

**National Consultation on
ETHICS IN SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH
2-3 December, 2005
Centre for Social Studies (CSS), Surat
Centre for Enquiry into Health and Allied Themes (CEHAT), Mumbai
Centre for Studies in Ethics and Rights (CSER), Mumbai**

**Ethics in Social Science Research
A Note for Discussion**

**Sudarshan Iyengar
Biswaroop Das**

Some questions relevant in the context of ethics in social science research are: Does social science have peculiarities which are masked by discussions on science at large? Given the need for objectivity in scientific inquiry can theory laden-ness be kept sufficiently distinct from value laden-ness? Can social sciences steer clear of arguments for and against relativism in ethics? There is a need to developing an exhaustive understanding of ethics associated with social enquiries and modalities of ensuring their integration across different levels and agencies of social research.

Social science research has gained acceptance and credibility only recently during the last century. ‘The Enlightenment Project’¹ of human society began in the seventeenth century with Francis Bacon as its father. Natural sciences and Humanities came to be accepted as scientific and academic disciplines. The search for truth based on facts and the search for facts based on intuitively realised truth (theory) emerged as accepted methods of holding scientific inquiry towards understanding nature. The purpose of understanding nature in the Baconian frame, one which still largely holds, was to exploit it for the material benefit of human beings. It was important for any science, therefore, to be deterministic and predictive. Social sciences despite claiming classical antiquity by some, could not get recognition as academic disciplines because the critics argued that social sciences were some hybrid mixture of meaningless jargon and pretentious platitudes and truisms.² It was in the twentieth century and especially in the second half of it, generally referred to as ‘the post war period’, the state and different social agencies recognised the need for social science disciplines while formulating plans and policies for development and interventions. The ‘scientific’ community, which had viewed social sciences as not to be value neutral, once again raised the issue of their relevance as the utility of social sciences and associated researches increased further. Among other things, this led to the resurfacing of issues related to ethics in social sciences.

One should not get an impression here that ethics did not bother the natural sciences and humanities. Ethical issues have been seriously discussed in the process of development of natural sciences. It is however important to understand that the ‘Enlightenment Project’ was launched and supported by the presumption that scientific and moral progress go together. Hence, once it was possible to establish that the inquiry was scientific i.e. it was a search for objective truth, the results were to be objective and by implications its contribution to the moral progress of the society was also to be positive. This assumption was however questioned and continues to be questioned. For quite some time, the scientific world lived under Condorcet’s firm declaration that ‘knowledge, power and virtue are bound together with an indissoluble chain’, which has now been realised as to be too bold and simple.³ The current official line according to Hollis is that, science describes, interprets and explains but cannot justify. But one of the duties of scientists is to exclude value judgements from science itself. Apparently, this applies to social sciences too, even though the social world is mixed with values and social scientists are very much parts of the groups that are studied.

Debates around the distinction of fact vs. value further reinforces the position of science as well as the social sciences in terms of their inability to ‘justify’. Values differ significantly across groups and there exists a wide range of values among individuals and groups. Value judgements nearly become relative, both as a matter of social philosophy and as a fact of life. The social scientists often face the dilemma that as to how social life can be understood without judging the moral beliefs and interpretations of the actors that are in conflict with the position taken by the researcher. This is perhaps not only a question of location of the ‘researcher’ and the ‘researched’ but also as to how groups or individuals being researched tend to perceive and absorb reality as well as articulate their position on a wide range of social issues over time.

The debate obviously is not settled in the social science. To refer to Hollis again there are three deeper questions that are relevant in the context of ethics in social science research. They are as follows:

1. Does social science have peculiarities which are masked by discussions on science at large?

2. Given the need for objectivity in scientific inquiry can theory laden-ness be kept sufficiently distinct from value laden-ness?
3. Can social sciences steer clear of arguments for and against relativism in ethics?

Placed within the context of the above core questions, different social science disciplines should attempt to respond to these queries and related issues. These can be taken as key elements of the broad canvas where a range of relevant issues remain embedded. Speakers at this consultation meet can choose to deal with issues that emerge from these questions, albeit within the specific context of their own subjects and the broader context of associated disciplines. Indeed, the first question is peculiar to the social sciences, for 'researcher' is also part of the 'researched' where his/her behaviour influences the responses and conduct of the 'researched' and vice-versa. Within such a given domain thus how can one remain 'scientific' or should one remain 'scientific' qua-scientist?

Value laden-ness and theory laden-ness are also difficult questions to resolve. Normative elements do influence in choosing and defining concepts, their applications and the ways that the results are interpreted. This contrasts with Weber's assurance that the conduct of science itself is or can be a value-free pursuit of truth.⁴ The poverty debate in Economics is a case in point. There is a running dispute about the extent of poverty in a country. It started in U.K. in 1901 with Rowntree's study that defined poverty in subsistence terms i.e. income below that is 'sufficient to obtain the minimum necessities for the maintenance of merely physical efficiency'.⁵ This concept by and large holds and is used currently for policy prescription and anti-poverty programmes by several national and international agencies. But it has also been questioned and alternative concepts introduced by ILO and UNDP in the post-1970 period. It consists of minimum requirement for private consumption of food, shelter, clothing and minimum furniture etc. The UNDP has introduced human development vis-a-vis income augmentation taking into account lack of access to clean drinking water, health services, education and cultural development. Then there is the concept of relative deprivation. If the majority in society owns a TV set, non-owner would be rated as poor. An economist is faced with dilemma and has to choose a norm. This also adds a temporal dimension to the definition

of a problem and identification of parameters. With the changing context not only changes the nature of a problem but also the frame of dealing with it. Hence, researches meant for ‘appropriate interventions’ through policies and programmes at times may appear to negotiate with and engaged in understanding different levels of depth of a problem at one end and the extent of ‘outreach’ of programmes on the other. The two approaches may not correspond with one another, for they may continue to get defined and re-defined within the context of changing values under the hegemony of thoughts and action which themselves are often not ‘value-neutral’.

Another major area for discussion related to ‘Ethics in Social Science Research’ involves issues associated with conducting such research. Once the questioned related to the selection of concepts for the conduct of research are settled, ‘the citizen-researcher-research’ dilemma needs to be addressed. There exists an immense scope for discussion here. Barnes has set out a comprehensive framework for this in lectures that he delivered during the mid-1970s.⁶ He sketches a model of society and social inquiry and identifies four main components listed below. According to him, the divergence and convergence of interests of these four parties – individually as well as collectively give rise to ethical questions in social research as a pursuit and a product. These are,

1. Social scientists engaged in empirical research.
2. Citizens whose behaviour and attributes constitute the subject matter of inquiry.
3. Gate keepers who sometimes control access to these citizens.
4. Sponsors who supply the resources so that research can be carried out.

Since in social science research, in a strict sense, the researcher is not an outsider during the course of conducting and also reporting research s/he influences and also gets influenced by various actors and faces serious ethical dilemmas. Within this context, it is not surprising that during the post-war period even the social scientists became conscious of the need for professional ethics. Given the fast changing research priorities and redefinition of relevance in social inquiries, it is worthwhile to deliberate upon (i) ethical dimensions related to the modalities and manner(s) in which sponsored as well as other research studies are undertaken and conducted and (ii) as to how within the context of practice of research, issues associated with professional conduct, integrity, professional

and scientific responsibility, respect for people's rights, dignity and diversity are addressed and dealt with.

Citizens are the next component as outlined by Barnes. He uses this term to imply the 'objects' of research or the subjects of experiments. Social scientist is a citizen herself and has right to ask questions and seek information and response from other citizens. But she can also face a denial with the respondent not co-operating or obliging only partially. How the citizen behaves and at times made to behave while responding is one of the central issues in ethics in social science research. How much attention various disciplines pay to this issue is an important subject matter for discussion. In this context, it should also be remembered that citizens are not always free. They often remain controlled and advised or guided by agencies and institutions such as an employer, a family head, leader, priest, friend and others who act as gatekeepers to data and information. Another important issue is that as to how social scientists negotiate with citizens/gatekeepers and how some of them keep their actual intentions veiled consciously. It should be interesting to share and discuss as to how different social science disciplines and researchers are dealing with such issues.

Within this context, it also becomes pertinent to discuss as to how ethical concerns can be spelled out clearly and made operational across the wide range of institutional sites where researches are conducted, data gathered, studies reported and results disseminated. There is now a proliferation of research agencies frequently responding to the needs and demands of the sponsors. And these include individual firms, consultancy 'collectives', NGOs, university departments and research organizations. Within a competitive milieu of bids and contests, ethical issues either get redefined or hardly ever surface. This calls for developing an exhaustive understanding of ethics associated with social enquiries and modalities of ensuring their integration across different levels and agencies of social research.

Notes

¹ The entire grand attempt to discover all natural secrets, including those of humanity, came to be known as 'the Enlightenment Project'. For an interesting account on this, see Hollis Martin 1994, *The Philosophy of Social Science: An Introduction*, Cambridge University Press, New York: USA.

² For a detailed discussion see Barnes J.A. 1977, *The Ethics of Inquiry in Social Science: Three Lectures*, Oxford University Press: Delhi.

³ Hollis Martin, op.cit.

⁴ Weber comes to this conclusion after a very sobering belief that reason is not always squarely on the side of progress.

⁵ Hollis Martin, op.cit., p.215.

⁶ Barnes J.A., op. cit. We are circulating first of his lectures.