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ISSUES AND CHALLENGES OF ETHICS IN SOCIAL RESEARCH: A CRITICAL SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

Ethics involves other-centric acts of reasonable morality, meaning thereby good for others and these acts ought not to be self-centric. Ethics, in the words of Beauchamp and Childress (1994: 4), is 'a generic term for various ways of understanding and examining the moral life'. It is concerned with perspectives on right and proper conduct. Three main categories of ethics are commonly distinguished: metaethics, normative ethics and applied ethics.

Traditionally, metaethics is concerned with the analysis or logic of moral concepts (Nino,1991). It involves: exploring the meaning, function, nature and justification of normative judgments (Jorgensen, 1971: 321-333); ideas like 'right', 'obligation' and 'virtue'; and how ethical evaluations are made. The objective is to achieve understanding of the meaning of right and wrong rather than to determine what acts are good or bad, or how ethical judgments might be justified. The fundamental concern is not with constructing any systematic theory of ethics for daily living, but with analyzing moral concepts (Kimmel, 1988).

For the conduct of social science research an understanding of normative ethics is more critical than a grasp of metaethics. Normative ethics offers the moral norms which guide, or indicate what one should or should not do, in particular situations. It provides frameworks – of which one may not actually be aware at that time – that allows to judge people's actions and decisions as 'right' or 'wrong', 'good' or 'bad'. The primary question in normative ethics is on what grounds can one decide whether an act is right?

The Issues of Ethics in Social Research

The basic ethical problem is as old as human, political and scientific activities: how can one observe and intervene in the life of others without inflicting harm or wronging persons?

The dominant social science methodology stresses objectivity, accuracy and understanding of social process. Accordingly, it was widely assumed that

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social science, by its nature, is value free and that social scientists have better developed social conscience and greater awareness of the interest and needs of others, and hence are well-prepared to make the ethical judgment required by their work.

Robert K. Merton (1968) has discussed the scientific ethos and value system of scientific inquiry in order to highlight the scientific nature of sociology. According to him, the sociological perspective has accepted certain values of scientific value system in order to become a scientific perspective and two very significant values are ethical neutrality and disinterestedness. Any scientist should remain ethically neutral while studying any phenomenon, i.e., he should be concerned with the reality of phenomenon ("What is") not with the desirability ("What ought to be") or undesirability of the phenomenon. There should be no value-involvement. For example - when a sociologist is studying poverty, then he should be concerned with the reality of poverty not with the problem of poverty – that whether poverty should exist or not or what ought to be done to eradicate poverty. All scientific researches should be independent of emotions, biases, likes and dislikes of the scientist. A scientist should maintain emotional neutrality from the object of study for achieving objectivity, e.g. while studying poverty, a sociologist is expected to maintain doctor like neutrality without getting emotionally moved or involved.

The Praxis of Ethics in Social Research: The American Psychological Association began to develop a code of ethics in 1938 and American Sociological Association in 1945. However, it was only in 1953 and 1969, respectively, that these two associations approved and published their first codes. Those codes were quite general, uncontroversial, and largely unenforceable. In short, one explicit concern about the ethics of social research at one time seemed unnecessary. The emphasis on social conscience that arose during the late 1960s brought about both an emphasis on "relevant" social research and many new laws that protect the right of the individual.

The present debate on ethical issues in social sciences research problematizes a normative approach to ethics, and highlights the importance of considering the social character of research activities when applying ethical guidelines or Research Ethics Committees' prescriptive procedures and methodological solutions. Established codes of practices define acceptable standards of conduct within the profession in sociology, linguistics, anthropology, psychology, etc. Virtually every social sciences association worldwide has established a professional code of ethics, such as the code of ethics of the International Sociological Association (ISA 2001), the British Sociological Association code (BSA 2002), the American Anthropological Association (AAA, 1998) and, at the European level, the RESPECT(2004) code, just to provide some examples. These codes attempt to define general principles and orientations. Boundaries of ethical principles and now informed consent,

confidentiality and protection of participants are central to most social science codes of ethics.

In many countries, a specific legislation is required to protect human participants in research activities. This legislation protects the rights of research participants in various ways. The institution of ethics committees, the so-called Institutional Review Board (IRB), Research Ethics Board (REB), Research Ethics Committee (REC), subject data collection and other research activities to obtain authorization, and prescribe specific procedures and methodological solutions to insure that research activities are conducted ethically. These ethics committees appear to materialize professional ethical codes into specific forms, practices and procedures. Probably the greatest risk in bureaucratizing ethics is creating the impression that when one has complied with the ethical requirements one is "done" with ethics and can forget about it.

There is heated debate raging on the utility of ethics committees and review boards (Tilley, Powick-Kumar & Ratkovic, 2009) with opponents and defenders. One needs to understand the main features of this debate to grasp the problems inherent in a normative approach to ethics in social sciences research.

With the emphasis on "relevance" in social research, urgent social problems such as drug abuse, violence, crime, overpopulation, the aged, minority issues and racial conflict become the object of much social research. But, the traditional training of social scientists was not adequate for their new roles. Scientists ventured into sub cultures about which they knew far less then they realize concerning values norms and relationships with the larger culture. For example, much research on aging has been conducted without awareness of either socio economic class stratification among persons born around 1900, or the corresponding stratification of interests, needs, norms and abilities for that group.

Some of the political impetus for federal regulation and ethical review of social and behavioural research was caused by the extensive use of human research in bio-medicine and some well publicized case of ethical abuse and misuse of human being in bio-medical research. This concern led to the issuance by United State Department of Health, Education and Welfare of regulations that deal specifically with protection of the rights and welfare of human subjects in research and prescribed establishment (as a condition of receiving DHEW and other federal agency research funds) of peer review board at each institution engaged in human research.

The Debate on Ethics Committees: Ethics committees are often criticized for limiting and threatening academic freedom (Bledsoe *et al,* 2007: 593-641; Lewis, 2008: 684-699; Rambo, 2007: 353-367; Tierney & Blumberg-Corwin, 2007: 388-398; Tilley *et al,* 2009): "institutional ethical oversight has

the potential to limit the creative process of scientific enquiry and censor academics" (Taylor & Patterson, 2010: 165). They are perceived as infringing on professional autonomy (Taylor & Patterson, 2010) and even as being an instrument for harassment in the academic workplace (Mueller, 2004: 290-313; Fogel, 2007: 109-118; Patterson, 2008: 18-27). Many authors describe ethics committees more as institutional instruments for implementing an audit culture in universities than as a means to improve the actual protection of research participants: "Social scientists have been attentive to the rise of institutional ethical oversight specifically, seeing it as one of the more intrusive and demanding instances of audit culture in the university" (Taylor & Patterson, 2010).

Opponents: The main arguments among the opponents focus on the difficult and lengthy ethics application process (Fogel, 2007) and in the often unnecessary regulation, as Haggerty (2004: 403) points out: "such well intentioned but onerous regulations are justified on the basis of hypothetical worst-case scenarios and then normalized across a vast range of research." Above all, critics sustain that ethics committees go far beyond regulating ethical practices in academia. They describe ethical review practices often used (or misused) as instruments to control the type of research that is funded and developed in the university. In their study on the impact of institutional ethical reviews on research work, Taylor & Patterson (2010) state that: "opposers frame it as an instrument of powerful elites—universities and administrators worried about institutional liability, or local business interests trying to keep nosy researchers at bay." Some authors describe ethics committees as primarily being instruments for institutional self-protection (Liberman, 1999: 47-63).

"If there were any truth in advertising, the university ethics review would be called how not to get the university sued committee." Other authors portray ethics committees as accomplishing a double mission—protecting research participants and universities from legal suits (Cloke, Cooke, Cursons, Milbourne & Widdowfield, 2000: 133-154).

The issue is that institutional self protection should be clearly distinguished from research participants' protection. Ethical issues in social sciences research are described as complex and context specific (Cloke *et al, 2000*), posing thorny questions with no simple answers (González-López, 2011: 457), impossible to predict (Swauger, 2011: 498). Are the existing ethical research committees able to assist researchers and students in facing ethical issues emerging from their research work?

Supporters: Many supporters of ethics policies have advocated local reforms rather than total rejection of ethical oversight. It is a useful exercise to make sure that ethical issues are carefully addressed and specific methodological solutions are pondered and evaluated at its beginning. The inclusion of consent forms and plain language statements in the material

provided to participants, is a helpful aid in designing a research project that will be ethically acceptable in its broad methodology (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004: 268).

The review process forces researchers to reflect on issues that may be overlooked in research design. Most defenders agree on the fact that the researchers "are not the best people to decide on the risks and benefits of their research" (Hedgecoe, 2008: 874), and therefore the need for an independent review process. An interesting point that is put forward among defenders is that human subject regulations are not only about preventing harm to research participants, but about "protecting people's rights not to be researched, even when anyone regarded the practices as harmless by any definition" (Stark, 2007: 778).

Ethical Dilemmas: Thus the social scientists are faced with a three pronged dilemmas, and a seemingly hopeless one, except in the hands of persistent problem solvers.

1. Ethicality of use of deception in the study of human beings? How can spontaneous private behaviour be studied experimentally without using deception?

2. Violation of individual interests of privacy by social research? Can procedural solution to this problem be found?

3. In the process of rapport building, researchers befriend people to elicit data (i.e., when investigators become participant observers), what obligation have they to respect and protect the privacy of the persons they study?

The corollary ethical issues are:

(1) A greater awareness of some kind of research problems that requires ethical awareness and decision making; (2) a sense of the range of decision criteria and choice alternatives that a social scientists might consider; and (3) do valid research ethically. (4) One of the difficulties faced by social researchers is that consequences can be difficult to predict and the definition of what is distressing differs from person to person and may also change over time and life course of events.

Ethical issues involve individual moral responsibility and ongoing self reflection during the whole research process. Empirical studies of ethical problems in social sciences research aim to document this process of self reflection and the actual solutions that were taken in relation to specific ethical dilemmas emerging during research activities.

The Challenges of Ethics in Social Research: There are some fundamental factors that lead to these challenges.

1. Man studies man. The subject is endowed with consciousness just like the researcher. Experiments are not possible due to ethical issues and also due to a limited life span of man. Social scientists do not have an inalienable right to conduct research involving other people.

2. Unlike natural sciences, social scientific theories can alter society, viz., Marxian theory.

3. Problem of measurement and subjectivity in social sciences.

4. Cultural specificity vs. Cultural Universalization.

5. Problem of validity and prediction; mere presence of a researcher alters the social reality and hence there are reasonable questions on the validity and reliability of social research besides issues of prediction.

6. Finally the issues of Applied Ethics that raises questions such as 'Knowledge for what' a la Robert Lynd? And consequently, knowledge for whom?

7. Hence comes in the dilemma of a social researcher who practices his profession in a scientific manner with his scientific tools and groomed in a knowledge base imbued in a humanitarian value system. Thus, there is a serious dilemma of generalization and explanation versus understanding of specificity and uniqueness of social reality. This has led to a new dilemma of quantitative research versus qualitative research.

8. Ethics committee procedures appear to be unsuitable for qualitative, ethnographic research and participatory research "standard ethical requirements that may fit relatively easily into experimental or quantitative research are far more problematic for qualitative researchers." "The qualitative research process … is less predictable, harder to outline ahead of time, and the projects' risks are more hypothetical in nature" (Taylor & Patterson, 2010). Ethnographers are most likely to identify risks for their research participants during the course of the project (Murphy & Dingwall, 2007: 2223-2234; Cloke *et al,* 2000). It is rarely possible to take all the ethical decisions at the beginning of the research, in particular in the case of providing guaranteed anonymity (van den Hoonaard, 2003: 141-151) and fully-informed consent (Murphy & Dingwall, 2007). Each research situation poses its unique contingencies; moreover, ethical issues "are shaped contextually, and therefore need to be addressed in a situated manner" (Cloke *et al,* 2000).

9. It is clearly impossible to gain informed consent from such a large number of participants. Beyond such practical difficulties, the notion

of informed consent itself is potentially problematic as researchers may not be able to provide participants with sufficient information about the consequences of their involvement.

10. Ethics committee procedures would finally kill techniques such as participant observation so well used by anthropologists and ethnographers in last several decades. Great scholarly accounts of anthropology have been fruits of participant observation.

Paradoxes of Procedural Ethics

a. To ask a participant to sign an informed consent form can put the participants at risk: "I had to protect them from the potential consequences of complying with an institutional procedure paradoxically designed to protect them" (González-López, 2011).

b. To highlight the importance of distinguishing between moral responsibility and compliance with institutional regulations is significant; as Koro-Ljungberg (2007: 1075) and her colleagues state: "Research ethical decision making and freedom of choice needs to be separate from discussion related to researchers' compliance, duties and institutional responsibilities." If compliance with the ethical review process can help researchers to systematically reflect on the ethical implications of research activities at the beginning of the project, it certainly does not absolve them from the ethical responsibility towards research.

c. Einwohner (2011: 415-430) describes her discomfiture towards the anonymising procedure she had designed for her project, a procedure approved by the ethical review board. Removing the name of individual holocaust survivors felt inappropriate in a moral sense, and she points out that: "In the case of Holocaust survivors, given the kinds of conditions they endured, maintaining confidentiality may also serve to undermine their dignity" (Einwohner, 2011).

d. Nespor & Groenke (2009: 996-1012) refer to studies on the Chicago heat wave of 1995 that led to several hundred deaths. The case-control designed used by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) focused on individual variables, such as living alone, medical conditions etc. It was pointed out the limitations of this research design: "If there were risks of living in an impoverished, institutionally depleted, or politically neglected neighbourhood or region, the CDC analysis would not help to identify them. The CDC study directs the attention of public health agencies to the particular set of individuals who are more vulnerable to heat related problems, but not to the places where such problems are likely to be concentrated".

e. As Cannella (2007: 316) points out: "This global move towards regulation of research ethics as enterprise (although imposed somewhat differently within various nations) can also result in the belief and the creation of the illusion that moral concerns, power issues, justice, protecting other human beings (and so on) have been addressed with no further need for concern."

Dangers and Risks Inherent in Social Research: This is concerned predominantly with professional hazards meaning thereby risk to researchers. The experience of risk to researchers frequently comes parallel to those of the people that are being studied. Public and private sector institutions are held responsible for performing relevant risk assessments for the constituencies they serve and society at large.

1. Physical danger has been described in research accounts from early anthropological literature through to the Chicago School and modern urban ethnographies (Fielding, 1981). Chicago School sociology was built upon the elevation of the endurance of physical danger often focusing upon street life, male work cultures and gangs (Anderson, 1923; Wirth, 1928; Whyte, 1955; Becker, 1966). Research on communities under threat, for example in high crime areas, war zones, high militancy, terrorism prone areas and in situations where torture and political repression occur, presents serious risks and dangers to researchers. For instance, anthropologist Myrna Mack Chang, researching internally displaced people in Guatemala, was brutally murdered by individuals with strong connections to the Guatemalan military (Menchú, 1998).

2. Researchers going for fieldwork in developing countries often risk serious adverse health consequences due to lack of safe and hygienic conditions of life. Linkogle (Lee-Treweek & Linkogle, 2000: 8-25) suffered a number of debilitating health problems ranging from contracting intestinal parasites to having an adverse reaction to anti-malaria medication during her research in Nicaragua. These problems of disease in the field are usually associated with researching other cultures, but Lankshear's experience shows the need for the issue of protection of health to include potential risk in our own societies. Any hospital laboratory dealing with pathology, is rife with completely unanticipated physical threats whilst participants are many a times well prepared for the threat of disease, in the form of inoculations and training, threats to researcher's own health as a participant observer are overlooked (Lankshear, 2000: 72-90).

3. Emotional danger involves experience of severe threat due to negative 'feeling states' induced by the research process. Real distress can affect other areas of the researcher's life, such as their family and

personal relationships at work. Letherby has researched in the field of involuntary childlessness and New Reproductive Technologies. As an involuntarily childless woman herself, Letherby argues that there are great benefits to using one's own experience as a starting point for research and as a resource throughout the research process. However, there are emotional risks in scrutinizing one's own experience and being able to identify directly with that of participants (Letherby, 2000: 91-113).

4.   Lee-Treweek examines her experience of carrying out ethnographic research in Bracken Court, a nursing home for older people, where researching the home had a substantial negative impact upon her emotional well-being. She finally discusses the importance of seeking support and guidance on the emotional impact of research when fieldwork experiences are very distressing. Lee-Treweek notes the interrelationship between a researcher experiencing emotional danger and the existence of ethical dilemmas in the field. She argues that her distress was, in part, caused by not knowing what to do in the face of ethical problems. The use of colleague support, personal counselling and specialized study groups is discussed as a means of coping, and the need for thorough planning and ethical consideration is presented as a prerequisite to managing emotional threats (Lee-Treweek & Linkogle, 2000: 144-131).

Currently, social science is becoming more aware of the importance of researcher safety and well-being. In Britain this is being driven, in part, by a general tightening-up of health and safety procedures within universities. In the United States, fear of litigation is focusing attention on the need for rigorous evaluation of research proposals and safety arrangements prior to entry to the field. Various disciplines within social science have also begun to recognize the need for researcher safety too. So, for instance, the Social Policy Association (Britain) is developing guidelines for fieldwork safety procedures.

Hence the issues and challenges of ethics in social research are multifold and need serious considerations for developing a holistic and integrated solution to the entire research enterprise.

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