



Evolving feminist ethics and institutional lag to address dilemmas from the field

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ABSTRACT

This paper is an attempt to unpack the ethical dilemmas for a feminist ethnographer going for fieldwork, working with adolescents situated in a rural Indian context. Already substantial literature (Hemming 2009) has shared concerns about the evolving nature of feminist research ethics while working with vulnerable communities. This study explores the issues of adolescents in the riot-hit region of Haryana. Adolescent boys have political opinions essential for a young democratic nation like India. The gap that remains under-researched relates to ethical dilemmas encountered during feminist ethnography. This article is based on a pilot study carried out by a feminist researcher in the month of July 2023 as a part of a Ph.D. dissertation in a village of Gurugram district (Haryana). Sixty adolescents from different castes, religions, ages, and regions have participated in the research. The mixed method approach was used for data collection using focus group discussion (FGD), one-on-one interviews, Questionnaires, etc. The ethical dilemmas of a feminist ethnographer come with reflexivity about power and hierarchies in the research process in general and fieldwork in particular. Key findings can be summarised as the access to field and participants in a rural setup is a continuous bargaining between ethical standards established in western academia and its local variance. This study seeks to highlight such dilemmas and invoke thoughts to navigate and fill the research gap in evolving feminist ethics and lag in institutional ethical clearance structure.



Introduction

Feminist ethnography is a methodological approach that emphasizes the importance of gender and power dynamics in ethnographic research. It seeks to center the experiences and voices of marginalized groups, particularly women, and often involves a reflexive and collaborative process. This approach is characterized by its commitment to ethical research practices and the co-production of knowledge.

Though the phrase “feminist ethnography” emerged only in the late 1980s, the discipline had existed long before then. At its most fundamental level, feminist ethnography is a qualitative research methodology emerging out of anthropology – a discipline that examines the lived experiences of a community “in its natural habitat.” It is a data-gathering approach that has been used not just in anthropology, but also in cultural studies, women's and gender studies, geography, education, and sociology, among other disciplines. This entry discusses the historical roots of feminist ethnography and the crisis that has plagued each of its three main parts: data collection, interpretation, and presentation of that data. The critiques of each of these three parts, from feminist, poststructuralist, and postcolonial theorists for their androcentric and Eurocentric perspectives, have shaped the contours of what we today call “feminist ethnography.”(Naples, 2016)

Feminist ethnography, with its focus on challenging dominant power structures and privileging marginalized voices, is marked by distinctive ethical dilemmas that require ongoing reflexivity from the researcher. Scholars such as (Mahmood, 2009) and (Abu-Lughod & Fox, 2006) have highlighted the tension between representing participants' lived experiences authentically and avoiding the reproduction of colonial or patronizing narratives. The imperative to establish relationships built on trust and reciprocity (Stacey, 1988) can blur boundaries, raising questions about the researcher's role, positionality, and potential influence on the field. Additionally, feminist ethnographers often confront the challenge of negotiating privacy, consent, and vulnerability, especially when research subjects may be exposed or stigmatized by the act of storytelling itself (Visweswaran, 1994). These dilemmas are compounded by expectations to advocate for change while maintaining analytical rigor, necessitating careful consideration of whose interests are served by the ethnography and how power dynamics are navigated both during and after the research process (England, 1994) and (Wolf, 2018a) Thus, feminist ethnography is continually shaped by critical ethical negotiation, where transparency, accountability, and care remain central to its practice.

In this paper, I have shared three specific ethical dilemmas that could be faced by a feminist researcher planning to enter or already working in a field with human subjects.



At the outset, this paper does not cover the exhaustive realm of ethics of social science research or ethics in feminist research in totality. It has a very narrow scope to highlight the potential ethical dilemmas along with a humble attempt to bridge the knowledge gap that exists at the intersection of education, adolescents, feminist research, and ethics.

Key concepts:

Ethical dilemmas can be unpacked if we first look at the field of ethics. To define ethics in the simplest sense is the *academic study of morality*. It aims to comprehend and defend people's moral convictions and the ways in which they live out those convictions. Additionally, it faults and amends certain practices and beliefs. It can be separated into three branches when seen as a field of study. *Metaethics*, the study of what morality is, is the first branch. *Normative ethics*, the study of moral theories and conceptions, is the second branch. Establishing and analysing the norms, or standards, that we can use to direct and assess our behaviour is the goal of normative ethics. The ethics of care, social contract theory, utilitarianism, Kantian ethics, and virtue ethics are part of this domain. *Practical ethics*, or the study of ethical issues that arise within particular social practices, is the third area of ethics. This is about applying normative moral theories to a specific scenario obtained after logically deducing them from the normative theories.

Ethical dilemmas in general and not specific to a researcher are often not always right vs wrong choice. In ethical dilemmas layers of complexities are involved causing discomfort in choosing one decision over the other. There is a moral not financial cost involved in decision making. Having discussed the meaning of ethics now we move towards the three major schools of ethics that can be of use to carry out ethical reasoning before reaching a solution to ethical dilemmas faced by feminist researchers in the field.

Three major schools of ethics that help resolve ethical dilemmas are

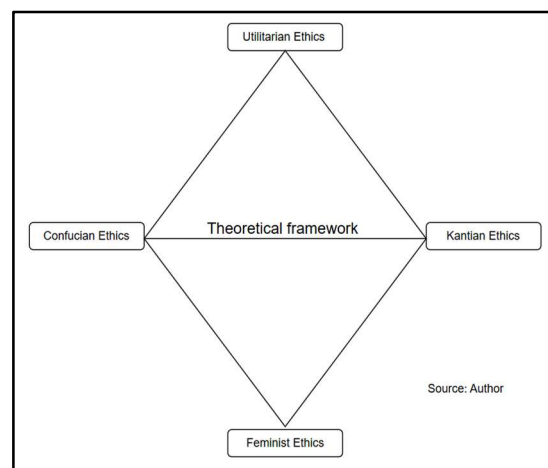


Figure 1: Theoretical framework for ethics



Utilitarian ethics translates into the greatest good for the greatest number. It is philosophically based on judging the action based on its outcome. This ethic is sometimes referred to as utilitarianism or the social benefit function, where the preferred decision is the one that will return the highest net social benefit to stakeholders (Liberty, 2002).

In contrast to the above school, Kantian school or Deontological schools emphasize that moral decisions should be based on a universal principle which is called Categorical imperative. It could be understood as that all humans should act as if the maxim of their action were to become general law, binding on everyone. This maxim is also translated as Do unto others as you would have them do unto you (Kant, 1994).

The third important school of ethics is based on the teaching of Confucius. According to him, our ethical behaviours are not operating in isolation and we cannot just talk of rights but look at the interdependence, groundedness, and trust between individuals (Ames, 2011)

Feminist critique of knowledge and philosophy

The three schools of philosophy discussed in the previous section helps us set the context for the entry of feminist intervention in knowledge production.

feminist critique of philosophy ensures that its three major components, namely epistemology, ethics, and logic, are deconstructed. (Grosz, 1990) challenged the ‘malestream philosophy’ and its masculine domination that uses a façade of neutrality and objectivity. She has questioned the universal, eternal, independent nature of truth. She argued that the subject is always embedded in a specific cultural context. The central feature remains dismantling binaries, integration of subject and object of knowledge, and the gap between theory and practice, rather theory is a form of practice.

A feminist reimagination of ethics

The three major schools of ethics namely utilitarianism, Kantian and Confucian suggest that the theories really aren't up to the job of illuminating the moral experience of all people everywhere. They fail to address the issues of women, men of color especially those who are poor, disabled, gay, old, or otherwise disadvantaged by their social situation.

As (Lindemann, 2019) in her book “ Introduction to feminist ethics has argued “ I believe that the three most widely known moral theories are plagued by a feminist version of the PowerPoint problem. As Baier puts it, “The great moral theorists in our tradition not only are all men, [but] with a few significant



exceptions . . . they are a collection of clerics, misogynists, and puritan bachelors” (1994, 3). The theories reflect their authors’ social circumstances, focusing on the sorts of preoccupations and concerns that mark a certain kind of prosperous and respectable masculine life.

Ethics in research

After having gone through the three major philosophical traditions of ethics and morality we are now trying to explore the brief historical trajectory of research ethics in order to understand the dilemmas involved for a feminist researcher in the field .The field of research ethics developed in the post-world War II periods as a system of check against the backdrop of the Nuremberg trials that took note of power abuse by the German scientific community against Jews, minorities, and other human subjects for scientific knowledge production by subjecting them to inhumane scientific experiments.

Derived from the Nuremberg code, several guidelines have been adopted by research councils across the world. India has two major sets of guidelines for research first is

Ethical Guidelines for Biomedical Research on Human Participants (2006) issued by the Indian Council of Medical Research and the Ethics Guidelines for Social Science Research in Health (2000) issued by the National Committee for Social Science Research in Health.

At the heart of all these guidelines are some basic principles:

All research participants should participate in the research only on a *voluntary basis* that too after informed consent is obtained having full knowledge about the risks and benefits.

The purpose of the research cannot be limited to serving the best interest of the researcher or funding agency rather the *benefit* should extend to the sections of society being researched. The *confidentiality* of the participants is equally important as it is connected with the right to privacy and autonomy of the individual. Thus safety, informed consent, and confidentiality of subjects being researched become the core of research ethics. The purpose of these regulations is to protect participants and ensure research ethicality along its entire development (Kottow, 2011)

Qualitative research and ethical dilemmas

While medical research operating in a positivist paradigm has potential for power abuse and as the need of research ethics cannot be overstated(Ethical clearance form attached). The question comes if we need similar ethical norms for qualitative research? Qualitative methods are increasingly used in the field of



social sciences in general and gender in particular because of the multidisciplinary approach that could be incorporated into the field of knowledge production. It is noteworthy that many of the participants in the qualitative research projects are from marginalized groups based on class, caste, age, religion, education level, etc. It is possible that qualitative methods may not appear risky at the outset but data collection tools like in-depth interviews, group discussion, and participant observations could touch upon sensitive areas that can create a potentially charged and conflicting environment (Peter, 2015). The ethics of research is not limited to respecting norms, directives or the approval of an ethics committee, as many researchers seem to believe but also deals with a situational aspect of ethics on a daily basis that requires ethical integrity at each stages of research process (Morse, 2015)

The author makes a distinction here between situational ethics and procedural ethics. In general, the term "procedural ethics" relates to formal ethical governance, such as approval procedures and ethical research guidelines. Prior to conducting any research involving human subjects, especially children, an ethics review procedure is necessary. This should draw attention to the ethics of research via situational ethics rather than to processes that are limited to checking boxes under one time procedural ethics. In organizations like universities, hospitals, and other stakeholder organizations, ethics review boards or committees typically evaluate the effectiveness of the system via procedural ethics and not situational ethics.

Contextual/Situated ethics

Situated ethics and ethics in practice are frequently used interchangeably. By paying great attention to place and context, some scholars separate situated ethics from other types of ethics. They pay particular attention, for instance, to how context can affect relational dynamics and, as a result, the data gathering.

Ethical issues are present in the entire trajectory, from the selection of the object, going on to the definition of the theoretical bases, objectives, and methodological framework, and continuing into the interpretation and dissemination of outcomes, whether to the researched persons, scientific community, managers or the entire society (Webster & Sell, 2014). A qualitative study, though not involving procedures of direct risk to participants, includes the possibility of causing harm to the human being's physical, psychic, moral, intellectual, social, and cultural dimensions at any one of its phases as a result of it or a posteriori (Kottow, 2011)

Entering the field: Feminist engagement with power question in research



Fieldwork is discipline-specific and varies with space and time. In common understanding, it is about going ‘out there’ and collecting data that may or may not correspond to your research question. The fact that the researcher ‘leaves’ the institution and enters a different territory holds key information that needs to be collected, analyzed, processed, modified, and presented to a specific audience. The method of fieldwork data collection broadly falls under the category of Quantitative vs. Qualitative data collection. The content and duration of fieldwork vary considerably based on discipline. Feminist field workers committed to some socio-political change would prefer working with marginalized groups. The group’s voice could be captured and raised during feminist fieldwork; this objective makes tools like interviews and oral history some of the favourite tools for qualitative data collection.

Ethical dilemmas in feminist research arise due to the uniqueness of the discipline.

Feminist Dilemmas in the fieldwork are “as much ethical and personal as academic and political”(Wolf, 2018b). The question of Power is central to feminist knowledge production. It often creates an identity crisis for the researcher. Anyone working for social change has to deal with a specific set of dilemmas and contradictions to deal with. Still, feminist research scholars are mainly driven by the ‘personal is political’ maxim and consistently challenging the structures of inequality and reducing the power difference via research process and feminist knowledge production. Carol Warren calls for an alternative to an androcentric worldview with her own conception of ‘methodological feminocentrism’, which is essentially about centering the women's experience-based research methodology on challenging the systems of power.

The central concern of feminist researchers is to take conscious steps to reduce the hierarchies and the inherent power difference between the researcher and the one who is researched. The feminist movement has raised concerns over the dichotomous way of looking at the world. The subject-object division in research that assumes the value neutrality of the subject and treats other fellow human beings as objects is criticized by feminist scholars as reinforcing the power-laden binaries.

It is essential that we understand the power in research via triangle.

The first axis of power that a feminist researcher is concerned about is the exercise of power during the problematization of research. Beginning from the moment, we define the research problem, selection of tools, and study area. The decision to enter the field, etc., all these decisions are means to influence the research process. The fact that somebody chooses to do research in a government school and not a private school automatically highlights that all of the research is ‘researching Downwards.’

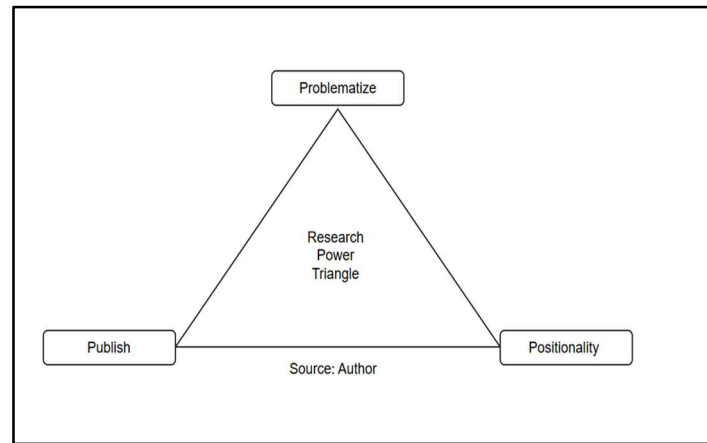


Figure 2 : Axes of power (3 P Model)

Is it not recreating the existing power hierarchies that as a feminist, we hope to challenge? What is the politics of social change that is driven by such research projects, except that it acts as a means to be part of my dissertation and help me climb the social ladder by getting me a job in the field of academics?

Second is the difference in the position to which the researcher and the researched person belong. Positionality carries power based on Gender, class, caste, nationality, Urban age, etc. In author's work at school with adolescents, author is in 37 years old, unmarried male, with an English education, upper caste, upper middle class, Hindu identity, he set up a considerable power difference with my respondents who are students from a village and belonging to different Dalit and landless farming and pastoral communities.

The third axis of power deals with the power exercised by the researcher once the fieldwork is complete and the writing and publishing part of the journey occurs. The whole debate about representing the people who are not speaking for themselves is presented and studied by the researchers gaining professional growth without contributing to the section of society they have researched upon. How we depict and speak about them and the language we use will shape the distribution of power with them.

Field notes: 13 August 2021, Village Gairatpurbas (Gurugram/Haryana)

It was morning assembly time in the school. Students were lined up in 6-7 rows and 5 teachers were standing at the front of these rows. Underneath a banyan tree, on a raised platform beside a glass-encased statue of Goddess Saraswati, the daily school assembly unfolded—a routine rendered so natural and practiced, its subtle nuances could easily be overlooked. The physical education teacher (referred as PT teacher here after), a man in his forties who carried a thin stick of a tree branch, took to the stage and called for the school slogan. Two boys led the chorus, prompting resounding responses from the entire



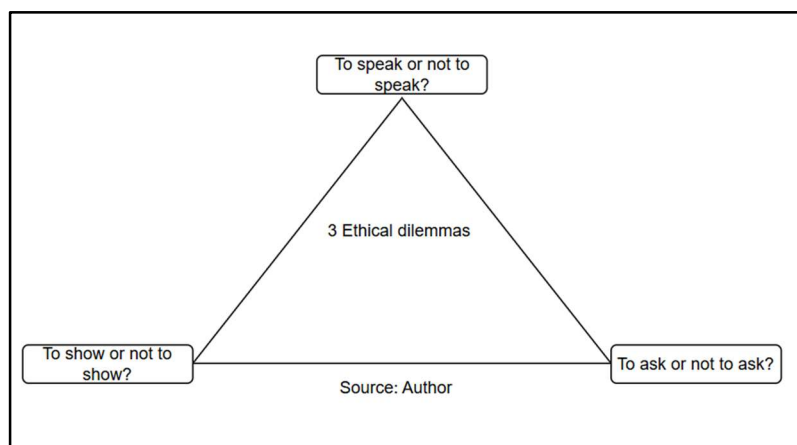
assembly: “*Desh ki Raksha Kaun Karega? Hum Karenge, Hum Karenge!*” (Who will protect the country, We Will, We will!!)The slogans—echoing patriotism and unity—reverberated across the school grounds, culminating with a spirited “Vande Matram.” What followed, however, was shocking. The PT teacher stepped off the stage and, to my shock, began to slap a boy in the front row, then the ones beside him, continuing until every boy in the 8th-class front row had been struck. I froze in the moment.



Field image Source: Author

After witnessing the violent episode that unfolded immediately after the harmonious school assembly, a researcher faces a profound dilemma. On one hand, the researcher is a witness to the daily rhythms, rituals, and community spirit of the school. On the other hand, the abrupt act of corporal punishment shatters the idealized narrative, revealing the hidden tensions and normalized violence within the system.

Three ethical dilemmas



In this paper, the author has highlighted three dilemmas and helps to navigate the same.

First ethical dilemmas “*To speak or not to speak?*”



Coming back to the anecdote shared in the beginning of the article. After having watched a few incidents of school violence. Should the author report to the school administration or stay silent? If he reports, then he loses access to school. Compared to a first world country where most of the ethical standards of procedural research are set up, in India and especially in a rural region like Haryana, getting access to school for field work is a very difficult task. No state education officer is ready to give permission in writing for a researcher to enter school. Only after the author was able to use his social capital and network through a senior IAS officer, then the schools were given access for research study. The procedural ethics is overshadowed by the situational ethics. Now with the informal setup under which schools have agreed to study them, is also conditional. The risk involved is that If the author doesn't report, then I can continue to work on my 'ethnographic observations' as part of my research. This dilemma, if looked closely, is not about simply speaking for injustice or not. It starts with the worldview and philosophical view one has chosen for research. Maybe for an ethnographer, it is important to observe such moments to gain insights into the socio-cultural norms in that particular context. But as a feminist researcher with a heightened sense of responsibility, driven by a social transformative research model, merely acting as a passive observant is against feminist ethics.

(Stacey, 1988) 'Can There Be a feminist ethnography' has argued that, contrary to popular perception, feminist ethnographers could actually be more exploitative than social science researchers using surveys and structured interviews which are often seen as objectifying human experience and are inherently structured in power difference.

They use empathy and emotional connection with the respondents only to convert that experience into 'data' that can be served as a product for a larger academic audience. The larger risks involved in feminist ethnography are emotional and social that can be reduced with what she calls 'partial ethnography'.

My speaking truth to power is part of activism and academic integrity. As a feminist researcher, by staying silent to injustice done to the school children in the form of corporal violence, the author becomes complicit to the scale of violence, the frequency, and the reasons for such incidents need to be recorded before making a formal move. This line of argument stands weak as it allows more students to be tortured for their gains. It uses them as a means to an end and not end in themselves.

The second ethical dilemma is *"To ask or not to ask?"*

This dilemma arises when one of the research objectives chosen in the study is in direct conflict with the interest of the consenting authority. In this case of researching school violence and masculinity, the



interest of school administration is to minimize reporting of such incidents. The interests of the researcher and school administration are in direct conflict. Informed consent is one of the cardinal principles in the ethics of research. For students, this consent is given by parents, and in the case of school ethnographic research with adolescents from marginalized groups, this consent is to be obtained from the school administration. So how does one take consent from teachers to study the violence conducted by them on school children?

What strategies are left with the researcher to navigate this complex ethical landscape?

By deceiving the school administration and intentionally giving vague research objectives to seek permission is one way to resolve this conundrum. Keeping the higher principle of the best interest of students in mind. The outcome or consequence of this act of deception is benefitting the students. This is a utilitarian approach towards ethics in which an action is judged right or wrong based on its outcome. End justifies the means. The researcher should share the entire research objective with the students. The latest study on adolescents evolving capacity development to give consent has shown that they can be assessed in case of conflict with the school administration (Graham et al., 2013)

The third feminist dilemma is “to show or not to show?”

Reciprocity is the one of the methods used by feminist researchers to deal with the guilt of the researcher's privileges vis-a-vis the respondents. Keeping with the foundational nature of feminist research being non extractive and somebody other than the researcher must benefit from the research. This could be monetary and non monetary benefits to the respondents. Auhot tried to provide them support in daily tasks like access to banking facilities, medical facility, help in property related paper work and extras classes after school. At times due to the guilt, author ended up doing more and involved in activities that were not directly related to my research. But in human interactions especially involving friendship, care (feminist ethics) and trust are we not expected to look beyond the instrumental and transactional nature of relationships.

Reciprocity is a moral obligation that a researcher may feel towards the respondents in return for their contribution to the research. How fair is it to use deception against somebody who has trusted the researcher? ‘Deception’ is an important ethical issue for a feminist researcher. It violates the principle of honesty and denies information to the person being deceived. It limits the exercise of choices and stands in conflict with the Kantian categorical imperative. The author has used deception when asked about his marital status. Being a bachelor at the age of 37 would have denied me access to residential spaces as a



tenant. He lied that he is engaged and will be married by the end of the year to reduce the tension around his male sexuality. While this may be a harmless lie, the anxiety around being caught or the burden of the deception is not easy to ignore. The guilt of feminist researchers comes with such a burden of deceptions.

The 'Guilt' within the researcher operates as a compass to guide the future course of actions on the field. In order to reduce guilt and feel good about themselves, researchers use reciprocity.

In a developed country, researching in public schools will not be seen as a favor. Rather it should be seen as a mechanism to ensure public accountability and knowledge production by the research scholar to improve the education system. In third-world countries like India, the situation is slightly different; as a researcher not only do education institutions work on suspicion about the researcher's intention, but also the institution works to limit the access of schools to researchers. Operating in such an environment, it is difficult to let go of the limited access given by the principal based on a personal rapport. I feel obliged to reciprocate the favor by helping her manage the shortage of teachers. She requested me to teach, and the author instead of researching was also teaching in the same class to cover up for the school teacher shortage. This act was again influenced by guilt. In such a situation, the author is expected to play the dual role of a teacher and a researcher. The teacher-researcher role is conflicting. The author is not a trained teacher and cannot do justice to the teaching demands of the students. But by volunteering service, the author feels good about himself and reduces the guilt of a researcher. To navigate the guilt associated, researchers chose to do community service beyond immediate research objectives.

Conclusion

Feminist research with marginalized people tries to be non-extractive and reduce the power differences with the respondents. With this spirit, working with adolescents to explore the norms of masculinity within a Govt school setup requires feminist research interventions. Researching with a marginalized group requires feminist ethics(ethics of care) and not procedural, masculine, universal ethical theories. The ethical dilemmas arise when research challenges these three axes of power and attempts to research with them and not 'on' them. These dilemmas are necessary to revisit ethical theories and, in fact, unavoidable steps for gaining ethical maturity in practical ethics.

Feminist researchers in a field ought to be particular about the power relationships operating at all stages of research. The power to *problematize*, *positionality*, and *publish* the research makes feminist researchers sensitive to the shifting of the role of respondents from passive to active agents of social transformation that challenges structures of inequality.



This shift in the position of marginalized participants (including adolescents) from subjects of research to agents in research is the core of feminist research. Research ethics committees and researchers need to shift their thinking, too. The need for feminist ethicists in the institutional review board cannot be overstated. Consistent with their evolving capacities, adolescents should be welcomed as active partners in research and as the primary decision-makers about their own research involvement – not as passive recipients of research. This shift in perspective is based on the principle of showing respect for persons and the notion that adolescents are persons with human rights and evolving capacities, as expressed in the Conventions for the Rights of Child(1989).

Too often, adolescents are excluded from low-risk research in the name of protection and the complexities of informed consent. The requirement for parental/teacher permission should not be used as a barrier to research or an excuse for excluding adolescents. Research ethics committees and investigators should promote inclusion of adolescents in research with appropriate safeguards to prevent harm (inclusion with protection)

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