]	Australia	Examples from author's professional experience	Drawing from the author's professional experience, this "article outlines the potential for Research Higher Degree (RHD) supervisors at universities and similar institutions to use ethical review as a constructive, dynamic tool in guiding RHD students in the timely completion of effective, innovative research projects" (p. 1368).
[8]	Australia	Survey	"The aim of this project was to investigate the human research ethics experiences and knowledge of three groups: medical students, and university academic staff and clinicians eligible to supervise medical student research projects; at two Australian universities" (p. 87).

I analysed the studies according to the procedure described by Saldaña (2014)⁷, adapted to this research: to foresee (an initial examination of my theoretical positions and their congruence with this research); to survey optimal methodological solutions (selection of the appropriate research design); to collect the necessary documentation; to organize documentation; to prioritize and to analyse (see descriptions above); to code (using predominantly process coding); to interrelate (iterative establishing relations

⁷ I used this procedure in Kušević (2025).

between the codes); to theme and assert (see Picture 1). In coding I excluded parts where authors were citing/quoting others (i.e., I used only original data generated by the authors). I included in the coding, but excluded from this report, participants' quotes from qualitative studies (e.g., interviews). Wästerfors et al. (2014) warn that these data should not be simply taken out of the context in which they were created. Also, by not wanting to repeat quotes of participants who agreed to be quoted only in the context of the primary study, I draw attention to the ethical aspects of reanalysing qualitative data (cf. with discussions on the responsible usage of research findings, aligned with what the participants initially agreed to, and questioning whether primary data can be used if the focus of the analysis is different from that communicated during informed consent; Mertens, 2014; Wästerfors et al., 2014).

Different mentors' roles and responsibilities regarding the ethical aspects of student research with human participants

Figure 1 presents two main agents in the research process: a mentor and a mentee. A mentee is, within the critical-thinking approach, viewed as an individual supported by the supervisor "in making autonomous choices in compliance with ethical principles" [6, p. 10], and as a responsible individual who understands the dynamics of the research and ethical dilemmas that might occur in different phases [5].

The mentor is described as the one that has "to ensure that the necessary approvals are obtained" (within the functional paradigm of supervision) [6, p. 8] and can decrease scientific misconduct [1], while some hold the mentor directly responsible for the research competence of the mentee, suggesting that in the planning phase of the research, evidence of the student's competence should be given to the mentor, as well as the plan for addressing challenging situations that might arise in research with human participants [5]. The most direct addressing of a mentor's responsibility is the one toward research participants, which includes protecting their well-being [2] [3] [5] or drawing a student's attention to the fact that the research risk is not minimal [7]. Interesting are the descriptions of a supervisor who recognized that the student behaved disrespectfully towards participants, leading to the questioning of the supervisor's responsibility towards the research participants [3], as well as feeling responsible for the student's well-being [3].

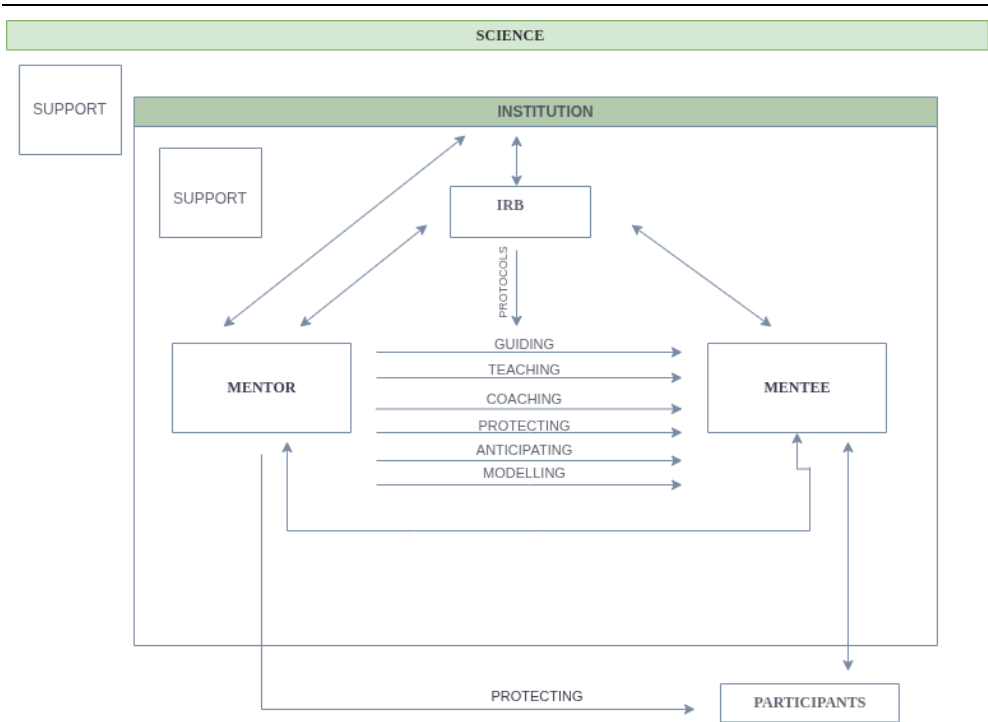


Figure 1

The specific roles of mentors (*guiding, teaching, coaching, protecting mentee, anticipating, modelling and supporting*) are described in more detail. A supervisor experience is “essential in guiding students in developing appropriate research questions, designing research methodology, and analysing and interpreting study results, while also advising and directing students in the ethical conduct of research” [8, p. 88]. A supervisor must create a context for a dialogical examination of ethical aspects of each phase of the research [2] [3]. This guidance is recognized as a tool for ensuring that a student’s research is aligned with research ethics conventions: “By spending time together reflecting upon the relational aspect of research ethics, in addition to the normative research ethics, we believe the supervisors facilitate research ethics through *Developing a quality relationship* in doctoral supervision” [6, p. 11]. In this questioning the mentor performs a demanding task of balancing between structure and the absence of structure, between “the need for templates and guidelines to ensure consistency in research ethics and the need for autonomy and critical thinking to mobilize research ethics principles in qualitative research practices” [6, p. 12]. A supervisor also balances between different

antinomies, which reflect the philosophy of the pedagogical relationship: “Do I want to be the ‘cool or flexible teacher’ or a stricter and protective teacher? The choice of topic is, therefore, not just about the content but also about the negotiation of relationships I want to build with my students. These relational aspects are important and have a lot to do with my own personal values and background” [3, p. 4]. A supervisor can help a student to see a broader perspective when dealing with ethical problems (instead of being too focused on details and particular stages of a research process) [7].

A mentor is described as someone who *teaches* and *coaches* a student about the ethics of research with human participants. A supervisor helps a student visualize the upcoming stages of research [7] or facilitates ethical behaviour by editing a student’s work [1]. *Coaching* refers to the skills development facilitated by a mentor, who can prepare a student to interview a vulnerable group of participants [3] or participate in role-playing that will empower a student to conduct research in a manner that respects the participants’ agency [5].

A supervisor is further described as being responsible for *protecting* a student’s well-being by encouraging a student to consider what will happen during the research and does not leave a student alone in responsibilities toward the research participants [2]. This might include even noticing that some research topics may not be suitable [2], sometimes because a student is personally too immersed in the topic [3]. It is recognised that a supervisor cannot protect a student from everything that may arise during the research [3], but still has the duty of care: “It is the academic supervisor’s responsibility to ensure that the student researcher is also mentally and emotionally healthy at the end of the research study” [5, p. 4].

Anticipating portrays a mentor as the person who recognizes ethically complex stages of the student’s research, thereby protecting everyone involved in the process. This role is especially important for inexperienced researchers [2]. It can be practiced through an extensive dialogue or visualization of the research process [7], sometimes requiring that a supervisor question whether some topics are even too sensitive to be researched [3].

Modelling describes a mentor as an ethical role model in research and a person on whose experience a student can rely [1]. One author describes how she invited the student to observe her practicing a research procedure that the student planned to use [3]. However, it is highlighted that “having undertaken a doctorate or currently conducting research is not sufficient

preparation for guiding a novice researcher to develop the required ethical reflexivity" [2, p. 847].

Supporting describes a mentor in the role of performing emotional and self-reflexive work [3], which can lead to burnout [2].

Picture 1 also marks a pedagogical triangle, where IRB (with protocols and procedures) mediates the content to a mentor-mentee dyad. Forms for evaluating research proposals are seen as an auxiliary tool for working with students [2] [5] [6] [7], with consensus that these materials cannot replace communication with a supervisor [2] [5] [6]. The IRB has three distinct relations: with a student whose project is evaluated, with a mentor (usually also a colleague), and with an institution whose interests it protects⁸. The analysed studies portray IRB as a critical friend [2], and its members as learners in situations in which they do not have enough experience with proposed research, whereby students "can help build a resource about the needs, values and cultural expectations of research in fragile contexts for Human Research Ethics Committees and other researchers, including supervisors, new to these settings" [2, p. 851]. Some authors do recognize potential tensions that may arise when a mentor is not sufficiently knowledgeable of the ethical rules governing research, which puts a student in an unenviable position [1]. It is also stressed that a student can resist the opinions of a supervisor or IRB, being "averse to dedicating time and effort to such activities or could resent the compulsion to alter their initial plans or mindsets" [7, p. 1373].

Regarding institutional responsibility, one paper [6, p. 13] explicitly states that "[t]he role and actions of supervisors are highly associated with whether their institution fosters an ethics culture, required for ensuring research ethics mobilization." Supervisors, however, do not receive adequate professional development opportunities to support students' ethical behaviour [2] [4] [8] or lack knowledge on these issues [8]. An opportunity to improve the knowledge and skills necessary for the ethical conduct of research needs to be available not only to supervisors but also to students [8] and IRB members [5]. The support of other experienced researchers is recognized as important, along with the proposal to establish a certain type of forum for discussing specific ethical challenges [2].

⁸ The relationship of IRB with research participants is not marked because it is, in most cases, an indirect one.

Discussion

In the analysed papers, the various roles and responsibilities of *mentors* are described in great detail. These detailed descriptions might stem from an understanding of mentoring as a pedagogical relationship between more and less experienced/competent *pais*, where a mentor has more influence and responsibility (Vizek Vidović et al., 2014) or simply the fact that the texts were written by researchers, who usually also do mentoring. Although elaborate descriptions cannot be interpreted as a *greater* mentor's responsibility, the plurality of the mentor's roles indicates that a mentor *has a burden of ethical responsibilities for the student's research project*. Interesting are the parts that describe a mentor's direct responsibility for a student's well-being, e.g., in reflecting on the impact of the chosen research topic on a student [2] [3], which resonates with authors who claim that mentors should ensure or at least check a student's safety (Richards, 2010, Willis, 2010). It would be interesting to empirically document the level of mentors' (dis)agreement with this responsibility, especially in contexts where mentoring a large number of students might be seen as a form of exhaustive, precarious academic work.

Another domain of a mentor's responsibility can be noticed: for example, within a functional approach, a supervisor should check if all research permits are obtained⁹ [6], if a student is competent to conduct research [5], to directly coach a student on how to do something [3] [5] or to model research techniques [3]. If in the pedagogical relation the *structure* should gradually be substituted with greater *autonomy*, as Anderson et al. (2006) suggest, I notice a potential threat for research participants, whose well-being can be jeopardized during fieldwork (meaning, *during the later—and potentially more autonomous—phase of research*). For a long time I was convinced that my mentoring role assumed supporting the student in making excellent research proposals, considering I cannot be held responsible for what the student *does* during the fieldwork, where I am not present. Recently I started to question my responsibilities after an IRB approval more thoroughly than before (cf. the importance of trust of supervisors that students are conducting their research ethically in Richards, 2010). If the mentors should indeed be responsible for this research phase too, then, apart from the need to discuss the elements of

⁹ In one analyzed Croatian guide for mentors (Odbor za završne i diplomske radove, n.d.), the mentors (and not the students) are the ones who send the documentation to the IRB, which is an interesting point of mentors' responsabilization.

trust and personal responsibility in pedagogical relation, the mentors should have structural conditions (time, at least) for practicing this responsibility. It might also be argued that, in this scenario, they are *de facto* researchers as well, which should be acknowledged when participants give their informed consent.

A mentor's responsibility for the well-being of research participants [2] [3] [5] [7] is clearly addressed in several studies. This burden can motivate mentors to reduce the degree of students' autonomy in an attempt to exercise this responsibility towards research participants (or even to colleagues in the IRB). Consequently, this could create a more hierarchical mentor-mentee relationship than in desk method research, where a mentor assumes responsibility for research conventions but does not protect the well-being of others (apart from the mentee). If we perceive mentoring as a classic pedagogical relationship, a mentor is confronted with balancing between the polarities of structure and freedom [3] [6]. Other authors also analyse this tension: "If one focused too exclusively on the supporting half (...), one would lose sight of the fact that the interpersonal dynamics of supervision are mediated by the demands that a dissertation places on both supervisor and student. (...) Alternatively, if one concentrated too heavily on the shaping side of the figure there would be the dangers of neglecting the supervisor's concern with promoting student agency" (Anderson et al., 2006, p. 165). This opens up a question of the *purpose of the student's research*: Is the purpose *scientific* (to expand knowledge, with a mentor as a preliminary evaluator of the level this purpose is achieved), *didactical* (to guide a student in the process of mastering different research methods and tools)¹⁰ or even personally transformative? Research that is deficient according to academic standards can enable a student to achieve significant personal and professional growth (or vice versa). The question of whether student research is truly a contribution to science seems to remain open: "Although dissertations might contribute to knowledge, supervisors also acknowledged limitations in the extent to which a dissertation in a professional Master's course could lead a student towards fuller participation in the community of researchers." (Anderson et al., 2006, p. 155). This issue is not completely resolved even at the PhD level: Åkerlind

¹⁰ Žižak (2014) notices conflict inscribed in the evaluative dimension of the mentor's role. At a systemic level, I notice this is solved by excluding mentors from committees that evaluate students' research, which has become customary in the Republic of Croatia in recent years, but only at the PhD level (*Ordinance on doctoral studies of the University of Zagreb*, 2024). This implies that mentors cannot distinguish the role of guiding a student and evaluating a scientific contribution, thus transferring the evaluative role to colleagues.

and McAlpine (2017, p. 1687) ask “whether the focus of the PhD should be on the ‘product’ (i.e. production of the thesis/contribution to knowledge) or the ‘person’/‘process’ (i.e. the developmental changes that students go through as part of the doctoral process). However, one could argue that policy initiatives internationally have been emphasising a greater focus on developing the person.” It seems this opens up additional relevant questions: if a student’s research is *mastering the craft*, could it not be conducted in simulated conditions, without risks for students and the research participants? In a situation where the scientific reach of a project might be questionable, should a mentor take over responsibility for ethical conventions in research that is not one’s own¹¹?

The emphasis on the mentor’s responsibility can infantilize the student, who will, paradoxically, soon (after master’s/PhD defence) be an autonomous professional. This is a questionable stance if competencies for conducting ethical research are developed from the beginning of a study program. Instruments that measure university students’ research competencies (Böttcher & Thiel, 2018) already exist, but not the competencies focused on research ethics (although this topic was also a subject of empirical research, cf. Rissanen & Löfström, 2014). In addition, institutions should create multiple opportunities to refine these competencies through elective courses for students motivated to conduct research with people. This would also promote institutional awareness that being passionate about researching a certain topic, if not accompanied by adequate competencies, is not enough (cf. Gorski’s (2008) claim (in the context of intercultural education) that good intentions are not enough).

The position of IRB, which offers collegial advice [2] or an auxiliary tool for working with students [2] [5] [6] [7], is intertwined with three complex responsibilities: towards a student, a mentor, and an institution. If we assume that the role of the IRB is not to protect anyone’s interests but to ensure that all approved research is aligned with the ethical standards, a hierarchy of interest must still be in place when the interests of different actors collide. In their overly protective mode (an analysis of vocabulary on the role of research ethics committees connected their work to attributes such as *overly cautious* and *bureaucratic*, Brown et al., 2020), IRBs can protect an institution, a mentor, and participants from even the smallest ethical repercussions, making it impossible for the student to conduct

¹¹ For a discussion of the level of ethical regulation of medical research and the acceptable risk to research participants depending on the degree of probability that the research will achieve its intended goal, see Wade (2005).

research. This kind of gatekeeping has additional ethical implications relevant to this paper. As Brown et al. (2020, p. 751) summarize, “a need to protect the rights of participants has simultaneously resulted in a weakening of the researcher’s control over their own research (Juritzen et al., 2011). One danger is that, as a result, researchers might surrender their sense of moral and ethical responsibility to the professional consensus of the ethics committee” (Fine et al., 2000; Alderson and Morrow, 2006; Hammersley, 2009). This quote is significant because it suggests¹² that multiple loci of responsibility can actually result in reduced personal responsibility. Shore (2024) recognizes the same problem of transferring responsibility to the committee. Continuing Hammersley’s pioneering criticism of the bureaucratization of the work of ethics committees and expanding it by arguing that evaluations of research proposals, related more to risk management than morality, lack a disciplinary perspective, Shore (2024, p. 10) takes a critical stance toward the requirement that graduate students’ projects undergo ethical review, concluding that: “Ethics is about morality and the moral principles that govern a person’s behaviour – or, in this case, the conduct of researchers and their disposition to act responsibly and obey the categorical principle of respecting others. Ethical conduct in fieldwork settings, however, is situational and defined by context.”

Papers also address the importance of institutional context in enabling mentoring aligned with the highest ethical standards, but Vican et al. (n.d.) question whether mentors are adequately trained for their role. In analysed papers, an institution is portrayed as responsible for creating a culture of ethical conduct [6], ensuring adequate education of mentors for supporting students’ ethical behaviour [2] [4], and improving knowledge and skills necessary for ethical conduct or evaluation of research [2] [5]. In research done by Guerin et al. (2017), the discrepancy between the high expectations from supervisors (not situated in the context of research ethics, though) and the scarce professional development opportunities was found, accompanied by the fact that some universities approve avoidance of supervisors’ training due to the limited number of available supervisors. This might be an illustration of how mass student enrolment, not accompanied by adequate staffing, could impact the quality of mentoring.

¹² Although the authors write about researchers in general, I find it equally applicable to mentoring.

Conclusion

This narrative review aimed to *systematize different mentors' roles and responsibilities regarding the ethical aspects of student research with human participants*. Although the analysed papers recognize responsibilities of all agents, with mentors being described in several different roles, a mentee's responsibilities are described less extensively, while institutional responsibilities are mainly reduced to providing a quality education on research ethics. An appealing response to this vague triangle of responsibility might be listing the responsibilities for every step of the research: this sequential ethics might, for example, hold the methodology teachers responsible for a minimum of methodological knowledge and skills, mentors and IRB members for research proposals, and a student for everything that happens after the IRB approval. In my opinion, this would lead to further bureaucratization of the process and not necessarily to better protection of research participants nor more engaged student learning.

I am more in line with Halse and Bansel (2012, p. 384), who advocate the relational ethics of responsibility—the learning alliance, which “shifts the focus from the individual student or supervisor and their dyadic relationship, and foregrounds the role and relationships of the multiple agents involved in doctoral education across the university community, including managers, administrators and support departments such as the library, information technology services and so on. The learning alliance recognises that all participants in the doctoral process bring resources to and make demands on each other but defines their relationship as a cooperative endeavour of reciprocal responsibilities and obligations.” In line with that, I advocate for a *dedicated construction of a dialogical* culture of responsibility, with a strong position that this culture does not diminish individual responsibility (of each agent) at each stage of the research. From a mentor's perspective (something similar could be written from a student's perspective), this ideal demands a mentor that is thoroughly informed on, e.g., how a debriefing is done, how a student is archiving data, whether the research report is aligned with IRB approval, etc. I personally do perceive the mentor, being a professional, as the single most responsible (but never exclusively responsible) individual in this process. Similar position is integrated, for example, into Croatian Code of Ethics for Psychological Practice (2005, Art. 25), which explicitly states that “psychologist is responsible for the ethical aspects of their research or research conducted under their mentorship or supervision.”

No doubt, this is a significant burden for mentors, which has to be addressed at a structural level. This means that I do not understand quality mentoring as something that a competent and dedicated mentor should ensure alone, no matter the personal or professional cost. To be even more precise, the desired outcome of this analysis is by no means putting an additional burden on academics and increasing the amount of their precarious work nor distrusting students or amnestying them from their responsibilities. On the contrary, I want to stimulate more extensive discussion on an issue that is a lived reality of mentoring and yet often remains on the margins, e.g., as a discussion topic in collegial support. In my understanding, this structural silence and scarce empirical evidence turn it into a personal problem of mentors and students. Although this dialogical culture of responsibility depends on the specific institutional/national context, its nurturing might include:

- institutional position on the importance of continuous development of competencies in research methodology and ethics, and provision of multiple and diverse opportunities for this development
- clearly communicated stance that the ethics of student research is a shared responsibility of different subjects, practiced through communication and joint education, but also safeguarded by institutional facilities and experts that offer their support in resolving ethical dilemmas that may arise before, during, and after research
- interpreting subsequently observed questionable decisions regarding research ethics as an *educational opportunity*,
- ensuring sufficient time for dedicated mentoring, as well as for a dialogue on the challenges of mentoring
- nurturing, when possible or necessary, a dialogue of the IRB members with mentors and students (cf. the open dialogue approach in Fox & Busher, 2022) instead of written, formalized “decisions”
- recognizing the institutional service of the IRB members
- creating an institutional compendium or organizing round tables with incentives (never recipes) for resolving ethical challenges that have arisen in the work of the IRB in the previous year.

Building such a culture also requires an opening of complex dilemmas, such as: What is the primary purpose of master's and PhD research? Should students conduct research on sensitive topics? What resources (e.g., time, the number of students they mentor, and professional development opportunities in this domain) are (not) available to mentors? These questions

can serve as a reflective protocol for discussions at different institutions, as well as a framework for comparative research with mentors, mentees, IRB members, and decision-makers, aimed at capturing the disciplinary and national specificities. Such research might collect rich descriptive data about current practices and challenges but also describe different normative positions on how mentoring *should be* organized.

Limitations of the study

This narrative review is exposed to potential bias in the selection and interpretation of the data. It is possible that the used keywords led to omitting many relevant texts. The heterogeneity of the included studies (data collected via surveys, vignettes, interviews, document analysis, etc.) and their various thematic foci also present a limitation: as expected, each study provided a different amount of coding material, leading to an underrepresentation of some texts [4] [8]. The biggest limitation stems from the complexity of the topic. Responsibility is ultimately an individual construct, but in the context of this research, it is placed in a relational pedagogical relationship and becomes diffusely *individual-relational* (only partly comparable to, for example, the responsibility of parents for the acts of an older minor). All ultimate solutions to this problem are either anti-pedagogical and restrictive (e.g., students should by no means conduct empirical research with human participants) or purely technocratic (e.g., see the *sequential ethics* described above). This might make a *contextual negotiation* of ethical challenges appealing. But before giving a warm welcome to this relativist standpoint, which could actually hamper attempts at creating structural conditions for practicing responsibility for research ethics, I consider a more detailed empirical documentation of all the challenges that this paper outlines (and many others) necessary.

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Appendix: Included studies

- [1] Bukusi, E. A., Manabe, Y. C., & Zunt, J. R. (2019). Mentorship and ethics in global health : Fostering scientific integrity and responsible conduct of research. *The American Journal of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene*, 100(1), 42–47. <https://doi.org/10.4269/ajtmh.18-0562>.
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