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## A REVIEW OF ETHICAL CHALLENGES IN THE SOCIAL RESEARCH ENTERPRISE

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### ABSTRACT

The challenges humans face all over the world necessitate the need for scientific research to solving the problems. Meanwhile, the process of conducting research in the social sciences may results in harm to the study participants; thus, the need for and adherence to ethical considerations to guide social scientific studies. This theoretical paper, therefore, is an attempt to review ethical challenges in the Social Sciences. The paper, which utilized the functionalist theory, identified the important role research ethical play in quality research output in the social sciences. The paper also examined the areas where ethical considerations are needed in social research, including among others: research methods, subject matter, data analysis and reporting, and utilization of research findings. Major ethical principles in social science research were highlighted in this paper. Furthermore, common ethical challenges in social research were also addressed. The paper concludes that, strict adherence to ethical standards in social research would go a long way to ensure credibility in any research enterprise, and by extension, lead to sustainable national development. An enduring strategy is therefore, needed to enhance ethical practices in the social science research. We, therefore, recommend, among others that, universities and other higher institutions of learning should establish Research and Ethics Committees that would ensure that both students and researchers always obtain ethical clearance before embarking on any research involving human beings, especially. Also, the professional bodies in the Social Science Faculty should, as a matter of urgency establish ethical codes for its members regarding the conduct of social research.

### KEYWORDS

Ethics, Research Ethical Principles, Research Ethical Challenges, Social Research.



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## Introduction

Research as a systematic, systematically organized quest for new and better insight generally refers to an enquiry into an unknown, the search for solutions to problems or answers to questions (Nworgu 2006). Social research can be seen to be a process of investigating a social phenomenon through systematic procedure which attempts to understand the attitudes and behaviours of people about whom facts are collected and to account for the resultant opinions.

As it examines complex topics involving cultural, legal, economic, and political phenomena, social science research has long been concerned with ethical dilemmas (Freed-Taylor, 1994). Due to its complexity, social science research must be concerned with upholding moral principles to ensure that both the research method and the results are reliable and accurate (Biber, 2005). Prior to beginning, research involving human subjects must have approval from the institution's Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC). This demonstrates regard for ethical concerns. Although scientific study on humans has the potential to be beneficial and significant, it can also be risky and damaging to the subjects. Therefore, ethical considerations are sacred when researching any aspect of human behavior. It is necessary for social scientific studies to follow ethical guidelines because the process of conducting research in the social sciences has the potential to harm study participants. Therefore, the goal of this theoretical study is to explore the ethical issues that social science research has to deal with.

## Aim and Objectives

The aim of this paper is to review the common ethical challenges in the social science research. The specific objectives are to:

1. Examine the importance of research ethical considerations in Social Sciences.
2. Identify the areas where ethical principles are applied in Social Research
3. Examine the major ethical principles in Social Science Research

## Materials and Methods

For this paper, secondary sources of data gathering were used. The paper's goals were used to review and analyse the content of books, journals, and online articles, publications among other documentaries.

## Literature Reviews

Using the above method, the review of relevant and related literature for this paper was carried out in accordance with the aim and objectives of the paper beginning from the following sub-headings:

## Conceptual Clarifications

The major concepts used in the paper are clarified as follows:

### The Concept of Ethics

Most people think of ethics (or morals) as a set of guidelines for determining what is right and wrong, such as the Hippocratic Oath ("First of all, do no harm"), the Ten Commandments ("Thou shalt not kill..."), the Golden Rule ("Do unto others as you would have them do unto you"), or as sage advice

like Confucius' sayings. The most popular definition of "ethics" is as "conduct norms that differentiate between acceptable and unacceptable behavior" (David, 2020).

The study of moral principles is a topic covered by a number of academic fields, including philosophy, theology, law, psychology, and sociology. For instance, a "medical ethicist" is a person who researches moral principles in the medical field. Ethics can also be described as a process, approach, or way of thinking on how to make decisions and analyze difficult issues and dilemmas. The study of what is right or wrong, good or terrible, acceptable or unacceptable has been defined as ethics. Ethics is a term that is frequently used in conjunction with morals. For the sake of this essay, we will restrict the topic of our debate to a set of moral guidelines, such as a code of professional ethics.

### **Research Ethics**

Research ethics is a notion that refers to a complicated collection of principles, norms, and institutional frameworks that help define and control scientific activity. In the end, research ethics codifies the ethics of science in application. In other words, it is founded on the general ethics of science, just as general ethics is based on common sense morality (Madushani, 2016).

Research ethics deals with the application of moral rules and professional codes of conduct in the collection, collation, analysis, reporting, and dissemination of information on research subjects (whether they are individuals or groups) as regards the right to privacy, confidentiality, and informed consent (Adeyinka, 2008). It means that from the collection of data to writing a research report, ethics must be considered for a credible research output.

### **Brief History of Ethics in Scientific Research**

Unfortunately, severe and devastating violations of humane ethical standards have served as the foundation for much of the history of the growth of the area of research ethics. The American Psychological Association (2020) states that a voyage through this history might give important insights into the current condition of research ethical organizations and rules that govern social science and biomedical research.

The requirement to use humans in study led to the development of the discipline of biomedical research, which is the foundation for adopting research ethics. Although this development dates back even further than the eighteenth century, it was only on December 9th, 1946, when an American tribunal began criminal proceedings against 23 prominent German administrators and physicians who knowingly participated in war crimes and crimes against humanity, that the need to evolve proper attitudes toward this need was seriously considered (Kour, 2014). They were accused of performing medical tests on thousands of World War II detainees held hostage in concentration camps without their permission. Unfortunately, many of these people died as a result of the studies, while others suffered chronic paralysis. Due to the prevalence of human exploitation in numerous situations, the Nuremberg code was established in 1948 as a result of the trial's findings. In order to prevent the mistreatment of human subjects and ensure the preservation of their rights during study, professional codes and laws had to be established (Oddi & Cassidy, 1990; Fouka and Mantzorou, 2011). The Nuremberg code placed particular emphasis on the risk-benefit ratio while emphasizing the need to uphold informed, voluntary agreement, the freedom to withdraw from research, and protection from physical and mental harm or suffering and death (Burns, 2005). The Helsinki declaration, which was made in 1964 and emphasizes the protection of subjects by stating that the welfare of individuals is more important than scientific or social needs, is the most important declaration on research ethics.

that has ever been made (Oddi & Cassidy, 1990). Other declarations on research ethics have also been made. The idea of research ethics has sparked the creation of a number of ideas that describe how humans are able to overcome a variety of obstacles in their day-to-day experiences.

Currently, professional associations for each discipline, such as the American Educational Research Association (AERA), the American Sociological Association (ASA), and the American Psychological Association (APA), outline their own general ethical guidelines relevant to their disciplines. These guidelines expand upon and occasionally go beyond federal guidelines. Each of these associations has a unique URL for their website, which covers a variety of ethical issues unique to each of these professions. For instance, the American Psychological Association (2020) outlines specific ethical categories of conduct ranging from general principles of professional conduct, which address concerns like integrity and justice, to more practice-specific issues, like patient privacy and confidentiality. Additionally, there are ethical rules on record-keeping, fees, and issues that could arise during treatment, such as those specifically relating to sexual intimacy with clients and therapy with past romantic partners. Additionally, there are rules for tackling ethical problems like discrimination and processing complaints, among others.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This paper is premised on the theory of functionalism.

In sociology, the functionalist explanation of society has a complicated and lengthy history. Auguste Comte (1798– 1857) and Herbert Spencer (1820– 1903) both heavily influenced it. It was created by Talcott Parsons and improved by Emile Durkheim (1858– 1917). But Alfred Reginald Radcliffe-Brown, who, along with Bronislaw Malinowski, might be considered the founders of modern functionalism, presented the most conclusive claim concerning functionalism (Yunusa & Usman, 2022). According to Radcliff-Brown (1959:181 as cited in Yunusa & Usman, 2022), "a particular social usage's function is the contribution it makes to the functioning of the overall system." This contribution could be constructive or destructive. The input is considered to be functional whenever it is constructive. For example, Durkheim believed that religion benefits society by encouraging social cohesion, likewise social research benefits the society by bringing a sustainable development. Durkheim provided a comprehensive analysis of society. According to him, society is made up of many pieces, none of which are greater than the whole, making society "sui-generis" (all-in-all). He chose sui-generis simply to emphasize the value of the community as a whole over the contributions of its individual members. As a result, the ability of the pieces to survive is determined by how well they function. When different parts of society don't do what they're supposed to do, society is in an abnormal state.

Therefore, institutions that positively contribute to the survival and efficient operation of society are said to be functioning. As a corollary, there are additional human actions that, by their negative effects, change the delicate equilibrium of the social system. The dysfunctional components of human society are what Robert Merton refers to as these. For instance, just as war can have a very negative impact on how well civilization is run, likewise unethical behaviour during social research can be harmful to the participants and hampers societal development.

Malinowski (1944, as cited in Yunusa & Usman, 2022) however, emphasized the significance of functionalism by stating that each established social pattern (ethical principles in research) contributes in its own unique way to meeting the requirements for the proper operation of the wider society. This is usually referred to as "the postulate of universal functionalism" in sociological literature. Goode

(1951, as cited in Yunusa & Usman, 2022) disagreed with this idea by saying that some social interactions have nothing to do with how well society works as a whole.

In his own contribution through his AGIL pattern variable, Talcott Parsons analyzes this. Where L-Latent pattern maintenance, G-Goal attainment, A-Adaptation, and I-Integration. The role of adaptation is to distribute scarce resources, and economic institutions carry out this function. According to Yunusa and Usman (2022), to achieve a goal, one must mobilize the resources and energy required for the social objective and the political institution's survival. The legal institutions carry out integration, which focuses on the coordination of all other institutions to maintain peace. The family, educational, and religious institutions perform latent pattern maintenance, which gives the means for preserving the traits of a society. The four institutions, in Parsons' view, are necessary for maintaining social balance (Yunusa & Usman, 2022).

The relevance of functionalist model in this paper therefore rests on its ability to highlight the role that ethical principles play in social research at every step in research project, such as in the choice of the subject matter, methodology, data collection, data analysis and reporting, statement of the problem, objectives, theoretical framework and even in conclusion. Functionalism has been able to explain how research can be beneficial to both the participants, the researchers and the society at large by upholding the stipulated ethical standards, as well as how the failure to abide by the ethical standards can result in social injury to the participants and societal underdevelopment.

### **The Importance of Research Ethical Considerations in the Social Sciences.**

The integrity of science, respect for human rights and dignity, and cooperation between science and society all depend on research ethics. These guidelines guarantee that study subjects' involvement is free, informed, and secure. You'll strike a balance between pursuing significant research goals and employing morally upright research techniques. Whether intentional or not, it is always required to protect participants against long-term or extreme harm. The credibility of your study will suffer if you violate research ethics since it will be difficult for others to believe the results of your work if your techniques are immoral. Even if a research hypothesis is important to society, this does not allow you to violate the dignity or human rights of your study participants.

It is crucial to respect people's dignity, privacy, and autonomy when conducting research on human subjects, to take extra precautions with vulnerable populations, to minimize harms and risks like deception, invasion of privacy, stress coercion, and social injury, among others, and to maximize benefits. Only by applying strict ethical norms can these be determined. Additionally, there are a number of reasons why it is crucial to observe ethical guidelines when conducting social research, as emphasized by David (2020), including the following:

First, the objectives of research, such as knowledge, truth, and error prevention, are first served by ethical considerations. For instance, laws against creating, manipulating, or presenting research results incorrectly encourage the truth and reduce inaccuracy.

Second, ethical norms encourage the values that are crucial to collaborative work, such as trust, accountability, mutual respect, and fairness, as research frequently includes a considerable lot of cooperation and coordination among many different people in various fields and institutions. Third, several ethical issues contribute to making sure that the public can hold researchers accountable. For instance, in order to ensure that researchers who are financed with public funds may be held

accountable, government laws on research misconduct, conflicts of interest, and the protection of human subjects are required (David, 2020).

Fourth, public support for research is also increased by the use of ethical considerations in research. If people can trust the caliber and integrity of the research, they are more likely to support it.

Finally, a lot of research ethics support a range of other crucial moral and social ideals, like civic duty, respect for human rights, adherence to the law, and public health and safety. Researchers, students, and the general public can all suffer serious consequences as a result of unethical study practices. For instance, a researcher who falsifies evidence in a criminal trial may undermine social justice, and a researcher who disobeys rules and regulations pertaining to participants' social safety may endanger those participants' social health and safety as well as the health and safety of research staff and participants.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO) (2023), research ethics, which define the behavior expectations for scientific researchers, are crucial for preserving the rights, welfare, and overall worth of study subjects. In order to ensure that the proper ethical standards are being observed, an ethics committee should examine all study involving human subjects. The fundamental focus of ethical review is discussion of the ethical concepts of beneficence, fairness, and autonomy.

### **Areas where Ethical Considerations are Needed in Social Research**

It appears that ethical norms should be followed at every stage of a research project, starting with the topic selection, issue statements, research technique, data collecting and analysis, reporting, conclusion, and even in the use of research findings.

Akaranga and Makau (2016) assert that ethical standards strengthen the goals of research, which include information distribution, telling the truth, and lastly the necessity to correct errors. Writing a research proposal and getting it approved are the first crucial stages before starting the real research investigation. A researcher must choose the best methodology to use, the most pertinent methods of data collection, present the research findings, interpret them appropriately, and display the material in a logical order. The information is then carefully reviewed and documented in the form of a book, project report, thesis, or article. While conducting research, it is crucial that a researcher always adhere to the proper values. Research misconduct may arise if this is not followed. We also talk about research ethics within this framework, focusing on concerns with the research itself, research participants, and the research method.

Furthermore, a researcher must exercise caution when disclosing findings if they could harm the productive working relationships with their sponsor. This is obvious if the information concentrates on the organization's policies and potentially discloses sensitive information about the people or organization. This necessitates good communication with other researchers while also preserving their intellectual property rights. If this is not strictly followed, it could result in revolt or even demonstrations (Akaranga & Makau, 2016).

### **Major Ethical Principles in Social Science Research**

The following are some of the ethical principles that guide research involving human beings. They are among others:

***The Principle of Autonomy:*** Participants' rights and dignity must be honored and protected during research. Giving research participants the option to choose whether or not to participate is what is

meant by treating them with respect or as autonomous agents. The secret to involvement is understanding the consent procedure. Because doing so keeps them safe from physical and psychological harm and ensures that the researcher does not pose awkward questions that can mislead or even startle the respondent, using participants must be voluntary (Resnik, 2015).

***The Principle of Non-maleficance:*** Both the participants in the study and the general public must not suffer negative effects as a result of it. Any difficulty, anguish, or suffering must be minimized, carefully justified, and truthfully explained to the participants and the public at large. The possible hazards of participation are expressed by non-maleficence. It focuses on the definition of injury, which might be physical, psychological, social, or even financial in character (Burns & Grove, 2005). The goal of non-maleficence is to prevent harm. It focuses on the necessity of refraining from physically or psychologically harming the respondent in order to prevent any intentional injury or to reduce any component of prospective harm. This could be the outcome of asking awkward questions, feeling let down, or pressuring them into disclosing facts that might cause discomfort or even dread in the respondents. A researcher's responsibility is to describe the research's implications, which should be weighed against the hazards involved. The researcher should then undertake a debriefing with the respondent(s) at the conclusion of the study, outlining the precise purpose of the investigation and the reasons why full disclosure was not made (Treece & Treece, 1982).

***The Principle of Beneficence:*** Positive contributions to the welfare of individuals should come through research. Participants or the community where the research is being conducted should benefit. As the main goal of upholding ethics in research is to serve and promote the welfare of people and prevent prejudice or deception, beneficence is a stringent commitment to maximize any advantages and limit any potential harm to participants (Resnik, 2015).

***The Principle of Justice:*** This speaks to the issue of who pays for the research and who profits from it. Studies ought to be planned so that rewards and hazards are equally distributed. It is improper to do research on weak or underprivileged individuals in order to assist the wealthy or privileged (Resnik, 2015).

Scientific integrity, essentiality, investigator competency, informed consent, non-exploitation, privacy, anonymity, and confidentiality, as well as conflict of interest, are additional ethical standards that apply to research. According to Beauchamp & Childress (2001), informed consent highlights the respondents' right to autonomy, which they define as the capacity for self-determination in action in accordance with a personal plan. A respondent can choose to take part in a study at this point if they are aware of the advantages and disadvantages of learning new information as a result of it. This component also deals with how to compensate for any bodily suffering or harm, as well as how to respect people's privacy and dignity.

Furthermore, in most cases ethical standards involve nine principles, according to (American Sociological Association, 2011; Resnik, 2015), including:

**1. Honesty and integrity:** The researcher must present their work in good faith, which includes information on the research's publication as well as methods, data, and results. The researcher is not allowed to use any information that would cast doubt on the objectivity of the study's findings or cause the society to be misled.

**2. Objectivity.** Any part of the study, including its design, data processing, interpretation, and review / evaluation of the report (publication), must be free of bias.

**3. Carefulness:** The researcher must use caution to prevent careless blunders. The researcher must thoroughly and critically assess his or her work to make sure the findings are valid. It's crucial to maintain track of every entry made in the study. If the researcher is requested to review, the task must be completed entirely and effectively.

**4. Openness:** When publishing the findings of his or her research, the researcher must always be ready to share the data and results, as well as the new tools (which have been developed), as doing so advances knowledge and science. The researcher must be receptive to feedback and fresh concepts.

**5. Respect for intellectual property:** The researcher must have a clear permit before using another researcher's tools, methods, unpublished data, or results/findings, and they must not plagiarize or copy another researcher's work. Plagiarism occurs when these elements are ignored. Copyrights, patents, and other types of intellectual property must all be respected, and the researcher is required to provide due credit to those who contributed to their work.

**6. Confidentiality:** It is crucial that participant identities remain anonymous or secure, and the assurances go beyond simply safeguarding their names to also cover refraining from utilizing self-identifying language and material. A crucial element in shielding the participants from potential damage is maintaining their anonymity and secrecy.

Contrary to popular belief, participant confidentiality and participant anonymity are not the same thing. When a participant is anonymous, the researcher is not aware of their identify (for instance, when employing anonymous surveys, the researcher is not at all aware of the participant's identity). Participant confidentiality is when the researcher is aware of the participant's identity but the identity is kept secret and the data has been de-identified (for example, in interviews where the researcher is aware of the participant's identity, so only confidentiality, not anonymity, can be provided). Anything supplied in a confidential manner must be respected by the researcher. The researcher is required to abide with the rules for disclosing private information, such as data submitted by study participants.

**7. Responsible publication:** Not only for the sake of maintaining his or her profession, but also for the advancement of science and knowledge, the researcher must publish. This indicates that the researcher shouldn't publish any original work or material that is a rehash of already published research.

**8. Legality:** The researcher must constantly be conscious of and consciously apply the laws, principles, and regulations that have an impact on the study that is currently being conducted, and must ensure that all research activities adhere to these ethical standards.

**9. Human protection:** If the study involves humans, the researcher must make sure that the study maximizes the scientific benefit of the study participants and other people (society) while minimizing any potential harm to the research participants. This indicates that the researcher cannot make study subjects do the tests against their will just because they are required for the specific research. The researcher is required to uphold all human rights, especially the privacy and autonomy rights. The researcher must consider vulnerable populations such as young children, seniors, those with learning disabilities, etc.

### Common Ethical Challenges in Social Research

The application of ethical standards to social research has brought up a number of challenging problems. The first problem is related to secret research. When it is necessary to better understand



specific social issues, covert study is appropriate. The study of drug traffickers' and users' social lives is an illustration of this type of research. Members of these communities do not want to be studied, hence it is impossible to obtain their informed consent, as stated by (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). Additionally, it has been suggested that simply asking a research subject for their informed consent may cause them to shift their perspective on sharing information with the researchers.

The researcher should be impartial in order to retain their purpose of "objectivity" in their research project, which is a second issue related to the function of the researcher as participant-observer (Gans, 1982). The researcher typically needs to establish and maintain close ties with other community members throughout study experiences where they also participate as participants. According to certain ethnographers, a close relationship of this nature between the researchers and the participants might result in conflict and deceit (Hesse-Biber & Nagy 2011). If researchers have a personal connection to their respondents, it could be difficult for them to make objective conclusions in their research.

The nature of ethical regulation is a third issue: Researchers have expressed concerns that increased ethical review is limiting their ability to independently decide on ethical issues relating to their specific projects. Universities have established Ethics Committees to review research proposals through an ethical review process, and academics are under pressure to obtain research grants (Hesse-Biber & Nagy, 2011). Researchers may feel pressured to check the appropriate boxes rather than consider ethical principles themselves because of the formulaic approach to research ethics that has been established by ethical regulation.

Another problem is related to weaker groups: In the majority of ethical clearance procedures, the term "vulnerable group" in social science research refers to children and young adults, those with mental health issues, and those with learning disabilities. Because disadvantaged populations have trouble giving initial and ongoing informed consent to undertake research, ethics committees urge that extra consideration be given to them when evaluating petitions for ethics clearance. In order to safeguard the interests of these groups, it has become necessary to insist on more involved procedures. Although some have argued that it is the responsibility of researchers to discover strategies to win participants' permission in a way that matters to them, regardless of their abilities (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011).

The last concern is about informed consent: Social scientists are increasingly required to have their research projects reviewed by Ethics Committees due to the increased bureaucracy of social science research as a result of the significant changes in research governance and regulation. The assumption that researchers will demonstrate that they have received informed permission by producing forms signed by research participants is one effect of this growing bureaucratization. Informed consent is required by ethics committees primarily for two reasons: (i) to ensure that participants are aware of what participation entails and of their rights regarding confidentiality and anonymity; and (ii) to shield researchers from accusations made in the future by study participants. Some social scientists contend that not all forms of research should utilize informed consent. This worry is that maintaining anonymity and confidentiality may encourage secrecy in areas of public importance. Researchers in the field of criminology have expressed concerns about signed consent forms in particular (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011).

The same as everyone else, researchers are only human. In light of this, everyone of us contributes our unique likes, dislikes, feelings, values, and motivations to our study initiatives. It is unreasonable to anticipate that you will always find people you research appealing or that you would constantly feel completely engaged. Keep in mind that you, the researcher, were the one to start the process and

involve other people (your subjects). Think about this carefully as you consider your ethical duties to your study participants, but as you do so, keep in mind that you are a human being. Be realistic and fair to everyone involved.

## Conclusions

To ensure that the research process is governed by ethical standards, it is essential to integrate ethics into every step of the process, from choosing the research problem, through carrying out research goals, interpreting, and reporting research findings. This article sheds light on the controversy surrounding moral concerns in social science. Arguments pertaining to topics like hidden research, ethical regulations, vulnerable groups, letters of consent, and ethical quandaries have become crucial in social research projects. When performing fieldwork, social science researchers face a variety of issues, including the need for cultural sensitivity, security concerns, the effects of administrative and political practices, and a lack of experience dealing with bureaucratized ethical procedures.

## Recommendations

As a result of the foregoing, it is advised, among other things, that universities and other higher educational institutions establish research and ethics committees to ensure that both students and researchers always obtain ethical clearance before beginning any research, particularly that involves human beings. As a matter of urgency, the professional bodies in the Social Science Faculty should develop ethical standards for their members with relation to the conduct of social research.

Again, despite the difficulties in putting ethical principles into practice, social researchers must respect the rights, dignity, and value of all people and work to eliminate bias in their social research-based activities. They must not put up with any types of prejudice based on factors such as age, gender, race, ethnicity, national origin, religion, sexual orientation, disability, health conditions, marital status, or parental status.

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## Authors' contributions

All authors drafted the manuscript, proofread and approved the final manuscript.

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