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Code of ethics

Issues and dilemmas in social science research

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Following the guidelines of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the World Medical Association Declaration of Helsinki, Finland, the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) has prepared a code of ethics for biomedical research. The objective of the code is to protect human rights of the individuals who are being studied. Accordingly, free consent of the people who are the subject of experimentation is the essential pre-condition of the research. We all know that the present code suffers from several lacunas. More than that, it is not properly observed in all studies. The poor are still vulnerable when it comes to being enrolled for participation for experiments. They are used as guinea pigs.

Discussion on the ICMR's document is beyond the scope of the present deliberation. What is to be noted however, is that a code of ethics exists for biomedical research. It may also be noted that a similar code also exists for life sciences where animals are used for experiments. Needless to emphasise that the ethical code of conduct is a prerequisite to protect human rights. But at the same time, a mere document delineating the codes is not sufficient guarantee for the protection of the rights of the people. Those who are insensitive to the rights of the others are capable of finding ways and means to subvert the code of conduct. At the same time conscientious and moralist scholars often face several dilemmas that may involve placing priority on certain principles over others. No code of ethics or guidelines can be full proof, nor can any code encompass all eventualities.

Nevertheless, a code of ethics is essential for maintaining a minimum uniformity in understanding researchers role in society,

their accountability, transparency in objectives and method and fraternity among the researchers. But it is not sufficient for ethically good research. One may also wonder whether the standardised code of ethics in research (CER) facilitates or hampers good research. We have to address these issues.

In India, research in the field of social sciences have grown significantly during the last five decades. But so far there is no code of conduct or ethical guidelines in the country for social science research. Neither the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR) nor the University Grant Commission the nodal organisations for sponsoring research in universities and research institutes have formulated any guidelines in CER. None of the professional associations such as Anthropological Society, Indian Sociological Society, Political Science Association, Psychology Association, the Indian Science Congress or the Indian Academy of Social Sciences has so far prepared CER for the guidance of their members. The subject has not received serious attention from social scientists. We do have a few studies on fieldwork experiences that touch upon ethical issues related to the researchers relationship with the respondents, confidentiality of information, autonomy of informants, etc. But these experiences have not been seriously debated. In India, we only have JA Barnes (1977) three lectures on The Ethics of Inquiry in Social Sciences delivered at the Institute for Social and Economic Change. I wonder why social scientists who study human beings and social institutions and social scientists who sit in policy-making bodies at various levels, frequently write commentaries on socio-economic processes and events have refrained from addressing ethical issues affecting them and society. A positivist approach may be one important explanation for such indifference to the subject. But I submit that this is not a full explanation. We have to stir our sensitivity and raise larger philosophical and moral issues regarding our responsibilities towards society.

Let me hasten to clarify that when I say that there is no CER, I do not mean that social science researchers are not guided by ethical values in conducting the studies. To be sure, the researcher at an individual level is guided by certain values in selecting a particular problem for the study or formulating a hypothesis. Also, the method

for data collection, analysis of the data, interpersonal relationship among the researchers, dissemination of the findings, etc are also not free from influences of personal ethical values. Like others, a social scientist imbibes values as a member of a class or religious denomination, caste, region, etc. Their understanding of social sciences and their ideology for social transformation set moral values for their studies. Sometimes for exigency, or under certain compulsion, they give up certain values and follow others. These are, by and large, personalised ethical values. These vary from individual to individual and situation to situation. They are individual codes of ethics and not the code of ethics and guidelines of social scientists as a community. One is accountable to oneself or in some cases to the employer or sponsoring agencies but not the peer group of social scientists. In other words, such ethical values tend to be subjective.

Why do we need ethical guidelines or codes of ethics?

A social or collective code has some objective criteria shared by the community as a whole that provides collective identity as 'professionals' such as social scientists, sociologists, economists, anthropologists, etc. The collective identity helps in the growth and the pursuit of the profession. It creates checks and balances against individual idiosyncrasies. It can provide space to an individual scholar to maintain one's autonomy. CER can guard an individual researcher's freedom vis-à-vis the conditions of the sponsoring agencies related to method of data collection, confidentiality of the study, accountability, etc. CER can mobilise collective support to the individual scholar to protect one's academic freedom. At the same time I do not rule out the possibility that CER may be used by vested interests (who may not be interested in research) as an instrument to prevent a creative scholar from undertaking genuine research and raising unconventional questions. One should guard against the collective coercion of a small clique. Such coercion is detrimental to change, and growth of knowledge.

A code of ethics is necessary for all social groups to harmonise social relationships and develop consciousness among the members for common objectives. Professionals have added responsibilities as they occupy important positions in society. They are expected

to contribute to the well being of society. Social scientists are professionals in this sense. They study society. More often than not their studies receive financial support from public bodies. Even the funds from the private agencies ultimately come from the public. Further, irrespective of the sources of the funds, they obtain information from members of society. Those who provide information expect that the research would ultimately be beneficial to society at large. Hence, social scientists are responsible and accountable to society.

No science is value free. Social sciences are certainly no value force. Studies provide inputs in policymaking, rule formation, and implementation of policies and adjudication of laws. They affect people; therefore social science researches have to be guided by code of ethics to protect the interests of those whom social scientists are studying. A code of ethics is necessary even for those who follow a positivist approach and claim to be value free and objective. They cannot escape from responsibility towards the people who provide information, share emotions and energy. Moreover, they work in organisations and get assistance from several persons in their research. In the absence of consciously evolved CER rules, procedures and norms for interpersonal relationship and organisational role are arbitrarily decided in favour of those who are in authority. Superiors who wield power often ignore the contribution of the fellow researchers who are in junior positions. Such a situation is not conducive to the growth of research. It is bound to create tensions among the researchers and also between researchers and other sections of society. If the violation of rights of the people in the name of scientific studies continues unabated and if credibility of research is repeatedly questioned by various sections of society it is possible that elite of civil society, funding agencies and the state may try to impose rules on research. If that happens it would endanger autonomy of social science research. Therefore, it is the best course for the professionals themselves to consciously debate various aspects of their code of conduct and evolve CER spelling out their responsibilities, accountability and transparency of their conduct.

Integrity is the core of code of ethics. Though integrity is multidimensional, we refer here the norm in relation to data

collection. We sometimes hear allegations that in some studies the researchers or their representatives had not visited the area and not met the so-called respondents.¹ Investigators write answers in the questionnaires on behalf of the respondents. In short, the data is 'cooked'. This is nothing but dishonesty. Such information is worth garbage. It is useless. If this is not checked and we social scientists do not express our concern or remain indifferent, in the long run it will discredit the research and adversely affect the profession. Genuine and honest researchers would also suffer.

Changing nature of research

The scope for exploration in theoretical issues at the initiative of social scientists has recently declined in all developing countries. Theoretical research is facing a heavy financial crunch. Scholars are compelled to take sponsored, so called applied research. Not only the number but has also coverage of sponsored research in terms of variation in issues and topics of study has increased. In several cases the researchers have no say in methods of data collection. Some of the changes in focus and method in research are directly related to quality and objectivity of research, autonomy of researchers, and researcher and participant's relationship. They also affect the course of utilization of research findings. All these involve a number of moral issues, which have bearing on CER.

Let me first of all clarify that that I do not subscribe a view that there is a dichotomy between theoretical and applied research. All research has both theoretical and applied aspects. Research is a pursuit to find out a pattern in phenomena. It is an endeavour to gauge and/or speculate relationship among various variables and to draw generalizations that may be tested, verified or rejected by others. For that, facts are collected, interpreted and re-interpreted. Such theoretical explanations are valuable inputs not only for the state in its policy formation and implementation, but also for social institutions of civil society. They are also relevant in the emerging social processes. Theoretical postulates are examined and assessed in several ways, not only in the form of empirical evidences. All this is possible of course, if the researcher has time, aptitude and competence for reflection.

Since the late 1970s, the ICSSR has given priority to and emphasis on policy research. It is expected from the scholar of the ICSSR-supported project that the research should have policy recommendations at the end of the study. Fortunately, the term policy is still maintained as broad concept and not confined only to the policy of the government of the day. For the conscientious scholar, relevant research cannot be devoid of social policy. But the problem arises when the notion of policy is narrowed down to the prescribed policy of the sponsoring agencies. Such discourse impinges on the freedom of the researchers.

In several cases, the sponsoring agencies restrict dissemination of the findings. It rules out the possibilities for verification and alternative interpretation of data, the cardinal principles of scientific research. The funding bodies use the research findings for expanding their interests – social, political and financial. For them knowledge is power. They buy information. For that they retain or hire professional researchers. For them, those who give information or share their experiences are treated as subjects or objects of the research. The latter have no say in the whole exercise. Neither do they know the consequences of such studies on their life. Some communities have rightly begun to question this unequal relationship.

Often the sponsoring agencies and the researchers consider applied research as micro studies applicable to specific situation. Such studies are treated as fact finding inquiries. They are sponsored with a view to find out corrective measures for a particular programme. For example, the health ministry is interested in studying the family planning programme to find out why young couples do not use contraceptives. Or, sponsoring agencies are interested in exploring the possibilities of selling a particular idea or product. The study on people's perception on lottery is an example. Or, some micro studies are related to evaluation of programmes. Such studies have instant concern for intervention. In such a concern, the scope for understanding the complexities of society is narrow. It is often a historical. It is repetitive, hardly adds to the growth of knowledge. They have potential to corrupt research priorities of the scientists and hamper their creative talents. Studies sponsored by the health ministry on population policy are case in point. These studies are dictated by a foreign power, geared

into neo-Malthusian framework. They have been focussed on family planning and control of population. They have not only used a vast public resources and talents but also misdirected policy priorities. At present, the studies on AIDS and HIV have the same story to tell. Social scientists often get into such research because huge funds are available. T. N. Madan had rightly observed nearly 20 years ago. Unfortunately research seems to have become the enemy of scholarship in this country and most social scientists seek instant *nirvana* through what passes for social research on urgent issues [Madan 1982].

Confidentiality and accountability

Several areas of research increasingly impinge upon very personal and sensitive aspects of life. Anthropologists now study interpersonal family relationships and customs, psychologists study marital relationship, sociologists study domestic violence and sexuality, ethnic identity, political scientists study voting preferences, opinion and perception on public events, political participation and so on. Economists study consumption, choices, etc. These issues of study seek personal information not only about income and expenditure but also about personal relationships, likes and dislikes, preferences, emotions, desires and also fantasies from the participants of the study. Not only do these participants expect confidentiality but also they have right to know how and why the information that they parted with is used. It is unethical if this information is used against their interests.

All researchers who have done fieldwork in India generally face the following questions from the respondents: “why are you doing this study?”, “who has sent you?”, or, “who provided finances for your work?”, “what will we get by answering your questions?” and so on. These are genuine and legitimate questions. Conscientious and efficient researchers try to answer these questions to convince the respondents about their bona fides. One reason for such response is that the researchers realize that true or real information cannot be obtained from the respondents without winning their confidence. This is done not for ethical reasons but for doing good research. It is a strategy to collect the required information. It is okay so far as it goes. But it also involves ethical

issues such as right to information and accountability of the researchers. Often scientists have an arrogance that pursuit of science is for public good. And they are doing scientific research which, by definition, aims at serving the larger interests of the society. This contention is on flimsy grounds and should be challenged. I submit that so-called science and technology have helped those who are in power to perpetuate their dominance. Even assuming that scientific studies are for the larger good, questions remain: who decides the public good? Do the respondents have the right to judge whether the particular research is for public good or not? And, how far is the 'public good', good for her (including him)? A respondent is as much a citizen of this country as the researcher is. Therefore, she has a right to know the purpose of the research and the benefits – real or imaginary – that she is likely to get. She also has the autonomy to participate in the research and to choose whether to answer the questions or not. It is an obligation of the researcher to respect these rights of those who directly or indirectly participate in research by providing data.

Codification

Some of the above notions of ethical conduct need to be codified for sharing common understanding. Without codification, ethical values cannot be implemented. They remain like sounding brass and tinkling cymbal. Codification, however, is based on pre-conceived concepts and categories. It is for brevity. Even a most rigorous codification cannot always cope with social dynamics related to space and time. It cannot capture all social complexities and subtle destinations.

Moreover, whenever a code, particularly when a code of conduct takes institutional form, there is a fear while evolving procedures and mechanism for implementation, that it may hamper the creativity of exceptional scholars. Moreover, if adequate care is not taken, and they get implemented mechanically, they may lose underlying spirit and perspective of CER. In the process dissenting views may get ignored and suppressed. We have to be aware of this danger. Does that mean that we should give up the exercise of preparing CER? Should we helplessly watch the present state of affairs, which tend to violate the freedom of a vast majority?

Present day social science research increasingly takes people for granted and caters to the interests of the state, the ruling and dominant classes. Should social scientists who talk about transparency and accountability remain above these norms? Moreover, autonomy of the researchers is in danger in a situation where the funding agencies decide agenda for research. Social scientists are used as an instrument to collect information. If this situation were allowed to continue for long, I am afraid that the credibility of social science research would be at stake. It is time to begin our exercise to protect the autonomy of citizens and scholars. Formation of CER is a small beginning. At the same time we should also be aware of the pitfalls of codification and we should think about checks and balances which can take care of dissent, complexities and subtle differences.

Codes of ethics are not neat and foolproof, nor applicable to all situations. They cannot be treated as administrative rules. Sometimes there are conflicting moral dilemmas such as protecting individual autonomy or cultural ethos of the community. Sometimes, the situation is so conflicting that a sensitive person is left perplexed as to what stand should one take? For instance, how do we reconcile anonymity and confidentiality with verification of the data? Protection of privacy and personal interests of the respondents is *sine qua non* for CER. How to assure this is a challenge. Some suggest that the researcher should not take down the name and other identification marks of the participants so that the anonymity of the latter can be maintained. Or, whatever information that the participants had given should not be shown to anyone. The information should remain confidential between the researcher, particularly the one who is collecting data, and the participants. Confidentiality is an important ethical value to guard the autonomy and interests of the participants. But at the same time verification of the data is an important component of research. If another researcher is not allowed to see the information and has no right to verify in the field with the respondent who had given information, then we have to believe the field investigator who claims to have collected the data. What are the implications of such a position? In a large-scale survey a field investigator collects information from a large number of respondents. Suppose that she

is instructed not to take names of the respondents, how would her supervisor check the data to see whether the information is correct, relevant or appropriate to the study? If the checking of the data were not possible, the possibility of the cooking up of such data would increase. Further, we also know that there are a few studies in which the data had been either cooked or misreported for ideological or strategic reasons. If the possibility of verification of the data by other social scientists is ruled out on the pretext of confidentiality the very basis of research gets shaken. Moreover, the possibilities of restudy of the same community over a period of time by other scholar would not arise. Hence comparative perspective to understand changing social processes would be lost. Data would become private property.

It is the moral duty of the researcher to report her findings to the participants. The latter have a right to know what the researcher has written and what are her interpretations of the information that they gave. This, however, involves a number of intricate issues. For example (a) Should the researcher report back to an individual respondent or should she report to the community? (b) Should she report to the community as a whole or to all segments of the community? (c) If the latter, which are and how are the segments be identified? (d) How does one prevent the dominant elite or groups from using the information for their own advantage and against the marginalised groups? Take an example of a study on domestic violence against women. Consider that for such a study the data is collected from female and male respondents. Is it not possible that males would use the information to further strengthen their own position? Or, the study on leadership in a community that reveals corrupt and manipulative practices of a few leaders who grab the resources of the poor. If the researcher reports the findings of the study soon after data collection it is likely that the corrupt leaders might prevent the researcher from disseminating the findings to all the segments of the society. How does one deal with such situation?

An important ethical guideline is that the researcher should tell the objective of the study in a simple language to the respondents and take their consent for the study. But it is not always easy in all social science studies. It is difficult the explain relationship of abstract variables in simple language. Some social anthropologists

begin the study by exploring broad processes, and in due course of time they study many aspects about which the scholars were not aware for at the time of data collection. They reflect on data and may look at it from a different perspective than with what they began before the inquiry. In such a situation what should one tell the respondents? Sometimes some respondents do not want to talk about their behaviour and relationship because they fear that such information might adversely affect their activities. Take an illustration of the dilemma of a young scholar who was interested in studying a traditional healer and his relationship as well as modus operandi with the patients. He met a healer and explained his purpose. The latter gave some excuses for not giving information. The researcher assured him that he had only 'academic' interests. But that did not work. The healer instructed his touts that the researcher should not remain in the vicinity of the area. The researcher tried another healer and met with the same consequences. He then selected another district and visited a healer as a patient and not as a researcher. How do we judge his behaviour?

Ongoing exercise

It is not easy to evolve a code of conduct that can apply in all situations. It is possible that at present our notions of privacy, confidentiality, autonomy, etc. are not understood; in the same way by all communities. Moreover these notions of the community might also undergo changes. It is possible that our notion of privacy is more individualistic and from a western tradition, than what is prevailing among the villagers on certain aspects of life. Therefore, we have to continuously define and debate several ethical issues.

It is of greatest importance to keep ethical problems under continuing scrutiny and debate in journals, in training programmes, in public forums with social scientists taking an initiative in the process, in order to provide increasingly instructive principles for clarifying ethical issues in social science research [Hobbes 1968].

At the end let me repeat that a code of ethics or ethical guidelines, and mechanism for implementation alone are not enough for developing socially oriented research. It also requires the overall development of healthy institutions, rigorous training in social science research, overall transparency and spread of democratic

values. Laying down guidelines is one of the ways that can contribute to the growth of meaningful and socially committed research for a better social order. The present effort of formulating ethical guidelines in the form of 'Ethical Guidelines for Social Science Research in Health' is the beginning of a collective endeavour to do so with a view to:

- Create sensitivity among social scientists for larger social good.
- Develop social commitment and responsibility of the researchers.
- Evolve common terminology and concepts across disciplines that facilitate the evolution a new paradigm of research that is socially productive and responsible.

Notes:

1. I am using the term 'respondent' for the person who is responding to the questions of the researchers. He may be called informant. Ideally I would like to call her (including him) as participant in research because she is participating in research by giving information or allowing the researcher to observe her behaviour. Of course, she is generally not involved, by the researcher; in formulating the study.