

# Research Ethics Essay

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Throughout history, ethical considerations have emerged in response to the human rights abuses within research practices. Following WWII, the Nuremberg Trials paved the way for the creation of the Nuremberg code. The 1964 Declaration of Helsinki, developed by the World Medical Association and based on the Nuremberg Code and the Declaration of Geneva, put forth a set of ethical principles for medical research (The CITI Program, 2017). Finally, the Tuskegee Syphilis Study (1932 to 1972), which intentionally denied African American men with syphilis treatment without their knowledge or consent, resulted in the formation of the National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research (National Commission or "the Commission"). In 1979, the Commission established the Belmont Report, a code of research ethics for the United States (The CITI Program, 2017). It outlines three key principles, Beneficence, Respect for persons, and Justice. The Belmont Report went on to inform the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) Code of Federal Regulations or the "Common Rule" followed by 15 federal agencies. Following the 2017 revision, it has now been adopted by 20 agencies. Awareness of these histories helps researchers understand and contextualize their own research within safe, ethical guidelines and the Common Rule.

In this essay, we will be looking at Doordash. Simply put, Doordash operates as the middleman between customers and restaurants. It provides customers the convenience of home-delivery, for which it charges a fee. And it provides restaurants the ability to deliver without the large up front investment into a fleet of cars, for which it charges a fee. According to Doordash, it currently employs more than "One million deliverers [dashers]" (Doordash, 2023). We will present theoretical research questions, consider ethical quandaries, and discuss how Doordash's consumer research department might maintain the Common Rule including beneficence, respect for persons, and justice, while meeting business goals.

## Beneficence

Beneficence is a principle that researchers should follow to act in ways that benefit others and minimize potential risks to participants. They have to ensure that the potential benefits to participants or to society exceed any potential risks. They should ensure that harm is minimized, such as by monitoring the research.

In the context of DoorDash's research or practices, , researchers should consider the following actions to uphold the principle of beneficence. First, prioritize the health and safety of their drivers by ensuring they aren't forced into unsafe conditions. This could mean compensating them fairly for longer trips or offering bonuses for adverse conditions. They should consider the risk of research practices such as forcing people to drive long distances in the study. They should consider tolls and gas - what is the reimbursement process? And if forcing people to test in bad weather, physical risk should be considered, as should well-being and safety. Second, any feature added should prioritize user safety, security, and utility. Using data to enhance the user experience without compromising on these principles. So, before rolling out a feature, it could undergo a robust beta testing phase, ensuring that it truly adds value and doesn't cause unexpected harm. Thirdly, DoorDash should not unduly favor some restaurants over others without clear reasons. The principle of beneficence should guide DoorDash to ensure the well-being of all its stakeholders, be they users, drivers, or partner restaurants.

## Respect for Persons

Respect for Persons is a principle which highlights the right of individuals to make informed decisions and that everyone, regardless of their background or status, deserves respect and autonomy. Specifically, the CITI training module states, "The principle of respect for persons thus divides into two

separate moral requirements; the requirement to acknowledge autonomy and the requirement to protect those with diminished autonomy” (The National Commission, 1979). “Additionally, people should be presented with clear terms of services, privacy policies, and any data collection or sharing practices” (The CITI Program, 2017).

Within the context of ‘Doordash,’ we can hypothesize several problematic research proposals which would be in conflict with the respect of persons principle for each of Doordash’s main user groups, restaurants, ‘dashers’ (deliverers), and customers. Autonomy would allow restaurants the ability to choose how they are shown on the platform and the ability to control pricing of the products they sell. In any proposed research study involving human participants through Doordash, we determined that incentives should appeal to the population being studied. Additionally, appropriate respect for food preferences should be given to those individuals as well. A major issue we foresaw, could be related to how the study can fairly respect individuals with specific dietary preferences, such as gluten free, vegan, or others. If Doordash forced specific foods on people, either by targeting vulnerable populations or through shaming, this would limit their freedom of choice and put an excessive burden on research participants.

## **Justice**

Sometimes when considering ethical principles, it's easier to consider the incorrect behavior. The Commission explained Justice thusly “An injustice occurs when some benefit to which a person is entitled is denied without good reason or when some burden is imposed unduly (The National Commission, 1979). Considering the second part first, it is clear to see how prisoners, people in low income brackets, or any other group corralled physically, financially, geographically etc. should not be utilized as research subjects due to convenience unless they already comprise a significant portion of DoorDash’s user group. A somewhat murky area could be poor college students. College students likely make up a sizable portion of DoorDash’s customers and dashers, however, poor students would be more incentivized by offers of free food, money, or gift cards. Further, while convenient, if poor college students are not the intended recipients of benefits produced by the research, it is unacceptable for them to be the primary research group. This would be an example of Fair Subject Selection practices.

Now we will consider the first part of the Commission's definition, “An injustice occurs when some benefit to which a person is entitled is denied without good reason...” (1979). Consider a study on ‘order cancellation due to late delivery’. It's well established that customers prefer their food to be delivered when they expect it to be delivered. The researchers could intentionally manipulate certain customers' orders to be delivered to them late, thereby testing which customers are more likely to cancel their order due to a long wait. During peak delivery times, those customers could be neglected as DoorDash biases towards fulfilling the orders of those more likely to cancel due to a long wait. Setting aside consent issues - the purview of Respect for persons - the benefits of reasonable delivery and commensurate tip would be denied these unwitting research participants and, potentially, to future customers and dashers.

## **Final Considerations**

While this paper just scratches the surface of ethical research practices, our team gathered several additional questions pertaining to how a company such as Doordash could design an ethical research study. Additionally, it is worth mentioning that while Doordash has recently come under scrutiny “for withholding tips, listing restaurants without permission, and allegedly misclassifying workers,” our questions regarding ethics were mainly focused on that of potential research rather than current business practices (DoorDash, 2023). These business practices should also be deeply considered when posing new research projects, as listing restaurants without permission is in violation of respect for persons, withholding tips is a violation of justice, and misclassifying workers, which could deny them healthcare, resulting in lower compensation in the event of physical harm while on the job, violates beneficence. By following the Common Rule including the principles of beneficence, respect for persons, and justice we can ensure the continued well-being of research participants.

## References

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