Chapter 10
Ethics in Research with Special Reference to Social Sciences

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10.1 Introduction

Formal research activity has widened and deepened enormously in the modern times. The types of research have multiplied, and very many new trends in research have emerged over the years (see Sect. 10.2 below). Students, faculty, committees, commissions and various organisations undertake research whose results may be used for the good or ill of the individuals and society. In other words, research at all levels and at all stages involves ethical considerations, i.e. the questions of right and wrong, value judgements, good or bad and so on. There is no doubt that ethical issues are involved in all research; the research in human subjects, medicines, etc. has a definite ethical dimension.

The research often involves elaborate deception, and the subjects in research are deceived in many ways to a limited or large extent. There exists a vast diversity or array of unethical acts which are committed by the researchers at various stages of research. There exist potential conflicts between ethical and professional values. The glaring example of how the subjects are deceived in research has come to light very recently in respect of Bhopal gas leak tragedy which occurred in India in the early 1980s. It was reported in the national press in June 2010 that hundreds of gas victims (patients) were subjected to same drug trials without their knowledge at the Bhopal Memorial Hospital and Research Centre (BMHRC) during 2004–2008. It was also further reported that the similar tests or trials were also conducted in other reputed hospitals in India. The several victims were not aware that they were being subjected to trials. All of them were made to sign consent forms without being clearly informed about the tests or that they could prove fatal.

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However, the researchers are often not aware of the existence of ethical considerations involved in their own research, and their perception of and approach to research quite often tend to be purely technical and devoid of ethics. All too often, researchers do not fully appreciate the complexities of ethical issues and dilemmas. It is in this context that the objective of this paper is to make the researchers at all levels, of all types and at all stages aware of the fact that the research should not be and it cannot be ethics-free. It tries to convey that values and ethics are a necessary part of a systematic and valid research that values cannot be eliminated from research and that values, ethics and research are linked with each other. The paper seeks to raise the ethical sensibility of all those who assume the role of researchers. It tries to clarify the range of ethical problems that might be encountered by the researchers in the process of research, and it tries to suggest some approaches for resolving those problems. The paper also seeks to make the researchers better equipped to anticipate ethical problems before they occur so that they can avoid them entirely or they become skilful in coping with them.

Some of the specific questions this paper tries to reflect upon are as follows: What is research ethics? What are the types of research, and can any type of research be ethics-free? What is the need for and importance of ethics in research? What are the ethical problems, issues, dilemmas usually faced by the researchers? What are the likely causes of unethical behaviour in research? How far research ethics can be promoted by issuing ethical guidelines by certain bodies or organisations? What are the typical ways in which researchers compromise with ethical failure?

10.2 Types and Trends in Research

Research or research activities refer to a systematic, scientific, critical investigation into or a study of a subject in order to establish old facts or discover new facts and reach new conclusions. It is an endeavour or a process directed towards innovations and improvement of understanding, skills and knowledge.

The taxonomy of research points towards theoretical research, basic research, pure research, applied research, prevention research, primary data research, field research, sponsored research, consultancy research, project research, in-house research, etc. Pure research is also known as basic research. The social scientists may direct their research activity from pure to applied orientation. Pure science remains unchallenged by practical, concrete, social problems and issues, while applied research is theoretical in nature.

The motivation behind research may be to earn academic degrees, or to earn money and power, or to publish books and articles or papers, or to contribute to human peace, happiness and welfare or simply the ‘animal spirit’. It is obvious that research is undertaken in all disciplines, subjects and branches of knowledge. The nature of ethical problems or issues in research may differ in different types of research mentioned above. From the point of view of research ethics, it is useful

to be aware of certain important evolving trends in research in various branches of knowledge, including the social sciences. Some of such trends are mentioned below:

- Increasing doctoral research (research leading to Ph.D. degree)
- The growing culture of 'publish or perish' in the academia
- Increasing number and types of institutions and organisations which sponsor and fund research
- Increasing funding of research by the states or governments
- Increasing international funding of research
- Increasing and huge amounts money becoming available to the researchers
- Increasing globalisation of research
- Increasing availability of research aids, tools and technology such as computational facilities, duplicating machines, computers, etc.
- Increasing clinical and corporate settings
- Increasing interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary research
- Increasing amount of social inquiry of all kinds
- Increasing dependence of universities on sponsorships and linking of government grants and salary raises to research performance
- Emergence and growth of new methodological patterns of working in social sciences
- Increasing emphasis on the cross-cultural and participant action research
- Increasing amount of attention is being now paid to questions of professional ethics
- Ethical and political questions are being faced now in systematic and institutionalised manners to an increasing extent
- More and more professional organisations are now issuing ethical codes to which their members are expected to conform
- Increasing corruption, scientific misconduct and impropriety in research activities
- Increasing public and institutional demands for individual accountability in research
- Increasing prospects and reality of legal action for misconduct in research

10.3 What Is Research Ethics?

Ethics, as per the Oxford Dictionary, means the science of morals in human conduct or moral principles or rules of conduct. Morals, in turn, are said to be concerned with the accepted rules, codes, norms and standards about goodness or badness, rightness or wrongness acceptability or unacceptability of general human character or human behaviour or human conduct or human duties. Research ethics, therefore, would mean the observance or practising of moral principles while doing research by any researcher. Certain ethical principles in research for example, are honesty, objectivity, carefulness, openness, respect for intellectual

property, confidentiality, responsible publications, responsible mentoring, respect for colleagues, social responsibility, non-discrimination, animal care and human subject protection. Ethics and legal rules or laws are not the same; the action may be legal but unethical (Resnik 2011).

10.4 The Need for and Importance of Research in Ethics

It has been experienced often that research activity is afflicted by undesirable, wrong and corrupt practices of various kinds. This ethical problem in the world of research may not be on large scale, but there is no doubt that it very much exists in a sufficient degree to make us quite uneasy. There are many situations where ethical dilemmas are encountered by us. For example, there is falsification, fabrication and plagiarism in research.

There are various stages in all research: the decision to do research, choice of topic or definition of research problem, determining the aim and design of research project, collection of data and research material, choice of methodology and techniques, interpretation of data and research findings, etc. The ethical considerations are relevant in all these stages of research. For example, economics researchers often use statistical or econometric techniques even though the prerequisites for using those techniques (such as minimum number of observations required) are not met. They also often use techniques mechanically without seriously ascertaining the relevance of certain technique for their research. One often observes that there is a herd mentality in using econometric or statistical techniques among the researchers. The easy availability of computing facilities and statistical packages has aggravated the situation in this regard. There is also a high degree of complacency and sense of superiority in the minds of researchers who can use advanced, complicated and sophisticated econometric tools.

We, therefore, have to be bothered about the moral or ethical side or aspects of research. Research ethics is about proper conduct related to the processes and consequences of research. It helps to promote the aims of research; it promotes the values which are essential for collaborative research work; and it helps to ensure that the researchers are held accountable to the public. Research ethics also helps us to ensure that our scientific endeavours are compatible with our values and goals. The ethical norms in research also help to build public support for research. Research ethics can promote a variety of important moral and social values such as social responsibility, human rights and animal welfare. On the other hand, ethical lapses in research can harm human and animal subjects (Resnik, p. 2).

This need, as well as the importance of ethics in research, bears further elaboration. Research ethics has traditionally focussed its attention mostly on issues in biomedical research. The application of research ethics to evaluate biomedical research has been quite well developed by now, and it has influenced much of the existing statutes and guidelines for the ethical conduct of research. However, in humanities and social sciences, new and emerging methods of conducting research

such as autoethnography and participatory action research are raising important but quite different ethical issues and obligations for researchers in humanities and social sciences.

Thus, research ethics can be said to help protect individuals, communities and environment and to offer the potential to increase the sum of the good in the world. If we do not practise ethics in research, we leave or put those who are attempting social change as a prey to the hucksters who are willing to put forth undocumented claims based on inadequate evidence. Ethical approach to research can help to promote the climate of trust in which the researchers can continue their socially useful labour. Ethical practices and ethical concerns help to promote integrity of research. If we can assure ourselves and others that we are conducting research ethically, we can be more confident that the results of the works we study are accurate and original.

Another reason why we have to care for research ethics is the increasing demand for individual accountability in research. Schools, universities, funding agencies, employers and professional societies seek to protect themselves from unethical actions in the field of research. The unethical practice in research can lead to community withdrawal of support for research, which, in turn, can reduce the capacity of institutions and individuals to continue research on groups and communities. The unethical research practices can end government research funding, travels to conferences, years of work and professional reputation.

The ethically poor practices affect not only individual and professional reputation but also the veracity and reliability of individual and collective works. It is vital that students, colleagues and others see us setting good examples by behaving ethically. The participation in and the observation of unethical conduct in research have an adverse effect on ethical beliefs of the students. The unethical researchers appear to model unethical behaviour for their colleagues. The moral observance in research is necessary for self-preservation. As a part of their claims to professional status for their members, professional bodies adopt processes and procedures for self-regulation of the moral conduct of their members. In return, the members of those organisations lay claim to professional status and receive special associated rights.

In short, there are, inter alia, three objectives of research ethics:

(1) To protect participants in research; (2) to ensure that research is conducted in a way that serves the interests of individuals, groups and society; and (3) to examine specific research activities and projects for their ethical soundness (Israel and Hay 2006, pp. 1–7).

10.5 Is Ethics Relevant in All Subjects?

Can any type of research or research in any field of learning be ethics-free? There are different viewpoints on this question, and the stand in this regard has been changing over the period of time. The two widely known approaches in this regard are positivism and normativism. The believers in the normative approach argue that the (social) scientists deal with phenomena that involves interpreting

and endowing with values and meanings. The researchers deal with human and other beings, societies and social relations which affect and which are affected by values. The process of gathering 'facts' is not value-neutral; the researcher plays a significant role in constructing facts; and observations are theory-laden reflecting the interests of particular vested interests. The strive towards objectivism fails to see the historical influences upon our consciousness. The separation of means from ends is not sustainable. The 'facts' are not collected; they are produced reflecting and perpetuating unequal power relations which already exist. To follow the positivists such as the sociologist Max Weber and the economist Milton Friedman is to condemn researchers simply to a technical science of efficiency, unable to challenge morally the individual and society.

The positivists, on the other hand, argue that social sciences should strive to make social inquiry value-free. Despite their goal being to understand the subjective meanings, the social sciences can be objective. The social scientists provide a cost–benefit analysis of different means, but they refrain from making statements about the desirability of goals of ends. After committing to a particular area of research, the social scientists can pursue their investigation in an objective manner. The basic researchers particularly tend to view themselves as 'value-free technicians' who discover truth but are passive, in respect of the societal use of their findings. The assumption underlying such a position of scientific non-responsibility is that although research findings can be used for the good or bad ends, the knowledge is ethically neutral. They believe in 'value-free' tradition, and they claim that their work is objective and morally neutral since their goal is disinterested and an impersonal pursuit of scientific knowledge for its own sake.

Among these two positivists and normative schools of thought, the normative school appears to be more tenable and convincing. There are a number of arguments against the claim to value-free research. First, research, even pure research, cannot be value-free because it is immoral not to use the knowledge we obtain from research from reducing real-life social problems. Second, in real life, there have been many examples of abuse in the application of 'pure knowledge', viz., discovery of atom and research in genetics. Third, the basic research often entails the use of unethical procedures to obtain knowledge. The (pure) scientist's right to know often tends to conflict with the obligation to do no harm.

10.6 Research Ethics in Social Sciences

The foregoing discussion on the relevance of research ethics in all subjects can be strengthened further by briefly noting the distinctive features of social sciences and by comparing the extent and nature of ethical issues involved in research in social sciences on the one hand and natural sciences on the other. This discussion draws heavily on Barnes.

When compared with the natural sciences, the social sciences as a systematic and professional body of knowledge are of pretty recent origin. It is said that it is only

in the twentieth century that the recognition has been granted to the existence of specific corpus of accumulated knowledge in social sciences, cultivated and added to by a specialist group of professional scientists. Further, social sciences differ significantly from natural sciences (and also from humanities) in respect of the relation between the phenomena the social scientist studies and the whole society. There are many problems and questions which arise in social sciences but not in natural sciences and even in humanities. It is because social sciences are essentially an activity in which human beings study themselves that complex ethical questions have to be faced as an abiding concomitant of the activity.

In this context, is the description of natural sciences as 'hard sciences' and social sciences as 'soft sciences' valid? The answer depends on what criteria are used to define hardness and softness of various disciplines. For example, if the kind of data used is the criterion, while the natural sciences have to be called 'hard sciences', the social sciences have to be called 'soft sciences' indeed. On the contrary, if the nature of problem is the criterion used, while the social sciences become 'hard', the natural sciences become 'soft'. This is so because the intellectual task of the natural scientist is greatly simplified because his or her data are hard and reliable and because the separation between the natural scientist and the natural phenomena he or her studies is clear-cut. On the other hand, the social scientist has to deal with data which, quite often, are unreliable and fuzzy, and his or her relation with the phenomena he or her studies is easily two-sided. From this perspective, the social science research is indeed a difficult, hard undertaking, and ethical problems constitute a major component of its intrinsic difficulty.

It has already been said previously that the ethical questions exist in all disciplines, whether social sciences or natural sciences or humanities. Even then, another distinctive feature of social sciences is that while the ethical questions are intrinsic, ubiquitous and unavoidable in social sciences, they are extrinsic and contingent in natural sciences. For example, there are ethical questions connected with atom bombs, germ warfare, environment destruction and genetic engineering, but they are not concerned with say, cruelty to atoms. The ethical questions in natural sciences are concerned with the effect of say, nuclear reactions on fellow human beings, yet human beings as such do not enter into the theory of say, physics at all. As opposed to this, fellow human beings are the essential ingredients of any social scientists' stock-in-trade. Hence, in social sciences, ethical consequences of professional activity are always present.

It is believed by many that the extent of concern for ethics in social science research has varied in roughly three different periods of evolution of social sciences:

(1) The social sciences emerged in a recognisable form in the middle of the nineteenth century, (2) the way they were practised in the 1930s or between two world wars when capitalism and imperialism still enjoyed widespread confidence and (3) the way they are practised currently after the second world war. In the first period, little attention was paid to ethical questions in social science research. There was an autocratic attitude towards the definition of the interests of the people whose lives were being investigated. Such attitude was reinforced by positivistic faith that the true facts of economic problem such as, poverty, unemployment, etc.

existed in some absolute and objective sense, and they were waiting to be discovered by unbiased investigators. This picture began to change during the interwar period (1920–1940) when the social scientist began to feel and appreciate that the natural science paradigm was not appropriate for social science in this context. The third period witnessed the strengthening of the trends and approaches initiated in the second period.

10.7 Some Aspects of Ethical Problems in Research

Given the importance of research ethics, many professional bodies, state agencies, universities, etc. have arrived at a kind of consensus on ethical principles, taxonomy of research conduct and characteristics of ethical problems. We list them below without elaborating on them. For details and full discussion, the reader may refer to (Resnik, pp. 2–6; Israel and Hay 2006, pp. 112–128; Kimmel 1988, pp. 30–41):

1. Ethical principles, codes and rules:

   - Honesty
   - Objectivity
   - Integrity
   - Carefulness
   - Openness
   - Respect for intellectual property
   - Confidentiality
   - Responsible publication
   - Responsible mentoring
   - Respect for colleague
   - Non-discrimination
   - Competence
   - Legality
   - Animal care
   - Human subjects' protection

2. Types of unethical conduct in research:

   - Fabrication or invention of data or cases
   - Falsification or wilful distortion of data
   - Plagiarism or copying of ideas, etc. without attribution
   - Silence about missing data
   - Conducting research without informed consent
   - Gifting authorship
   - Publishing the same paper in two different journals
   - Using an inappropriate statistical technique in order to enhance the significance of the research
   - Overworking, neglecting and exploiting research students

- Making derogatory comments and personal attacks while reviewing the author's submission
- Wasting animals in research
- Sabotaging someone's research work

3. Characteristics of ethical problems in research:

- Research problem can give rise to multiple problems about proper research conduct.
- Sensitivity to ethical issues is necessary but not sufficient for solving ethical problems in research.
- Ethical problems are the result of conflicting values.
- An adequate understanding of ethical problems often requires a broad perspective based on consequences of research.
- Ethical problems involve both personal and professional elements.
- Ethical problems can pertain to science as a body of knowledge and to research in it.
- Judgments about proper conduct lie on a continuum ranging from the clearly unethical to the clearly ethical.

4. Causes of research misconduct:

What are the possible causes of misconduct in research? It has been pointed out in this regard that while most of the researchers are highly ethical, there are some who are basically morally corrupt, economically desperate and psychologically disturbed, and the world of research becomes ethically afflicted on account of the nature and behaviour of such people. The research misconduct may also occur because of the 'stressful' or 'imperfect environment', i.e. various institutional pressures, incentives and constraints encourage or induce some people to commit misconduct. The peer pressures; the pressure to publish and obtain grants, contracts, consultancy and sponsored projects; career ambitions; the pursuit of fame and name; the pursuit of profit; the desire to maximise patents to one's credit; the poor supervision of students and trainees; and the poor oversight of researchers result in the emergence and entrenchment of unethical behaviour in research.

To put it differently, research misconduct may result from environmental and individual causes, i.e. when people who are morally weak, ignorant or insensitive are placed in a stressful environment, they easily commit misconduct in research. The deviations from research norms may also occur because the researchers simply don't know or have never thought seriously about the ethical norms in research. The lack of ethics in research sometimes may be due to the facts that certain practices which are in vogue (although basically improper) are regarded by the fraternity as normal and traditional. The failure to reflect critically on the mistaken or problematic traditions results in the continuation of research misconduct. For example, it is regarded that there is nothing wrong in naming the research supervisor as an author on every paper that comes from his or her students even if he or her doesn't make any or significant contribution to the

paper. Similarly, the practice of drug companies to employ ghostwriters to write papers 'authored' by their physicians' employees is perceived to be ethically unproblematic because it is asked as to what is wrong about this practice, and it is pointed that it is just the way it is generally done (see Resnik, pp. 8–9).

10.8 The Role of Ethical Codes or Rules or Guidelines in Promoting Research Ethics

Since research ethics is of primary importance in research activity, what are the approaches to promote research ethics? The two approaches for this purpose are (a) external and (b) internal. The external approach emphasises the issuing of ethical codes by the external 'authorities'. The internal approach, on the other hand, requires the acceptance that research ethics is a value in itself, and it puts onus on every researcher to behave ethically without fear and favour while doing research. We show below that while there are certain limitations of the first approach, the second approach is the only ultimate guarantee to infuse ethics in research.

With the passage of time, certain professional organisations have issued ethical codes to which their members have to conform and adhere. Similarly, research sponsors have developed norms, codes, rules, regulations and guidelines which specify in details the ethical constraints which must be accepted by the researchers they sponsor. About 59 such codes have been developed and issued in the West during the period of 1945–2006. The most of these codes have been developed in the area of bioethics, but they have been extended across the research spectrum including social sciences. Nuremberg code (1947), Declaration of Helsinki (1964), Belmont report (1979) and Council for International Organization of Medical Sciences (1982) are some of the examples of such codes (for details see Israel and Hay 2006, pp. 23–29).

The survey of these codes in various countries such as the USA, the UK, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and Scandinavia reveals that there have been diverse regulatory experiences in these countries. Many early regulatory initiatives were responsive to crises, but more recently, ethical regulation has emerged as a part of broader social trends towards individual and organisational accountability. Ethical review strategies based on biomedical experiences are being applied to social science research. This is achieved either through national legislation or through actions of funding agencies. One may come across two ways in which ethical codes have been issued and used, namely, 'top-down' and 'bottom-up' approaches in the former; the national strategies which are set out legislatively or by major government bodies and research organisations are common. In the latter, professional organisations and individual institutions drive multiplicity of codes. In the future, it is quite likely that international benchmarks for ethical research conduct may be established. One can expect that in the coming years, supranational approaches to ethical regulation of research may be developed.

Although ethical codes are useful and effective to some extent, certain limitations and problems associated with them cannot be ignored. The wide range of certain ethical questions cannot be resolved easily and satisfactorily by reference to these codes. It is difficult to draw up a set of research ethics norms which are commonly applicable to all situations and countries because of the diversity of the ethical position held by people and a great variety of social and cultural contexts in which the research is carried out.

Some of the problems associated with the ethical codes which have multiplied over the years are particularly relevant to the research in social sciences. As said earlier, social scientists face many difficulties in conducting research ethically. These difficulties have been the result of methodology chosen, the actions of participants and colleagues and so on. However, some of the problems have often arisen due to regulatory environment or procedures prescribed by research committees, funding agencies and the government.

One comes across a strong view that the research ethics regulators have given ethics a bad name. Ethical codes and regulatory mechanisms have been established and multiplied disproportionately. In the beginning, such codes had little to do with research in social sciences, but soon, there was net-widening, and what was mostly true in the field of biomedical research came to be applied to all research involving human beings. Funding agencies began requiring every institution which received money from them to abide by regulations. In turn, the institutions concerned about their funds established review structures whose decisions cut to the heart of social sciences research.

It may be noted that much of the above has happened with the minimal consultation with the social scientists and with little recognition that the social sciences research is not the same as biomedical research. As a result, the regulation of research ethics in many countries is now underpinned by an unsettling combination of biomedical research and institutional risk minimization models. An adversarial culture has emerged between regulators and researchers. There has been an imposition of bio-ethnically derived models of research ethics governance on social scientists. Given these problems, social scientists need to develop their skills in evaluations and determining ethical conduct and engage collectively and constructively with local and national regulatory bodies (Israel and Hay 2006, pp. 129–144).

All this goes to suggest that the internal approach to promote research ethics, particularly in social sciences, assumes great importance and relevance. The ethical conduct is not the same as regulatory compliance, and there are practical and philosophical reasons for all the researchers to take ethics seriously. The researchers ought to be committed to the virtues of trust and integrity. In the last analysis, the researchers must remain responsible as individuals for acting with integrity.

This need to remind researchers about the importance of honesty, integrity, trust and ethics as values in themselves, now and not sometime in the future, arise because sometimes, one finds that even the highly renowned social scientists regard expediency, plenty and money to be far more important and necessary than the ethics, and researchers prefer to listen and follow them.

One of the best examples of this is the following viewpoint of J.M. Keynes, the famous and influential economist. Once, while reflecting on the 'economic possibilities for our grandchildren', he or her concluded that the day might not be all that far off when everybody would be rich. We shall then, he or her said 'once more value ends above means and prefer the good to the useful'. 'But beware', he or her continued, 'The time for all this is not yet. For at least another hundred years, we must pretend to ourselves and to everyone that fair is foul and foul is fair for foul; is useful and fair is not. Avarice and usury and precaution must be our gods for a little longer still' (see Schumacher 1977, pp. 19–20). Such a 'religious' belief or faith that ethical considerations are not only irrelevant but also an actual hindrance can never promote research ethics even if hundreds of ethical codes or guidelines are issued.

10.9 Summary and Conclusions

The formal research activity has grown enormously over the years in modern times. There are many types of research, and they have witnessed quite a few new trends. Although quite often the researchers are not aware of and sensitive to the ethical side of their research, it cannot be gainsaid that research does have an ethical side. The research ethics refers to the observance of certain moral principles while doing research. There are many considerations as to why ethical approach is needed and important in undertaking research. This is true in the case of all subjects of study or fields of inquiry. Of course, there are certain distinctive features of social sciences as compared to natural sciences, and, therefore, ethical issues involved in social sciences research may be somewhat different from such issues in natural sciences. The various aspects of research ethics are ethical codes, types of unethical conduct, characteristics of ethical problems and the causes of research misconduct. There are two main approaches to promote research ethics: one, issuing ethical codes or guidelines and two, the acceptance of the need and importance of ethics by each individual researcher at his or her own volition. The ultimate guarantee to ensure ethical behaviour in research is this belief or faith that ethics is a value in itself and it must be practised by every researcher voluntarily without any external intervention or guidelines.

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