

ETHICAL ISSUES IN SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH

Gurmanjit Kaur

Assistant Professor, Khalsa College of Education, Ranjit Avenue, Amritsar, Punjab, India.

Abstract:

Knowing what constitutes ethical research is important for all people who conduct research or use and apply the results from research findings in social sciences and humanities. All researchers should be familiar with the basic ethical principles and need to up-to-date knowledge about policies and procedures designed to ensure the safety of research subjects and to prevent sloppy or irresponsible research. Some ethical principles like cultural sensitiveness, honesty, confidentiality, objectivity, responsible mentoring, respect for intellectual property, citation and acknowledgement. As a researcher is held accountable to the public, so he should take care of federal policies formed by ethical committees to avoid research misconduct and conflicts of interest. A researcher cannot rely entirely on his own ideas, concepts and theories, so standard practices are existing that permit the researcher to use work and ideas of the originators.

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About the Author:



Dr Gurmanjit Kaur is Assistant Professor, Khalsa College of Education, Ranjit Avenue, Amritsar, Punjab, India.

Research is a public trust that must be ethically conducted, trustworthy, and socially responsible if the results are to be valuable. Social science research has long been concerned with ethical issues. Social science investigates complex issues which involve cultural, legal, economic, and political phenomena (Freed-Taylor, 1994). This complexity means that social science research must concern itself with “moral integrity” to ensure that research process and findings are “trustworthy” and valid (Biber, 2005). Knowing what constitutes ethical research is important for all people who conduct research projects or use and apply the results from research findings. Researchers in social sciences and humanities – such as anthropology, sociology, philosophy, psychology, criminology, business administration, political science, communications, education and history – have a common belief in the desirability of trying to understand human action through systematic study and analysis. Some researchers use quantitative research approaches, others opt for qualitative research methods, and some use a combination of both. All researchers should be familiar with the basic ethical principles and need to have up-to-date knowledge about policies and procedures designed to ensure the safety of research subjects and to prevent sloppy or irresponsible research. Ethics are of fundamental concern to researchers, who are committed to openness, honesty, truth, and protecting their subjects from harm. A researcher does face value dilemmas, the first being how to make certain that research is objective and not unintentionally distorted by the researcher’s own values. A second dilemma faced is whether to do research solely to analyse human behaviour or with the goal of reforming harmful social arrangements.

Research should be conducted with openness and honesty regarding the role of the researcher and the character of the research. This means that researchers must negotiate their entrance into the research setting and be candid about their research activities. Of course, these principles cannot be treated in isolation as they interrelate, for example, informed consent relates to avoidance of harm, anonymity and confidentiality and openness and honesty since potential participants can only give informed consent once they have been made aware of the existence of the research and what it entails for them. Further, in some circumstances, it can be ethical to concede a principle, for instance, anonymity and confidentiality where a public figure is concerned or, more contentiously, openness and honesty where a specific subject demands secrecy. Resnik lists some of the major values the study of research ethics concerns itself with: “honesty, objectivity, integrity, carefulness, openness, respect for intellectual property, confidentiality, responsible publication, responsible mentoring, respect for colleagues, social responsibility, non-discrimination, competence, legality, animal care and human subjects’ protection. The following is a rough and general summary of some ethical principles that addresses the various codes of research:

Culturally sensitive:

Research in developing countries needs to be culturally sensitive. This issue is normally considered to be less important in developed countries, except in dealings with indigenous peoples. The research procedure applied in developed countries may not be appropriate on ethical ground in developing countries. Cultural sensitivity needs to be taken into consideration in such instances. It is not

necessarily a matter of adding layers of regulation to achieve the necessary sensitivity. In developing countries, where societies are often pluralistic, cultural background and security become important issues for social researchers in conducting fieldwork, so being culturally sensitive is the required ethical behavioural approach.

Objectivity:

Objectivity is when research is neutral; when personal bias has been removed meaning two independent researchers should be able to conduct the same research and get the same outcome. However, objectivity is more of an ideal than reality. Social researchers are individuals with their own culture, race, religion, gender, beliefs etc. Traditional theorists (Weber, Durkheim) believed that social research can be objective. Objectivity was seen as a central methodological principle where the challenge was the practical constraints in objectivity rather than the desirability of the principle itself. Objectivity can be seen as detrimental to social research by contemporary researchers as they believe that emotions and feelings contribute to their understanding of research. Thus objectivity makes social research valid. Social research should be objective so that findings are unbiased. There should be an aspiration to objectivity by the social researchers; this inheres only if the person is detached from the practical commitments and interests of the subjects. The researcher needs to interpret free from values, norms and so forth. Moreover social scientists should be reflexive about their interpretative work, both to aspire to detachment and at the same time to accept its ultimate impossibility. Researcher should try to avoid bias. You, as a researcher, need to acknowledge it, and if anything, use your reflexivity as a human being to add to the richness of the account you offer when you report the qualitative data you have collected and analysed. Reflexivity is an alternative and is a way of researchers to acknowledge how they have helped construct meaning in the subject-matter of a social science, ruling out a simplistic limitation of study to 'social facts', and accepting the context-specificity of knowledge.

Integrity:

Integrity is an active adherence to the ethical principles and professional standards essential for the responsible practice of research. By active adherence we mean adoption of the principles and practices as a personal credo, not simply accepting them as impositions by rule makers. For individual researchers, research integrity has been defined as a range of good research practices and conduct, intellectual honesty in proposing, performing and reporting research, accuracy in representing contributions to research proposals and reports, fairness in peer review, transparency in conflicts of interest or potential conflicts of interest, adherence to the mutual responsibilities between investigators and their research participants. It is essential to keep your promises and agreements; to act with sincerity; to strive for consistency of thought and action.

Carefulness:

Care ethics takes a very different view than the general principles. Care ethics began as a feminist revolt against the intellectual, rational approach to ethics. This school of thought supports that

sometimes people don't make ethical decisions from the mind, but from the heart as ethics is subjective and emotional. Avoid careless errors and negligence; carefully and critically examine your own work and the work of your peers. Keep good records of research activities, such as data collection, research design, and correspondence with agencies or journals.

Openness and honesty:

There is need to foster and support honesty in research, in relation to your own research and that of others. A researcher must ensure his research designs, methodologies, data, findings and results are open to scrutiny (subject to appropriate confidentiality applicable to personal or commercially protected data). There is need to ensure the accuracy, security, accessibility and completeness of data and results, to appropriately acknowledge the contributions of others, and to neither engage in misconduct nor conceal it. Research ethics demand that data and results are retained and deleted/destroyed in accordance with all legal, ethical requirements. Researchers must consider the wider consequences of their work and to engage critically with the practical, ethical and intellectual challenges that are inherent in the conduct of high quality research. They should strive for honesty in all scientific communications and honestly report data, results, methods and procedures, and publication status. Do not, as a researcher, fabricate, falsify, or misrepresent data. Do not deceive colleagues, granting-agencies or the public.

Confidentiality:

There is the ethical responsibility of the researcher to maintain confidentiality towards the people from whom information is gathered. This is because social science examines the public and private lives of people, including their ideas, beliefs, opinions, behaviours, emotions and attitudes. A researcher must exhibit explicit as well as implied confidentiality in his work. In social science research an explicit confidentiality means guarantee by a researcher to a respondent that the respondent is confident that any information provided to the researcher cannot be attributed back to that respondent. Furthermore, the assurance of confidentiality carries with it the additional implication that non-researchers cannot discover the respondent's identity. Implied confidentiality involves instances where the researcher implies through either word or deed that the respondent's identity and responses are protected. While the researcher may or may not be aware of the implied confidentiality, she nonetheless becomes responsible for upholding that implied agreement. Likewise, implied confidentiality also may involve an unspoken assumption by the respondent that his/ her comments and replies will be un-attributable or "off the record. A researcher has to protect confidential communications, such as papers or grants submitted for publication, personnel records, trade or military secrets, and patient records.

Responsible Mentoring:

Mentors play a fundamental role in the ethical development of students in the manner in which professional values and ethical standards are conveyed. The mentors need to be aware about all principles of ethics by keeping their knowledge updated. There should be frequent interaction and

regular, reliable and systematic discussion among mentors, collaborators, co-workers and other students. Sometimes, even most supportive faculty members do not discuss professional standards, policies and techniques with their students.

Objectivity:

Researchers shall strive to avoid bias or deception in the design of methods, data analysis, and data interpretation of their research. They shall serve rather than threaten the interests of society in which they operate. For this reason they shall be aware of the fact that their assumptions may have an impact upon society. Hence, their duty is, on the one hand, to keep an unbiased attitude as far as possible, while, on the other hand, to acknowledge the tentative and relative character of the results of their research and not to conceal their own ideological position(s). No social sciences and humanities assumptions shall be presented as indisputable truths. Researchers shall need to clear misconceptions and misinterpretations about their research objectivity.

The communication and enforcement of research ethics standards:

It is incumbent upon institutions and individual researchers to develop and maintain good research practices. Institutions are to have procedures to enforce breaches of research ethics standards. Research ethics pose requirements to individuals and institutions alike. The institutions should pave the way for the development and maintenance of good research practices. Institutions must convey the Guidelines for Research Ethics to their employees and students, and ensure that training is provided on research ethics and the relevant acts of law that govern research. This will promote reflection on research ethics and encourage more explicit discussions in basic research communities about dilemmas related to research ethics.

Respect for Intellectual Property:

Intellectual property may exist in a written or electronic form, may be raw or derived, and may be in the form of text, multimedia, computer programs, spreadsheets, formatted fields in records or forms within files, databases, graphics, digital images, video and audio recordings, live video or audio broadcasts, performances, two or three-dimensional works of art, musical compositions, executions of processes, film, film strips, slides, charts, transparencies, other visual/ aural aids or CD-ROMS. A researcher has to honour patents, copyrights, and other forms of intellectual property. Unpublished data, methods, or results without permission should not be used. The researcher should give credit where credit is due, give proper acknowledgement or credit for all contributions to research and should never plagiarise.

Avoiding Misuse of power:

The powerful position of the supervisor has the potential for inappropriately influencing or even directing the choices of the students irrespective of their goals, values and interests. Both the supervisor and student need to recognise that the advice of the supervisor has to be evaluated in the light of research ethics.

Citation and acknowledgement: A researcher cannot rely entirely on his own ideas, concepts and theories. Therefore standard practices exist that permit the researcher to use work and ideas of the originators. The acknowledgement within the text of the researcher is called citation.

Accountability:

- a) **To the public:** We live in the age of accountability. There is abundance of demands for greater openness, transparency and accountability of decision-makers in both the political and public affairs. Researchers are held accountable to the public. Policies on research misconduct, conflict of interests, protecting the human interests and securities are the issues to be taken care of. Researchers who are funded by public money can be held accountable to the public. Ethical norms in research also help to build public support for research.
- b) **To Research Organisations:** Research organisations have strong motives to be accountable to all not merely for ethical demands placed on them by outsiders demanding better performance. There are significant reasons why participation, transparency, evaluation and feedback mechanisms can assist research organisations in achieving their goals.
- c) **To Ethics Committees:** There is need to establish ethics committees in developing their own norms like it is in the developed countries. While judging a work done in developed countries by the ethical norms, it is found that ethics committees are often unfamiliar with the social and political circumstances in developing countries. Together, these factors may contribute to international PhD students' difficulty in obtaining clearance from the ethics committee. This can lead to delays in their research programme.

Forming policies:

The ignorance of policies designed to protect research subjects is not considered a viable excuse for ethically questionable research. Therefore, the duty lies with the researcher to seek out and fully understand the policies and theories designed to guarantee upstanding research practices.

As a researcher, one is bound by rules of ethics. The researcher may be excited about his or her research idea, and be keen to collect in-depth high quality data and report findings sincerely. Whilst ethical requirements in research can vary across countries, yet these are the basic principles of research ethics. This is important not only for ethical reasons, but also practical ones, since a failure to meet such basic principles may lead to your research being criticised, potentially leading to a lower mark, and/ or the chance of being rejected by the supervisor or Ethics Committee, costing the researcher valuable time. So careful consideration is needed in the application of ethical approval, which often can not be applied universally in developing countries. Complex ethical issues in such countries need careful justification by social science researchers.

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