

Ethical Considerations and their Applications to Research: a Case of the University of Nairobi

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Abstract

Human beings face many challenges especially when they are expected to make certain ethical decisions in life. Sometimes, it is difficult to classify the difference between ethics and morality. This paper examined the meaning of ethics and research ethics in particular; the characteristics of research ethics and the need to embrace research ethics in academic writing. The study was basically library oriented, emphasizing on the bad apple theory and the stressful or imperfect theory. Emphasis was laid on the need to uphold research ethics in institutions of public learning with particular reference to the University of Nairobi where all Masters and PhD candidates' reports are subjected to the turnitin anti plagiarism software. It is a requirement that they must comply with the 15% and less plagiarized material rule so as to be approved for graduation and inclusion into the research repository. It is also noted that all post graduate students and academic members of staff are supposed to be registered into the Google scholar accounts and their works documented accordingly in the research repository.

Keywords: Ethics, Research Ethics, Plagiarism, Self Plagiarism, Falsification, Fabrication, Informed Consent

Introduction

In all aspects of academic endeavour, emphasis is laid on conducting research and publication. This is the reason why the main objective of research is to contribute towards knowledge by expanding what is already known. But, such knowledge can only make sense if it is shared with other people or scholars. This knowledge is disseminated in journal articles, theses, dissertations or books. In all aspects of academic writing researchers must adhere to right behavior in conducting and disseminating their research findings (Blumberg, Cooper & Schindler, 2005). This calls for the need to conduct the exercise in a sound and moral way basing on laid down ethical principles.

Definition of Ethics

Ethics is a branch of philosophy that deals with the conduct of people and guides the norms or standards of behaviour of people and relationships with each other (Kovacs, 1985; Blumberg et al, 2005). It refers to an "ethos" or "way of life", "social norms for conduct that distinguishes between acceptable and unacceptable behavior" (Shah, 2011, p.205; Akaranga & Ongong'a, 2013,p.8). Many societies have legal rules which dictate behavior, but ethical norms are broader than laws. However, societies apply laws to enforce the moral standards.

The study of ethics leads to the creation of social norms which focus on the behavior that a person is expected to uphold in a particular situation. These norms of behavior which guide moral choices can allow for a wide range of ethical positions (Saunders, Lewis. & Thornhill , 2011). Moral values are taught progressively in the life of an individual and are also influenced by the way someone interacts in the society. This is the reason why ethical norms are interpreted diversely among individuals (Resnik, 2011). Norms can be learnt beginning from childhood in homes, school and even as the children attend Sunday schools or the madrassa.

Research Ethics

Researchers are professionals hence, research ethics as a branch of applied ethics has well established rules and guidelines that defines their conduct. Research ethics is important in our daily life research endeavours and requires that researchers should protect the dignity of their subjects and publish well the information that is researched (Fouka & Mantzorou, 2011). There are two dominant philosophical approaches with regard to research ethics: teleology and deontology (Blumberg et al, 2005). The teleological view holds that the ends served by the research justify the means. This implies that the benefits of the research findings could be weighed against the costs of acting unethically. But, this depends on the comparison made about the relative good over the evil produced (Frankena, 2001). While the deontological theories which are the opposite of teleological theories state that the ends served by the research can never justify the use of research which is unethical. They assert that there are considerations which make an action or rule right besides the goodness or badness of its consequences (Frankena, 2001). An action can be morally right even if it does not promote the greatest balance of good over evil. Hence, one cannot use deception to ensure validity and reliability of data. Having discussed the meaning of ethics and the two major standpoints that could be used in conceptualizing research ethics, it is vital to examine the origin of research ethics and the theories related to it in contemporary research.

Genesis of research ethics

The purpose of embracing research ethics is premised in the field of biomedical research which arose from the need to use human beings in research. This development dates back even before the 18th century although the need to develop appropriate attitudes towards the need to evolve great interest in human beings was seriously taken into consideration starting from 9th December 1946 when an American tribunal opened criminal proceedings against 23 leading German physicians and administrators who willingly participated in war crimes and crimes against humanity (Kour, 2014). They were charged with conducting medical experiments on thousands of prisoners without their consent who were held captive in the concentration camps during the World War II. Unfortunately, these experiments led to many of these subjects dying, while others were crippled permanently. The results of this trial led to the establishment of the Nuremberg code in 1948 because, human beings were being exploited in various cases. This then necessitated the introduction of professional codes and laws to prevent the abuse of human subjects and protection of human rights in research (Oddi & Cassidy, 1990; Fouka and Mantzorou, 2011). The Nuremberg code emphasized the need to observe informed voluntary consent, liberty of withdrawal from research, protection from physical and mental harm or suffering and death with particular emphasis on the risk-benefit balance (Burns, 2005). More declarations on research ethics were made, but the most significant one was the Helsinki declaration of 1964 which states the need for non therapeutic research emphasizing the protection of subjects by noting that the well being of individuals is

more important than scientific or social needs (Oddi & Cassidy, 1990). The concept of research ethics has led to the developments of various theories to explain how human beings are able to adapt to numerous challenges in their everyday life experiences.

Theories of research ethics

In order to understand why researchers indulge in research misconduct, we discuss in brief the “bad apple theory” and the “stressful or imperfect environment theory”. The phrase that, “one apple spoils the whole bunch” is derived from a 14th century Latin translated proverb “The rotten apple injures its neighbours” (Shah, 2011, p.206-207). It is from this proverb that we derive the “bad apple theory” which emphasizes the fact that mold from one apple could spread and infect the rest. This is why; a bad person is synonymous to a bad apple among a group. The “bad apple theory” holds that most researchers are highly ethical apart from a few who are morally corrupt.

The “stressful or imperfect environment theory” on the other hand expresses the notion that an institution has multiple pressures, incentives, ambitions in careers which force individuals or researchers to deviate from their norms and engage in misconduct. This is evident even at the University of Nairobi where the famous slogan “publish or perish” is a key indicator in upward professional mobility for the academic members of staff (Shah, 2011, p.206). Many lecturers will therefore strive to write their doctoral theses and publish in refereed journals in order to fulfill the mandatory conditions of promotion to higher ranks. Lecturers will therefore partner with their colleagues or students in writing academic articles to fulfill this mandate. Post graduate students on the other hand will also work with senior academic members of staff in order to publish the requisite articles to enable them fulfill the mandatory requirements of publishing articles to enable them earn their masters or doctoral degrees respectively. This no doubt could result into some form of misconduct among the researchers.

Ethical issues in research

Norms enhance the purpose of research which includes the dissemination of knowledge, reporting or saying the truth and finally the need to counteract errors. Various steps that are vital in research begin with research proposal writing and approval leading to the actual research study. A researcher must select the appropriate methodology to employ, relevant ways of collecting data, present the research findings and interpret them accordingly leading to presentation of information in a logical sequence. The data is then analyzed and reported well in form of an article, project report, thesis or a book. It is vital that a researcher must observe appropriate values at all these stages while conducting research. If this is not observed, it could result into research misconduct. And, it is within this framework that we discuss ethical issues related to research emphasizing on those related to the research itself, research subjects and the research process.

Ethical issues related to research

A researcher must be cautious in revealing his or her research findings if they may impede the good working relations of his or her sponsor. This is evident if the information focuses on the policies of the organization and could reveal sensitive matters of the people or organization. This calls for the need to collaborate well with other researchers and yet uphold the intellectual rights of the researchers. If this is not well adhered to, it could lead to rebellion or even protests.

Academic freedom

Academicians are expected to be open minded and share their information and ideas freely without fear or intimidation yet observing the need to protect intellectual property (Mugenda, 2003).

Fabrication and Falsification or fraud

Fabrication involves creating, inventing or faking data or results which are then recorded or reported while, falsification or fraud is the manipulation of materials, equipment, processes, by changing results or omitting some data or findings so that the research does not seem to have been well represented or recorded (Mugenda, 2003; Kour, 2014). Any researcher who is involved in such a practice violates the primary objective of research ethics which renders him or her untrustworthy and could mislead other scholars, while at the same time undermining their own academic authority. This is prevalent if the researcher or researchers misuse their privilege and abuse the power bestowed upon them for their benefit at the expense of the vulnerable subjects (Mugenda, 2003).

Financial issues and sponsorship

Research is a delicate but rigorous endeavour which calls upon thorough presentation and analysis of information. Hence, researchers should be held accountable to the public and must seek for financial support and sponsorship because a research study should be thoroughly undertaken. But, in some cases, the research findings could be compromised by the funding organization which does not fully support the research financially and instead strives to save money thus impacting on the quality of the study. This definitely leads to hurried research and distorted findings (Mugenda, 2003). Such studies could be a waste of money or is of no value or impact on the consumers. Some research studies are even conducted under the guidance of a sponsor/s who specifies their needs or demands. In one way, this could lead to non compliance or non conformity.

Plagiarism

The issue of plagiarism is an important topic in academic institutions of higher learning. This is the practice where an author or researcher has to ensure that any work which is written should be original and be devoid of some texts, results or even expressions which are borrowed, manipulated or used such as ideas, processes, results or even words of the author or publication without acknowledging where the information has been obtained from (Mugenda, 2003; Kour, 2014). This malpractice has been necessitated by the advancement of Information Communication Technology (ICT) in the contemporary society (Saunders et al. 2011).

The most common aspects of plagiarism occur in the introductory pages such as in the introduction and in literature review. This could be attributed to laziness, ignorance or diversity of cultures hence affecting the integrity of the researcher. It is the responsibility of the writer to quote, or cite the original material appropriately. The two forms of plagiarism include “self plagiarism” or “multiple duplication” which is also known as “salamis”. This is a situation where identical material is noted in two or more publications. The other form of plagiarism is “redundant publication” which occurs if a researcher re-uses his earlier work in another research without making appropriate references to the earlier work or when some information which has been already published is re published but with some additional new data. Perhaps the intention of the researcher is to overemphasize on the findings that were already made. But, this definitely interferes with research analysis and violates the copyrights law.

Some of the tools that are used to test plagiarism include; the iparadigms “ithenticate” – <http://lithenticate.com>. And the turnitin – <http://lturnitin.com> which is used by the University of Nairobi. The two software providers have partnered with crossref-<http://www.crossref.org> to verify the originality of documents that are submitted for publishing. This exercise is observed at the University of Nairobi where all post graduate students are expected to subject their projects and theses through the turnitin software. The Masters and PhD candidates are expected to subject their written works to this soft ware and be 15% or less compliant of plagiarized material. A report must then be acknowledged and submitted together with the written projects to the Board of Post graduate Studies for approval before a graduate is included in the graduation list. All academic members of staff and post graduate students are also encouraged and advised to enroll and obtain Google scholar accounts and have their published documents uploaded accordingly.

Writing and publishing Ethics

The publication of articles in peer reviewed journals or a book is mandatory in academic and professional advancement in institutions of higher learning. The rule of the thumb at the University of Nairobi is, “publish or perish”. With this in mind, each institution of higher learning has to motivate its scholars to engage in the art of publishing so as to improve on its visibility and ranking to compete with other institutions in Africa and the world in Webometrics. Any written article must be original and should make significant contribution to knowledge by presenting findings that will be interesting to be read by other scholars. And, it can only be submitted for publishing if it is well researched, written and adheres to the necessary research ethical guidelines.

An article could be written by one author or more authors. In some instances, it could be written by a forth coming scholar or graduate student who then writes the name of a senior scholar without informing the scholar so as to participate in joint ownership of the paper. But, each of them must have a definite role to play so as earn credit to the final product and enhance accountability when the work is finally published. The paper can only be original if the authors jointly agree with the information. They should show their affiliation to an institution of higher learning because, it is mandatory for the researcher or author of a paper or article to contribute in one way or the other to the final paper. Upon completion of writing, the article is submitted to the Chief Editor or editor of a journal who then forwards it to a minimum of two academic scholars for peer review. The comments from the reviewers are meant to check on the quality of the paper by offering scholarly advice and input to it. These views are then forwarded to the author or authors who adhere to the rubric before the paper is accepted for publishing in the next journal issue. It is however unethical to submit one article to two different journals or duplicate publication of research findings without informing the editors that the work is under consideration elsewhere.

Ethical issues related to research subjects

In most research studies, human subjects participate in the research process. This is the reason why due consideration must be taken on how to deal and relate with them in this noble exercise as explained below.

Advocacy and safety

It is the responsibility of the researcher to design a project which will not infringe on the rights and safety of the interviewees or respondents. This is important in advocating, promoting and protecting their rights (Blumberg et al, 2005). The risks related to the research must be well explained to the respondents while conducting the research.

Anonymity, confidentiality and privacy

Anonymity refers to keeping secret by not identifying the ethnic or cultural background of respondents, refrain from referring to them by their names or divulging any other sensitive information about a participant (Mugenda, 2003). This is why, during research a researcher must promise to protect the information given in confidence by the respondent. But, if any information has to be revealed, then consent must be sought from the respondent. This enhances honesty towards the research subject by protecting them from physical and psychological harm thereby ensuring that the researcher does not ask embarrassing questions which can disguise or even shock the respondent.

Beneficence

The concept of beneficence means, “doing good” (Churchill, 1995). It is the role of a researcher who has direct contact with a participant to explain the purpose of the study and the benefits that will accrue from it. However, the researcher should not exaggerate or even understate the benefits. It is the examination of the benefits of the study that leads us to examine the concept of beneficence in research which according to Beauchamp and Childress, (2001); Mugenda, (2003) is associated with the Hippocratic “be of benefit, do not harm”. The major purpose of maintaining ethics in research is to serve and promote the welfare of people and avoid bias or deception.

Deception

When conducting research, participants should be told the truth. But, if they are told only part of it or if the truth is completely denied or compromised this could lead to deception. Such a situation occurs if the researcher is biased when conducting a survey or conducts a research just to protect the sponsor of the research project (Blumberg, et al 2005).

Non-maleficence

Beneficence asserts the usefulness of the study while, non- maleficence expresses the potential risks of participation. It emphasizes on what constitutes harm which could be physiological, emotional, social or even economic in nature (Burns & Grove, 2005). The concept of non-maleficence focuses on avoiding harm. It centers on the fact that it is important to prevent any intentional harm or minimize any aspect of potential harm by refraining from injuring the respondent either physically or psychologically. This could be as a result of either asking questions which are embarrassing, being disappointed or forcing people to divulge information which could result into anxiety or even fear among the respondents. It is the duty of a researcher to explain the consequences of the research which should be balanced against the risks involved. A researcher should then at the end of the study conduct debriefing to the respondent/s by explaining the exact aim of the study and why the disclosure was not full (Treece & Treece, 1982).

Voluntary and informed consent

This is one of the major ethical issues in conducting research which implies the fact that “a person knowingly, voluntarily, intelligently, and in a clear and manifest way, gives his or her

consent” (Arminger, 1997, p.330). In all research studies, emphasis is laid on obtaining information truthfully. But, this can only be achieved if the researcher explains to the respondents the purpose of the study, the risks that could be involved and also guarantees the confidentiality of the research subjects by observing anonymity. Such confidence can only be attained if the researcher is able to identify him or herself clearly to the subjects by explaining the benefits of the study to the subjects. For example, when executing a questionnaire or employing focus group discussions the respondents are at liberty to respond to issues raised on their own volition. In this regard, a researcher must affirm to the respondent the need for observing the principle of voluntary consent or willingness to participate in a research. And, for a respondent to make informed consent, a researcher should explain clearly the truth about the purpose of the research being conducted, if there are any risks involved they should be elaborated. The researcher should then not reveal the identity of the respondent and guarantee them anonymity and confidentiality (Mugenda, 2003).

Informed consent also emphasizes the respondent’s right to autonomy which according to Beauchamp & Childress (2001) is the ability for self determination in action according to a personal plan. It is at this moment that a respondent can make a decision to participate in a study if he or she understands the benefit and risks of the study leading to new knowledge. This factor also addresses how to counteract any form of physical harm or discomfort, infringement of dignity and privacy and compensation.

Vulnerable groups/ special populations

While conducting research, it is possible to involve populations which are disadvantaged or vulnerable such as children, poor or sick people. If this is done, then the researcher must obtain due consent from their parents or guardians so as to involve them in the investigations (Mugenda, 2003).

Ethical issues related to the research process

Research requires cooperation and coordination among different people and diverse disciplines, institutions, standards which are ethical so as to foster collaborative efforts. This includes; trust, accountability, mutual respect and fairness. Researchers should adhere to guidelines which are associated with authorship, copyright and patenting policies, data sharing policies and confidentiality rules in peer review. This is why for example; the University of Nairobi has established a code of conduct for research which is guided by a research note book. It is upon all researchers at the university to familiarize themselves and adhere to the ethical code of the institution (Bell & Bryman, 2007, Saunders et al, 2011). This must be observed in writing research proposals, research projects, dissertations and theses.

Research proposals

The University of Nairobi code of conduct addresses the following ethical principles in research. First, students and lecturers should observe honesty in all communications by reporting data accurately, presenting their results well using appropriate methods and procedures, methods and procedures leading to the completion of the final written report. The beginning of academic writing at the University of Nairobi starts with crafting a research proposal which is written by a post graduate student under the guidance of a proposed supervisor or supervisors. At this level, the student presents the study at a seminar in the Department which is critiqued by academic members and other post graduate students who make positive suggestions to improve on the quality of the work. The candidate then makes

corrections and improves on the proposal which is further discussed at the Faculty or School. At this level, it is the supervisor who presents the document on behalf of the candidate. Upon satisfactorily meeting the set corrections and amendments, the proposal is approved for research and the candidate is now fully registered to undertake the study. This is normally a rigorous exercise which takes a lot of time and some prospective candidates even drop off from the programme and may not go ahead to undertake research.

Recommendations

There exist many reasons why ethical norms are maintained while conducting research. First, they promote the main aims of the research which include among others, the acquisition of knowledge, promoting the truth in research by avoiding errors that could arise due to providing false information, fabricating or misrepresenting information. Second, research involves great efforts which require the cooperation and coordination among many people and researchers. It is therefore vital for the researchers and consumers to trust each other, respect the views of other scholars and treat them fairly and are accountable to their research endeavours. In this regard, there exist guidelines which are produced so as to maintain the copyright and patenting policies of their products. But, this can only be achieved if appropriate rules are executed to enhance confidentiality. Third, any work that researchers are involved in or any work that is published must be read by the public who also appreciate the efforts of the researcher. Fourth, if the research is being sponsored by funds from the public coffers, it must be well accounted for because, such research must be supported so as to enhance its quality and integrity. Finally, research ethics focuses on values which are societal in nature. Hence, researchers should enhance social responsibility, maintain the integrity of human values, and protect the welfare of the research subjects and animals in compliance with the international law and safety standards.

Biography of Authors

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