Ethical Issues in Social Science Research: A Review

H. D. P. Madushani[1]

Abstract

Research is a systematic, socially organized quest for new and better insight. 'Research ethics' refers to a complex set of values, standards and institutional schemes that help constitute and regulate scientific activity. Ethical issues are becoming a crucial element in social research. It is compulsory for a social researcher conducting research involving humans to apply for ethical clearance. The aims of this study were to Ethical Issues in Social Science Research in Developing Countries discussed in the literature. This review used 20 various research efforts from 1982 to 2014, using key words research, ethics, social sciences, developing countries. 60% of them mostly concerned of research ethics and ethical issues of social science research. First, significant issues regarding of research ethics were identified. Then, as a result of a literature review and case studies, it was also found that ethical issues are mostly occurred in the countries which are still developing. The research findings indicated that Complex ethical issues in such countries need careful justification by social science researchers.

Keywords: *Ethics, Issues, Social Science, Research*

Introduction

As a concept, 'research ethics' refers to a complex set of values, standards and institutional schemes that help constitute and regulate scientific activity. Ultimately, research ethics is a codification of ethics of science in practice. In other words, it is based on general ethics of science, just as general ethics is based on commonsense morality. Research is often intertwined with other specialist activities. The ethical responsibilities inherent in research are partly associated with standards related to the research process, including relationships between researchers, and partly with respect for the individuals

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[1] Department of Economics, University of Keloaniya. pavithra.hdm@gmail.com

and institutions being studied, including responsibility for the use and dissemination of the research. Many standards must be weighed against other considerations and modified in the light of them when making specific assessments in individual cases.

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). Research involving human subjects is required to show respect for ethical issues by obtaining approval from the institution's Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) prior to commencement. University policies on research ethics state that all research involving human subjects must comply with the 2007 National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research. This policy applies to all researchers. In developing countries, where societies are often pluralistic, cultural background and security become important issues for social researchers in conducting fieldwork. This state of affairs can lead to the researchers finding it difficult to get letters of permission from the local authorities, and may lead to delays in conducting research.

The value of research and research ethics

Research is a systematic, socially organized quest for new and better insight. Scientific knowledge is of value in and of itself. Many research results can also be useful for improving social conditions. The ultimate responsibility of research is to seek the truth. Accordingly, scientific integrity is a key aspect of research ethics. Cultural and social studies deal with human choices, actions and relations, standards and institutions, beliefs and historical developments, works and traditions, language, thought and communication. Empathy and interpretation are prerequisites for the research process. This can open the door to different, yet reasonable interpretations of the same factors. However, the fallibility and inconclusiveness attached to research do not relieve researchers from the obligation to shun arbitrary views and to strive for coherence and clarity in their reasoning. In many disciplines, there is disagreement over fundamental questions of scientific theory. However,

honest documentation and consistent reasoning are absolute requirements, regardless of scholars' position with a view to theory. In the humanities and social sciences, research is distinguished by researchers' views on society and humanity, a factor that is usually enriching. However, this requires that researchers consider how their own attitudes can colour their choice of topics, data sources and the balance between possible interpretations. At an overall level, all disciplines are subject to the same research ethics obligations, e.g. requirements for interesting and relevant research issues, verifiable documentation, impartial discussion of conflicting opinions, and insight into one's own fallibility. The requirements for professional independence and peer review are also universal. The basic research ethics standards are based on the general moral standards of society (Walton, 2013).

The Nature of Ethics as Fundamental Basis for Social Sciences Research

Ethical issues are becoming a crucial element in social research. It is compulsory for a social researcher conducting research involving humans to apply for ethical clearance. The ethical principles set out in the National Statement state that all research involving human subjects should be conducted in accordance with the following : people must be respected, benefits must be maximized and harms minimized, harm shall not be done, and subjects in studies must be treated equally (Akpabio & Esikot, 2014). Clearly, ethical behavior in social science research should be required of all researchers, including international students conducting research at universities in developed countries such as Australia. In Australia, the implementation of ethical standards should be based on the 2007 National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research Therefor Australia's ethical standards put considerable emphasis on protecting the privacy of research participants. Almost all research guarantees the participant's confidentiality. This means they are assured identifying information will not be made available to anyone who is not directly involved in the study.   The effective administration of these ethical rules means that there needs to be a procedure which ensures researchers will consider all relevant ethical issues, including guaranteeing respondents' privacy, when formulating research plan (Mollet, 2011). To address such needs, most institutions and organizations have established one or more Human Research Ethics

Committees (HREC), a panel that reviews research proposals with respect to ethical implications, and decides whether additional actions need to be taken to ensure the safety and rights of participants. In practice, the Ethics Committee at a number of universities has seen its task as including helping to protect both the organization and the researcher against potential litigation with respect to failure to address important ethical considerations on behalf of participants.

Debate of Ethical Issues in Social Research

Several difficult issues have arisen in the application of ethical principles to social research. The first issue is associated with covert research. It is still questionable whether or not it is ethical for social science research scholars to covert research. According to Hesse-Biber & Nagy (2011), covert research is appropriate where it is necessary to achieve a better understanding of certain social phenomena. An example of this kind of research is the investigation of the social life of drug dealers and drug users. As pointed out by (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011), it is impossible to ask for informed consent from members of such communities, because they do not want to be investigated. It has also been argued that the very act of seeking informed consent from some research participant can lead to a change in the attitude of the research participant towards giving information to the researchers. Other authorities, however, have argued against the covert research, stating that it is unnecessary in social research. Homan (1991) argues, moreover, that covert research may have a negative impact for the researchers. He believes that as long as the respondents 'trust' the researcher, there is no need to conduct covert research. Homan claims that covert research is likely to invade the privacy of the respondent to an unacceptable degree and he argues that using covert research makes social science research no different from journalism.

A second issue relates to the role of researcher as participant- observer. The main concern here is that the researcher should be neutral in order to maintain their aim of 'objectivity' in their research project (Gans, 1982). In research experience where the researcher also acts as a participant, he or she must normally develop and maintain close relationships with other community

members. Some ethnographers have argued that a closer relationship between the researchers and participants of this kind can lead to conflict and deception (Hesse-Biber & Nagy 2011). Researchers may find it difficult to make objective judgments in their research if they are personally connected with their respondents.

A third issue concerns the nature of ethical regulation. With universities setting up Ethics Committees to review research proposals through a process of ethical review, and with academics under pressure to obtain for research grants (Hesse-Biber & Nagy (2011), researchers have raised concerns that increased ethical review is circumscribing their ability to make their own decisions about ethical issues relating to their specific projects. Ethical regulation has produced a formulaic approach to research ethics, in which researchers may feel constrained to tick the right boxes, rather than to think through ethical principles themselves. There is also a problem that basic ethical principles may lead to different and conflicting prescriptions. (Social Research Association, 2003). Haggerty (2004) expresses her point by using term 'ethics creep' to characterize the change in social science research that has taken place 'in the name of ethics.

A further issue relates to 'vulnerable groups'. In most ethical clearance processes, the social science research category "vulnerable group" refers to children and young people, people with mental health problems and people with learning disabilities. In considering applications for ethics clearance, Ethics Committees ask for special consideration to be given to 'vulnerable groups', because they have difficulties in providing initial and continued informed consent to conduct research. This concern has led to an insistence on more complicated procedures to protect the interests of such groups. Moreover, Some social researchers, however, have argued strongly against defining such groups as 'vulnerable' and 'incompetent' on the grounds that it makes researchers more likely to exclude from research and thus to deprive them of the benefits of research. These researchers insist that it is unethical to exclude people from research on this basis. Researchers have argued, particularly in the area of child research, that interpreting groups as vulnerable has had a negative impact on the focus of research and the ways in which it is conducted. It has been argued that the onus is on researchers

to find ways of obtaining consent from individuals that is meaningful to them, regardless of their abilities.

The final issue relates to informed consent. Increased bureaucratization of social science research resulting from the broad changes taking place in research governance and regulation means that social researchers increasingly have to have their research projects assessed by Ethics Committees. One of the results of this increased bureaucratization has been the expectation that researchers will proved that they have obtained informed consent by providing forms signed by research participants. The main reasons that Ethics Committees insist on informed consent are i) to ensure that participants understand what participation will involve and that they know their rights in relation to participation and issues of confidentiality and anonymity, ii) to protect researchers from later accusations by study participants. Some social researchers argue that the use of informed consent is not appropriate in all types of research. This concern is that respect for confidentiality and anonymity may contribute to secrecy in matters of public interest. The objections to signed consent forms have been raised particularly by researchers working in the area of criminology.

Conclusion

This article provides an insight into the debate concerning ethical issues in social science research. Debate within social science relating to issues such as covert research, regulation, vulnerable group, letter of consent has become important. There are numerous concerns for social science researchers when conducting fieldwork in developing countries. These include the lack of experience in dealing with bureaucratized ethics procedures, the need for cultural sensitivity, security concerns and the consequences of administrative and political practices in developing countries. Therefore, careful consideration is needed in the application of ethical approval which often cannot be applied universally in developing countries. Complex ethical issues in such countries need careful justification by social science researchers.

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