

20/01/2025

## Multidimensional Vulnerability in Research Ethics: Lessons from the COVID-19 Pandemic



The COVID-19 pandemic has posed several challenges for conducting research in social sciences, including ethical issues. While all humans share inherent physical and mental vulnerability, factors like poverty, racial discrimination, and limited healthcare access create additional layers. Researchers from the MIGRADEMO project argue for the concept of *multidimensional vulnerability*, which must be considered at every stage of the research process.

Social science research ethics traditionally emphasise protecting vulnerable groups, yet the concept of vulnerability remains under-theorised. The COVID-19 pandemic has illuminated both universal vulnerabilities—our shared susceptibility to disease and social interdependence—and contextual vulnerabilities, which disproportionately impact groups like the elderly, low-income individuals, healthcare workers, and ethnic minorities. To address this complexity, the authors propose the concept of *multidimensional vulnerability*, which recognises the interplay of universal health-related vulnerability and diverse contextual factors.

This framework has significant ethical implications for research, in particular for fieldwork. Researchers should identify vulnerable groups affected by the pandemic, considering intersectional dimensions of vulnerability, to ensure their inclusion and protection. Detailed assessments of interviewees and fieldwork sites must account for the pandemic's impact on existing vulnerabilities and the emergence of new ones. Ethical considerations should integrate health-related vulnerabilities, leveraging partnerships with local institutions for nuanced insights into shifting risks. Researchers must remain flexible to uncover "hidden" vulnerabilities during fieldwork. Moreover, researchers must consider these overlapping vulnerabilities at every stage of the research process, including fieldwork and the dissemination of findings, during and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic.

On the other hand, online research requires careful evaluation, as it may exacerbate or obscure certain vulnerabilities. A hybrid approach combining fieldwork and online methods is recommended, tailored to research goals, participant profiles, and contextual vulnerability dynamics.

By emphasising a reflective, adaptable ethical approach, the concept of multidimensional vulnerability offers a robust framework for addressing the ethical challenges posed by COVID-19 and future global crises. This approach promotes a holistic understanding of the complex factors shaping individual and group vulnerabilities.

**Deniz Pelek**

Izmir Demokrasi Üniversitesi

[deniz.pelek@uab.cat](mailto:deniz.pelek@uab.cat)

**Vladimir Bortun**

University of Oxford

[vladimir.bortun@spi.ox.ac.uk](mailto:vladimir.bortun@spi.ox.ac.uk)

**Eva Østergaard-Nielsen**

Department of Political Science and Public Law

Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona

[eva.ostergaard@uab.cat](mailto:eva.ostergaard@uab.cat)

**References**

Pelek, D., Bortun, V., & Østergaard-Nielsen, E. (2023). **Emerging ethical challenges in researching vulnerable groups during the COVID-19.** *Qualitative Research*, 24(3), 731–750. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14687941231176945>

[View low-bandwidth version](#)

