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Component II: Description of the Module

Items	Description of Module
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Module 11: Research Ethics

1. Introduction

Ethics are the moral principles that govern a person's behaviour. Research ethics may be referred to as doing what is morally and legally right in research. They are actually norms for conduct that distinguish between right and wrong, and acceptable and unacceptable behaviour.

According to The Research Excellence Framework, 2014, research is "a process of investigation leading to new insights, effectively shared." Research is a multi-stage process. Ethics are central to the research process. Researchers need to take care of various ethical issues at different levels of this process. The reality is there can be ethical concerns at every step of the research process (Bickman& Rog, 2009).

Even though few aspects of research ethics have been set out in legislation, moral values mostly govern the conduct of research. Ethical considerations have been gaining paramount importance across the research community. With an increase in the public concern about the limits of the inquiry and legislative changes in human rights and data protection, the ethical considerations have come to the forefront in social research. With the advent of technology, more and more ethical issues have been arising in the field of communication research.

Despite dealing mostly with human and animal participants, different branches of social sciences deal with different techniques and ethical issues. Besides decisions to be informed by shared values and experiences, ethical guidelines may enable the researcher's individual ethical judgments in addition to the professional ethics.

The studies dealing with personal data are considered most sensitive in nature. According to Resnik (1998) research ethics are the common denominator for researchers' relations with respondents and colleagues. Researchers are themselves

responsible for the ethical conduct of their research. They have to take care of all the ethical issues at every stage of the research process.

The material available on the internet also gives rise to a number of ethical issues. According to Jensen (2002), "This is, in part, because the status of computer-mediated communication as a social context – on a scale from the public to private – is unresolved." Depth, the strength of qualitative research, also "poses serious issues for the ethics of research."

Many universities across the world have drafted their own ethics policy governing research involving human and animal participants. Apart from that, a good number of the researchers and institutions follow Social Research Association's ethical guidelines, first drafted in 1980, with a revised draft in 2003.

Being one of the most diverse countries in the world, researchers in India have to work within a variety of cultural, political, economical and religious settings. Researchers must possess adequate knowledge regarding the characteristics of ethical problems in social research. Apart from the general ethical issues, we in this paper have also attempted to draft some ethical issues of local concern encountered by the Indian researchers.

2. Ethical Ethos

Researchers have to take the sole responsibility for the ethical conduct of their own research. In simple terms, we can say ethics are researcher's responsibility. First and the foremost responsibility of a researcher is to take care of the safety, dignity, rights and well-being of the participants. Researchers have to take care of various other issues at different stages of the research process. Both the researcher and participants have an important role to play. Ones' rights are the others' obligations. Researchers have to take care of the participants' right and must consider their research from participants' perspective.

According to the University of Sheffield, the principle concern to take care of in "research involving human participants, personal data and human tissue is respect for the participants' dignity, rights, safety and well-being." Further, as per the university, all the ethical issues encountered at various stages of the research process may be taken care of at two major levels.

A. Researchers' Obligations

The researchers have to take care of various obligations during the research process. They must ensure that their research is conducted with honesty, objectivity and integrity. The researcher must seek consent from the participants for their participation. They must respect people, their cultures, values, religions, economic status and so on. Researchers have an obligation to take care of the confidentiality and personal information or identity of the participants as per her choice. Researchers should avoid experiments which may pose a threat to both the participants and the researchers themselves. Apart from the participant's, the researcher has also an obligation towards society, her colleagues or other researchers and funders of the project.

B. Participant's Rights

On the other side, the participants have the exclusive right to give consent to participate, withdraw from, or refuse to take part in research projects. Participants have right to seek confidentiality and stop personal information or identifiable data from publishing or sharing. They have right to seek their safety and security. Whenever required, the data should be kept secure and participants should not be exposed to unnecessary or disproportionate levels of risk.

3. Research Ethics: Researcher-Participant

Conducted ethically, research is a public trust. So, researchers must fully understand the theories and policies designed to guarantee upstanding research practices. It becomes important for the researcher to know what constitutes an ethical research. With an up-to-date knowledge, the researchers should develop a way with the basic ethical principles ensuring the safety and security of the participants of the study.

Different types of research methods need a different set of ethical guidelines. To make it easy to understand, let's divide the research ethics simply into two groups; Research-Participant Ethics and General Ethics. We will enlist different ethical issues arising at various stages of the research process. The researcher has a primary responsibility towards the participants and other researchers.

1. Informed consent is the prime responsibility of the researcher. A standard procedure in professional codes of ethics is 'informed consent' (Resnik 1998: 133). Seek consent for the participation from people. In the case of children and few other exceptional cases, the informed consent of participants, as well as their guardians must be obtained.

2. The researcher must reveal all the risks associated with the research to the participants. She should highlight all the negative and positive aspects of the research during the consent process. Aim, objectives and nature of the

research, duration of the study, sponsors and other important information must be revealed to the participants.

3. The knowledge gap between the researcher and the participants must be considered.

4. The privacy, anonymity and confidentiality of the participants and data must be given due consideration (Jensen, 2002). As professional guidelines and some form of a cultural consensus are still being negotiated, research projects need to consider carefully issues of anonymity, confidentiality, and 'informed consent.'

5. Participants must be given an option of rejecting data-gathering devices like camcorders, audio recorders etc.

6. To make them convenient and easily understandable, the questionnaire and other forms of rating scales must be designed in the native language of the participants.

7. Participants' safety is the prime concern. They should not be exposed to risks greater than they encounter in their normal lifestyle.

8. In case, it's the responsibility of the researcher to protect participants from the risks arising from their research.

9. The researcher should protect and promote the rights and interests of the participants.

10. The researcher must take care of their own safety.

11. She must take care of cultural, religious, economic, psychological, spiritual, physiological, biological, political, social and other issues of the participants.

12. Researchers are expected to consider ethical implications of their research.

13. To uphold the ethical standards in the research process, the researcher must accept and respect the principles of integrity, honesty, objectivity and openness.

4. General Ethics

Apart from the above-listed guidelines, a researcher needs to take care of various other ethical issues at different stages of the research process as follows:

1. As some topics are controversial in their nature, so it becomes the prime duty of the researcher to check whether the topic to be studied has innate ethical ramifications. Thus, before finalising the topic, the ethical implications of the topic must be given a thought.

2. Ethics play a paramount role in the studies involving direct human contacts. So, the effects of the research on subjects must be given due consideration. Harmful research should be avoided.

3. Researchers conducting studies involving human subjects should clearly describe and justify the research protocol in the research design.

4. Authorship: Each author must be credited in the manuscript. In the same way, all the persons listed as authors in the article should have contributed significantly to both the research and writing.

5. Data management: The data must be collected in a way that doesn't harm or injure anyone. In order to address and sort out all the issues of conflict, a clear and ethically sound plan for data management must be carried out. Besides that, the ethical and truthful collection of reliable data, ownership and responsibility of collected data, and retaining data and sharing access to collected data with colleagues and the public are the three most important ethical issues must be taken care of in data management process. Data manipulation must be avoided.

6. Avoid plagiarism: Researchers must properly cite the original source. She has to act responsibly and take care of copyrights, intellectual property, patents and other forms of rights. Self-plagiarism - copying one's own work, must be avoided at any cost.

7. Unlike duplication, breaking up or segmenting or slicing a large study into various different papers is called "salami publication" or "salami slicing". This is unethical as the study is based on same hypothesis, method and population. Don't slice the study and publish more than one paper based on the same findings.

8. Avoid any fabrication, falsification and misrepresentation of data or result. Don't indulge in the manipulation of images or videos or other forms of illustrated work. The researcher should report the data honestly. Research misconduct is a sin.

9. The author should retain the raw data as they may be asked for the data at the time of editorial review.

10. The researcher should also unveil her personal or financial interests and must avoid bias.

11. The researchers shouldn't launch personal attacks against any individual, culture, religion etc.

12. They should uphold the moral values of the society.

13. Act sincerely and don't break promises. Avoid discrimination on the basis of demography or on any other condition.

14. Carelessness and negligence must be avoided. The researcher should be critical of her own work and must keep a record of things. Be open to criticism.

15. The researcher must maintain the confidentiality of records and other sensitive information.

16. The research must contribute to the body of knowledge. Duplication must be avoided.

17. The researcher must abide by the rules and regulations of the land.

18. Both humans and animals must be handled carefully.

19. Both negative, as well as positive findings, revealed during the course of research should be reported.

20. Ensure transparency and accountability in all the research activities.

21. Besides researcher and editor, sponsor, publisher and reviewer of the research also have ethical obligations to the publication and dissemination of the findings of the study.

22. People who anyhow helped the researcher in conducting the research must be properly acknowledged.

23. Most of the young researchers send the same manuscript to different reviewers or publications at the same time. It's unethical. Avoid such practices.

24. Resubmitting an already published research paper or article with minor changes or under a different title to a journal violates, "international copyright laws, ethical conduct, and cost-effective use of resources."

25. The final report must clearly declare the sponsor of the study, institutional affiliations and conflicts of interest.

26. The findings of the research must be disseminated in an easily understandable report.

5. Ethical Issues in India

Mostly matters of research ethics differ from method to method. Most importantly, ethics also vary from place to place. For example; A Christian lady in white indicates a bride, while a Hindu lady in white indicates a widow. In most of the cases, cultures in India vary from state to state, and even from city to city. So, researchers should have a depth knowledge of cultures and other things of the place, they are working in.

1. During the study, Indian researchers should give utmost importance to the cultural diversity and religiosity of the country.

2. They must work within a framework suitable for all the customs, traditions, languages, castes, creed, colours, classes, regions etc.

3. They must work for the promotions of all the cultures, religions etc., not the other way round.

4. During the research, the researchers must keep in mind the wide economical, knowledge and technological gap between the people of India.

6. Ethics Committees

Indian universities lack research ethics committees. Researchers have no other option but to rely on their own common sense to eliminate and minimize various crucial ethical issues. Therefore, need for a common policy or a common framework both at domestic as well as national level assisting Indian researcher in addressing the ethical issues is cardinal. Keeping in mind the aforementioned concerns, following suggestions may prove to be fruitful:

1. As there is a difference in the nature of issues arising in various methods of research, all the universities in India must be equipped with research ethics committees at the departmental level or faculty level.

2. Research protocols may be submitted to such committees for consideration, guidance, improvement and approval before the commencement of the study.

3. These committees may help to promote the awareness regarding the do's and don'ts of the research.

4. The committees may act as the mediators and advisor in disputed cases.

5. The ethical issues have shown an increase with an advent in technology, as witnessed, these committees may provide advice on all such matters.

6. Such ethical committees may encourage an organizational research culture based upon defensible standards of research practices.

7. These committees must be committed to high quality, transparent and accountable research ethics throughout India.

8. The committees may also monitor the progress of the ongoing studies.

9. On the other side, the researcher may also update the committees regarding the events and issues and status of the research.

10. At last, a copy of the thesis or research paper may also be submitted for the perusal of these committees.

7. Summary

In this chapter, we explored the dimensions of an ethical research. We also came to learn about the obligations a researcher has towards the participants in particular and society in general. We discussed the do's and don'ts of an ethical research. Apart from the general ethics, the paper also examines the ethical issues researchers in India must keep in mind while conducting research. Through this paper, we also recommend the establishment of research ethics committees at the departmental level in each and every university across India.

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