

# **Ethics of Social Research**

**Pradip Kumar Bose**

*As society develops, it is important to keep ethical problems under continuing scrutiny and debate. It should also be recognized that a productive balance is between society's need for knowledge and its member's need for protection against intrusion, inconvenience, or discomfort. Freedom of enquiry must be balanced against the rights of privacy. While the issues are complex, accommodation and resolution are possible.*

An examination of the history of social science shows that in its early positivist phase little attention was paid to ethical questions. It was believed then that the 'facts' were there anyway and it was a matter of expediency to choose best how to discover them. At the next phase, that is the period between the wars, a somewhat different pattern of social inquiry emerges. With the institutionalisation of empirical research, disguises began to be used to protect the identity of informants and of the localities in which they lived, but nothing beyond this. Little attention was paid to the process of data collection and analysis as affecting the interests of those being studied [for details, Barnes 1977]. It is in contemporary times that more complex issues are being raised about the ethics of social science research.

There are a number of time honoured and recognised principles of ethics in social science research that do not need detailed discussion. Among these are the maintaining of the highest standards of work, protection of informants and information given in confidence, giving proper credit to co-workers, proper acknowledgement, reporting procedures and results faithfully and, when appropriate, mentioning sources of financial support. That is why some have argued that the canons of research are exacting enough and separate ethical standards are not really needed. However, under changing conditions and in the context of the emergence of new problems and new areas the question of ethics must be redefined continually to keep them relevant to contemporary situation. I mention some of the issues that are subjects of concern and debate.

### **Deception in Social Science Research**

Researchers have rather frequently disguised their role or purpose in order to gain entrance into a group. In all instances the issue raised is: Is deception ever justified? Though it has been argued that deception is sometimes required to achieve a good that would not otherwise be achievable there is a considerable debate on this issue. It has been pointed out that the 19<sup>th</sup> century exposes of conditions in English sweatshops and 1930s studies of white racism in rural south in the US, necessarily used deception, and in the process revealed startling instances of human exploitation and misery. These investigations were instrumental in creating new social policy. Some social scientists maintain that dogmatic condemnation of deception only seems suitable for a society of equals. In a society of gross inequality, without the use of deception dark corners of the society cannot be revealed [Seiber 1982a; 1982b]. Others have argued that deception has many pitfalls, both ethical and methodological. They point out that it is likely to lead to misunderstanding of the situation being researched, because the masked man confuses the roles, and liable both to convey and to obtain distorted impressions [Erikson 1967]. That is why it has been argued that, except when the organization is publicly accountable, one should not enter a group without its consent. While such an ethical policy obviously has much to commend it, the losses would also be substantial. The problem is not simple, nor is it unimportant. Perhaps a minimum obligation of the social scientist is to make the public aware of the problem.

### **Protection of Research Data**

The right of the clinician to keep data confidential is widely recognized by custom and in some cases by law. The social science investigator does not as clearly enjoy such protection. For example the social scientist engaged in survey research may encounter a serious ethical problem and lack clear guidelines for conduct, when his evidence is introduced in a court as legal testimony. The ethical quandary may get further complicated if it is demanded by the authorities concerned that the respondents be identified, because survey data are generally obtained with the assurances of anonymity. The problem is further complicated by the investigator's obligation to keep his work open to scrutiny by competent social scientists.

### **Invasion of Privacy**

The conception of the modern individual and society is based on the cherished ideal of privacy, which is often impinged by the social scientists. The ethical issue that seems most frequently involved is that information about a person or his family is used without the individual being aware of what is happening. The invasion of privacy issue arises at the point of intersection of two highly valued social goods: The need for knowledge about problems, opinions, expectations of people, and the need for preservation of personal rights. Among the issues that must be considered in achieving a proper balance of conflicting social and individual interest are the importance of the investigation, the informed consent of subject, the preservation of confidentiality, and the judicious use of records of research.

### **Knowledge for the Sake of Knowledge**

In the practice and ethics of social research the question that is encountered again and again is the concept of knowledge. If a researcher charged with having used unethical practices to obtain information were to counter with question, 'How else could the knowledge be gathered?', his question would imply that if there were no better or more ethical manner, then knowledge should always takes precedence over ethics and foreseeable consequences. Few if any social scientists would offer medical researchers such a *carte blanche* to do what they wished with their subjects in order to gain information. Of course this analogy is not a perfect one; no analogy ever is. The social scientist is essentially an observer, not an experimenter. Yet, the medical analogy should not be entirely dismissed, for the social investigator, even if he does not experiment, must affect the persons under observation at least to some extent.

### **On Confidentiality**

Most professionals in other disciplines who obtain information, work under the privilege of confidentiality; however, such professionals, are usually called in by their clients for assistance. The sociologist is not ordinarily summoned by those he studies and is not at their service; rather, he is asking that the subjects be at his service for his benefit or,

presumably, for that of mankind. Further, the client exercises his right to choose the physician or therapist; no one has seriously suggested that groups being researched should exercise a similar right. Yet, disguised research is the equivalent of studying people without their knowledge; and insistence that there is no right of a group to exclude a researcher means that they can be studied without their consent. Sociologists, for the sake of their own ethics and for the future of the profession, should not be placed in the role of invaders of privacy.

### **Research and Ethical Norms**

Ethical problems have involved such issues as plagiarism, misrepresentation of data, the betrayal confidence, claiming undue credit, and other clearly unacceptable behavior. However, it should also be noted now that social science research itself is a potential major source of understanding of ethical conduct, of the origins and development of moral standards. This is a reflexive problem and creates further complications informing ethical standards in social science research.

### **Conclusion**

As society develops, it is important to keep ethical problems under continuing scrutiny and debate. It should also be recognized that a productive balance is between society's need for knowledge and its member's need for protection against intrusion, inconvenience, or discomfort. Freedom of enquiry must be balanced against the rights of privacy. While the issues are complex, accommodation and resolution are possible. It must also be added in the discussion of solutions and guidelines that a code of ethics may sensitise individuals to the existence of ethical problems, but such a code would call for enforcement procedures, the practicability of which can be questioned. The more preferable alternative could be the adoption of guidelines by professional associations for proper conduct. Guidelines, here, are intended to be expression of professional conduct and should be internalised as part of acquiring the status of social scientist. A code emphasises the need to correct sociologists for breaking the canons of their own profession. This still remains a far dream. More optimistically, guidelines imply that the real objective is to educate social researchers to their responsibilities.

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