

## ETHICS AND SOCIAL RESEARCH

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The word ethics in simpler phrase means the differentiation between right and wrong. Simply put, ethics can be defined as the study of morality. The word ethics is derived from Greek word 'ethikos' meaning "moral nature." Ethics form a very integral part of academia.*

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### **INTRODUCTION**

The word ethics in simpler phrase means the differentiation between right and wrong. Simply put, ethics can be defined as the study of morality. The word ethics is derived from Greek word 'ethikos' meaning "moral nature." Ethics form a very integral part of academia. Ethics in academics refers to certain principles and values that are crucial in the domain of education pertaining to activities like teaching, research and other scholarly enterprise. Ethics in education sets a defined standard to be followed by both the learner and the one who imparts learning to others. Ethics are important for setting boundaries in research to distinguish between what is good and bad (borah, 2020). Ethics are defined as the professional code of conduct applied to analysis and reporting of the information (marshall, 1998). Ethics developed as a branch of philosophy that defines what is morally right for an individual and society (BBC, 2005). Ethics is a social behavior. (Hundekar *et al*, 2005, Navran, 2010).

### **IMPORTANCE OF ETHICS IN SOCIAL RESEARCH**

Ethical norms play a very crucial role in social research. The integrity of a research is destroyed if even a single component of a social research is carried out in unethical manner. The goals of the research such as information, accuracy, and error avoidance are always supported by ethical standards for it to be an authentic research. Since research may be an individual initiative or a collective venture having ramifications for the society as a whole, it entails a significant coordination and collaboration amongst people who are part of the research study. It is the ethical/moral principles that uphold the ideals required for a good research like trust, responsibility, respect towards individuals who are a part of research and also equity. Ethical norms in research help build public support for research. People fund projects that have academic integrity and validity (resnik, 2010). Academic integrity forms the most fundamental principal of the field of education. Academic integrity and honesty are complementary in nature. It is crucial for maintaining credibility of the entire academic process and the related institutions. Ethical codes in research contain honesty, objectivity, non discrimination, openness, confidentiality, responsible publications, competence, and legality. (borah, 2020)

Integration of ethics into research process becomes important. People play a central role in the majority of social science studies. Social research involves people to people interaction as a key component. Thus, upholding fundamental ethical behavior is an obligatory requirement for the same. Research ethics involves taking responsibility of one's work as well as for those who have contributed in research in any way. Another ethical code of conduct for a researcher is to maintain the anonymity of the participants and informants in the research, especially if one is dealing with sensitive situations and groups. A series of ethical questions is posed by an ethical research project. Asking the participants of research any questions, should always be done with consideration and responsibility. Any social research must steer clear of arbitrary, damaging questions. As a result, ethics becomes an indispensable part of social research since unethical study can be deceptive and have detrimental effects on both individuals and society at large.

### **EVOLUTION OF ETHICS IN SOCIAL RESEARCH**

Social research can be defined as scientific study of society to examine beliefs, attitudes, assumptions, rules and regulations. Social research determines the relationship between different variables (valek, 2011). Present day understanding of ethics in social research goes back to the Nuremberg code of 1947. The Nuremberg code is a collection of ethical principles of research to be followed in any human experimentation. The code developed as result of the Nuremberg trials in the post second world war period. The subjects taken for research for the purpose of experiment by Nazi doctors were seen to experience abuse. The code outlined ten important principles to be followed in medical research. That equally applies to the social research in the contemporary times. These are as follow-

- Voluntary consent of the individual who is a subject of research must be obtained.
- All necessary physical and mental suffering to the subject must be avoided.
- An experiment is strictly prohibited if there is sufficient reason for death and injury to occur.
- The degree of risk should be minimal.
- Proper adequate facilities to be provided to the subject while conducting the research.
- The experiment should be conducted by qualified and well trained researchers.
- During the period of research, if a subject does not want to be a part of the research experiment voluntarily, it must be respected.
- The responsibility to end the research experiment also lies on the researcher conducting the research if he/she believes that the research will result into causation of any threat or injury to the subject involved.
- Experiment or research should not be done in isolation and must always yield positive outcomes and must have a societal impact.
- The research should not be conducted in a vague manner. Proper understating and knowledge of the background is a prerequisite of conducting a good research.

These codes were later solidified as World Health Organization's 1964 Declaration of Helsinki.

The ethical framework used in the medical research was later used in relation to social research. A Hippocratic Oath for the members of the academic profession signified the importance of ethics in conducting social research. In the contemporary

times, a formal code of ethics have been adopted by members of academic community around the world. The council for international organization of medical research was also created for the researchers in developing nations (Beyrer & Kass, 2002). The American sociological association's code of ethics outlines the principles and ethical standards that must be adopted and well followed by social researchers. It was published for the first time in 1971 and later revised in 1997. These are as follows-

- Maintain objectivity and integrity while pursuing research.
- To respect participants privacy and ensure to uphold their dignity throughout the study.
- To maintain confidentiality.
- To guard full protection to the subjects.
- Informed consent
- Disclosing all sources of financial support received during the research.

The regulation of social research began on a large scale in countries like USA and Europe. The institutional review boards have been constituted to review the research study conducted. Their powers and scope have been wide ranging (Haggerty, 2004). In UK, research ethics committees have been formed for maintenance of integrity in research practices (Tinker and Comber, 2004). Research conducted under the aegis of European Union also has research ethics committee as one of its core committees. (Wiles, Clark and Prosser, 2011). The plethora of research work conducted in these places has a properly well designed ethical review mechanisms.

## **APPROACHES TO RESEARCH ETHICS**

An approach to research ethics can be defined as a framework of rules and principles that enable a researcher to conduct his research in an ethical and just way. It offers an array of guidelines and conditions that must be met before the research may proceed. Some key approaches to research ethics are as follows-

### **Principles Approach**

It pertains to different sets of guidelines that are used in research like individual autonomy, beneficence, justice etc. Individual autonomy in research means the subjects or the participants in research have the right to make an informed and consensual decision to participate and provide information in research. It is a fundamental principle that is responsible for upholding the rights and dignity of the individuals who are a part of the research experiment. Researchers must provide clearly outlined and comprehensive information to his/her subject about the research work to be undertaken. Consent that has been fully informed is essential, particularly in social science research since both subject and the researcher participate in an experiment that could have a significant impact on society. The principles of ethical social research also include voluntary participation. Participants should not be coerced into any kind of research activity at any stage throughout the completion of research. A researcher is entitled to decline participation in the research study. Capacity to consent is another important principle in a social research. Working with vulnerable populations like women, children and marginalized groups in society makes it crucial. Researchers should also respect the privacy of the participants in research. An ethical social research project must maintain confidentiality. Institutional boards for review have been established to guarantee that a research adheres to ethical norms. In case where direct voluntary consent cannot be provided by researchers, proxy consent is necessary to be obtained. E.g. - consent of a legal guardian in case of children as subjects of study.

### **Deontological Ethics Approach**

This approach to research outlines moral responsibility of a researcher while conducting the study. It was propounded by political philosopher Immanuel Kant. Social scientists ought to behave properly with the highest ethical standards.

### **Consequentialism as an Approach**

This approach argues that any action in research must be based on correct analysis about the consequences of the same. A step in research is morally correct if it produces good outcome at both the level of individual and society (wiles, 2012). An example of this approach is provided by Lord Humphrey's study of homosexual behavior. He defended his study by stating that knowledge about homosexual behavior was essential in understanding repressive state laws and attitudes and therefore in such a situation end justifies the means undertaken for the study (warwick, 1982). Researchers using consequentialist approach tries to maximize the overall utility of their research, thereby employing utilitarianism in the same.

### **Virtue Ethics Approach**

Virtue ethics focuses upon the virtues or the qualities of the researcher itself. It draws on the notions like honesty, integrity, fairness while conducting a social research. Virtue ethics is people centric (wiles, 2012). Macfarlane identifies category of virtues needed for a researcher to inhibit at various stages of research to meet the respective challenges encountered during research. These are identifies as courage, respectfulness, sincerity, humility. A researcher using virtue ethics approach is compelled to choose the most suitable course of action for a virtuous research endeavor.

### **Feminist Ethics Approach**

This method examines the power and gender dynamics at play, in a research study. It is also referred to as ethics of care approach. It was developed by feminists like Carol Gilligan and other feminist theorists. (mauthner *et al*, 2002; held, 2006). Values like care, compassion are central to the social research investigations. Held (2006) has provided important features of the approach as- meeting other's needs, respecting emotions, recognizing interdependence among subjects of study and respecting their moral claims. The morality of the study's subject and the researcher's own ethics must be calibrated for an ethical research to succeed. Mauthner et al (2002) highlights the importance of the questions that researchers should think about while they navigate moral dilemmas during their research study.

### **Cultural Relativism Approach**

This approach is also important while conducting a social research. Distinct cultures and societies have distinct ethical frameworks and norms, thus it is crucial for researchers to respect the background of study participants.

### **Casistry Approach**

It is another approach wherein a researcher determines the right course of action on the basis of separate individual case studies.

### **Rights Based Ethics Approach**

This approach emphasizes the acknowledgement and defense of both individual and collective rights while conducting a social research.

### **Pragmatic Approach**

It attempts to strike a balance between the practical environment of research and the ethical values of the researcher.

Researchers often draw from varied approaches to navigate, negotiate ethical complexities at work. The ethical framework provides researcher proper tools to guide decision making in research.

### **CONCEPT OF INFORMED CONSENT**

Informed consent is essential to every ethical study. According to Denzin & Lincoln (2011), it is the cornerstone of an ethical research. Participants in a research must be informed about the purpose of the research study undertaken by the researcher, the mode of data collection and the possible consequences of their research on the subjects of study. It includes both the right to access the information provided by the participants and their right to withdraw in further contribution of research, at any point of time. The concept of informed consent is employed differently under different context. In the context of research, it is defined as an individual's free and well informed consent to take part in a study. In the medical context, it refers to the process by which a patient is provided with all the required information about disease, method of treatment etc. Maintaining an individual's autonomy in the research and honoring their ultimate decision to participate in the study or not, are necessary for obtaining informed consent. It requires for a participant of the study to have all the relevant information about the research and then proceed to making a free decision after that. Obtaining informed consent is a continuous process rather than a onetime occurrence. It entails providing information at the outset, giving the participants of the study a chance to ask questions to researcher and continue to respect people's autonomy while doing research. The ethical review boards like the Institutional Review Boards (IRB) ensure the adherence of the process of obtaining consent to the required ethical and legal standards. In majority of the cases, giving informed consent is having the subject sign a formal consent form that certifies their agreement to participate in the study after being rightfully informed. Informed consent includes two aspects- informed and consent. Aspect of informed includes clear understanding on- the identity of researchers, the intent of researchers, data to be collected and the process of collecting the same, how the information is utilized and reported. The consent aspect involves- the participant's active consent, the confidentiality of their personal and professional identities and freedom to request and access additional information. (fleming, 2018)

It is an important aspect of the research that the consent form and the information sheet must be well written in a clear and simple language and must avoid usage of any jargons. (miles and huberman, 1994)

### **VULNERABLE POPULATIONS AND ETHICS IN RESEARCH**

Research involving vulnerable population poses important ethical considerations. Groups or persons who may be more vulnerable to harm or who are unable to defend their own interests in research are known as vulnerable populations. Children, the elderly, people with cognitive abilities, criminals, expectant mothers, socio-economically disadvantaged groups are few examples of this demographics. It also includes special populations like prison inmates, military personnel, homeless, physically or mentally disabled people, survivors of sexual assault. Involving such vulnerable population in research is unethical unless two requirements are met- i) an authorized legal guardian gives a written consent and ii) the researcher complies with all accepted ethical guidelines to protect the participants.

There are some key ethical principles to consider while conducting research on and with the vulnerable population-

- **Informed consent-** Researchers must always ensure that participants or their legalized representatives fully grasp the aim of the research and the risks involved in the same. It can be necessary to take extra precautions, including using independent advocates or using simpler language, to get informed consent when dealing with vulnerable groups.
- **Minimizing harm-** In order to reduce the vulnerable participant's physical, psychological and social suffering, researchers should adopt additional safety measures. The research study should not take advantage of their weakness.
- **Maintaining privacy and confidentiality** becomes extremely important in dealing with special, vulnerable populations. It is critical to safeguard the interests of the participants who are at risk. It is important for researchers to reduce the possibility of stigmatization or prejudice as a consequence of their involvement.
- **Risk benefit analysis-** researchers should carefully balance the possible advantages of the study undertaken against any hazards to individuals who are more susceptible to it. The population under study should have the chance to benefit either directly or indirectly from any research.
- **Community involvement-** To make sure that the interests of the vulnerable population are taken into account; it may be desirable in some circumstances to involve community or representatives of that population.
- **Accountability** is another important component of an ethical social research. Institutions and researchers alike have a responsibility to answer for every act pursued by them as part of the research, especially in dealing with the vulnerable and the marginalized sections.

### **PLACING CAP IN AN ETHICAL SOCIAL RESEARCH**

CAP stands for confidentiality, anonymity and privacy as the three major pillars for an ethical study. When a survey researcher probes into a person's beliefs, background, behaviors in a way that divulges sensitive personal information, this violates the basic fundamental right to privacy. Sometimes, concealed microphones are used by experimental researchers to "spy" on their subjects. Sometimes, individuals are aware they are being observed but do not know what researcher is trying to find. Therefore, violation of privacy must be avoided in an ethical study. Anonymity means keeping a person who is a subject of research, nameless. In survey and experimental research, rather than the names of persons, codes are used sometimes to maintain the identity of research participants as anonymous. An ethical researcher must obtain written permission for using specific names of the persons. Maintaining the privacy of study-related information is the definition of confidentiality. Data is released by the researcher in a manner that prevents the linkage of particular respondents to responses and it is only publicly presented in an aggregate form. Both confidentiality and anonymity are complementary to one another. Confidentiality without anonymity arises when all the information about a certain person is disclosed to the public but their name is kept private; maintaining privacy without anonymity happens when certain data is kept private yet a researcher effectively connects names to certain answers.

On the other hand, as digital cultures are being studied more and more, many researchers are running into novel and distinctive issues when conducting their research online.

## **IMPORTANCE ON INTEGRITY AND TRANSPARENCY IN SOCIAL RESEARCH**

Financial assistance is an important part in journey of any researcher. Every institution should clearly lay out general guidelines for ethical research practices. It must also specify the roles of researcher and institutions in relation to data and record management, authorship, conflicts of interest and handling financial utilizations. The onus lies on the researcher to not compromise with their methodologies and maintain the ethical research standards expected of them. In the similar manner, it is important for a researcher to collect and document the data in a transparent and understandable manner.

## **ETHICAL ISSUES FACED IN SOCIAL RESEARCH**

Ethical problems in social research arise when a researcher does not adhere to ethical principles and standards. Some ethical problems faced by a researcher are-

- Violation of informed consent- It is possible for a researcher to misinform participants of research about the purpose and nature of study to get the required consent.
- Invasion of privacy is another ethical issue in a social research. Gathering sensitive information without appropriate authorization and justification may raise moral questions on the entire study.
- Participant's harm- It is seriously unethical to set aside the possibility of participant's bodily and psychological sufferings.
- It is also hazardous to use deceit in a research without providing a valid reason to the participants or to neglect to provide them with an after briefing.
- Coercion is also employed in a social research. To pressurize someone to participate against their will is an unethical practice that has the possibility to jeopardize the entire research study.
- Bias and unfairness- researchers may treat some people or group of people in an unfair and biased manner. This tends to pose questions on the validity of research.
- Problems like plagiarism and fraud may also arise by usage of unethical means to collect data for a research.
- The research scholars are also expected to declare any conflict of interest that arises in their study.
- Whistle blowing is another problem faced in social research. A whistle blower is any researcher who sees the ethical wrongdoing but is unable to stop it even after informing the superiors. The researchers in such cases turn to external sources. This becomes an ethical concern when an outsider may or may not be interested in the problem and may subject the problem to their priorities that may differ from the researcher's primary concerns.
- Epistemic injustice is another critical ethical issue that is faced in the domain of research. It is defined as being excluded or silenced, having one's meanings or contributions systematically distorted or misinterpreted. The term was coined by Miranda Fricker. There are two types of epistemic injustice- testimonial injustice which occurs someone is not believed because of their background and are discriminated on the basis on race, caste, lass, gender etc., Hermeneutic injustice is another type of injustice which occurs when people lack proper vocabulary to understand what your study says.

## CONCLUSION

Ethical research is an extremely important approach to carry out a study in social setting. Nonetheless, ethical moral quandaries will always pose difficulties for the researchers. To reduce severity and recurrence of such ethical dilemmas, a periodic thorough examination is required. A researcher must follow certain minimum standards to make his or her research ethical and responsible. Professional associations and robust ethics committees must be set up to uphold integrity of the research field. Certain safeguards must be laid down for both researcher and those who supervise the research while conducting a social research. Ethical codes offer assistance to researchers in dealing with ethical problems. Code of ethics helps provide a definite well defined structure for the same. Conducting ethical research extends beyond data collection and analysis; it includes all aspects of study. It is thus imperative for the social researchers to uphold the utmost ethical standards at every stage of the endeavor they undertake.

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