

7 RESEARCH ETHICS – AN INDIAN SURVEY

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Abstract

Ethics indicates the norms of conduct that distinguishes between acceptable and non acceptable behavior. It is important to adhere to ethical norms in research. Many reasons are cited to stress the need for adherence to ethics in research. Bearing the importance in mind government and non government agencies and Universities have adopted specific codes, rules & regulations relating to research ethics. The ethical principles are generally adopted in formulating such codes for research ethics.

Based on Manfred Schussler's, "Research Ethics and Good Scientific Practice – A Brief overview", a comparison of the data on Research Ethics between USA & India has been made. In all the unethical activities cited in the research, the percentage of unethical activities in India are high compared to USA. The American research scholars are ethical compared to the Indian research scholars. The reasons why Indians score low and suggestions for improvements are indicated.

Keywords: Research Ethics, Ethical Standards, Codes & Policies, Moral & Social Values, Research Methodology.

1. What is Ethics in Research

David B Resnik in his article "What is Ethics and Why is it Important" published in the Journal of National Institute of Environmental and Health Sciences, says "The most common way of defining ethics is the norms of conduct that distinguishes between acceptable and non-acceptable behaviour". Another way of defining is that "Ethics focuses on the disciplines that study standards of conduct such as philosophy, theology, law, psychology and sociology". One may also define ethics as a method, procedure or perspective for deciding how to act and for analyzing complex problems and issues. Many different disciplines, institutions and professors have norms for behaviour that suit their particular aims and goods. These norms also help members of the discipline to coordinate their actions or activities and to establish the public's trust of the discipline. For instance, ethical norms govern conduct in medicine, law, engineering and business. Ethical norms also serve the aims of good research and apply to people who conduct scientific research or other scholarly or creative activities. There is a specialized discipline, research ethics, which studies these norms.

2. Why Research Ethics is Important

There are several reasons why it is important to adhere to ethical norms in research.

- Promotes the aims of research:

Ethical norms promote the aims of research in areas like knowledge, truth and avoidance of error. Norms prohibits falsification, fabrication and misrepresenting research data.

- Ethical standards promote the values that are essential to collaborative work.

Research involves a great deal of cooperation and coordination among many different people in different disciplines and institutions. Ethical standards promote trust, accountability, mutual respect and fairness.

- Researchers are held accountable to the public.
- Builds public support to research.

Ethical norms in research help to build public support for research. Funds for research are easily available if the quality and integrity of the research are acceptable.

- Promotes moral and social values.

Many of the norms of research promote a variety of other important moral and social values, such as social responsibility, human rights, animal welfare, compliance with law, health and safety.

3. Codes & Policies for Research Ethics

Bearing the importance of ethics for the conduct of research in mind, professional associations, government agencies and universities have adopted specific codes, rules and policies relating to research ethics. The following ethical principles are generally addressed in all the codes:

- Honesty
- Integrity
- Openness
- Confidentiality
- Responsible mentoring
- Social responsibility
- Competence
- Animal care
- Objectivity
- Carefulness
- Respect for intellectual property
- Responsible publication
- Respect for colleagues
- Non discrimination
- Legality
- Human subjects protection

4. A Comparison of Research Ethics between USA & India

In 'Research Ethics and Good Scientific Practice – A Brief Overview', Manfred Schussler(1), has quoted from an article titled 'Why Lecture on Research Ethics' by Martinson, Anderson & de Vries, published in Nature (9th June 2005)(1) about an anonymous poll of 3247 scientists funded by NIH, USA. The survey indicates the percentage of unethical activities by research scholars in their Research publications.

The research data by Martinson, Anderson & Vries(1) is indicated in vertical columns (1) & (2). Using the same framework, the author made an anonymous research(2) of research scholars in the areas of engineering, management, medical, humanities and science and the data is indicated in vertical

U.S %	Unethical Activities	India	
		What I do myself %	What I think others do %
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
0.3	Falsifying or cooking research data	4	48
1.4	Using other person's idea without permission or giving credit	13	65
1.7	Unauthorised use of confidential material for own research	17	54
6.0	Failing to present data that contradicts one's previous research	23	63
12.5	Overlooking others' using flawed data or questionable interpretations	29	65
4.7	Multiple publication of the same data or results	19	69
10.0	Inappropriately assigning authorship credit	8	44
10.8	Withholding details of methodology in papers or proposals	23	63
13.5	Using inadequate or inappropriate research designs	15	63
15.3	Dropping observations or data points on a 'gut feeling'	33	52
27.5	Inadequate record keeping related to research projects	31	58

columns (3) & (4)

5. Research Analysis

The column (3) indicates the percentage of unethical research activities by the Indian researchers. Column (4) indicates the feeling of the research scholars about the unethical activities of other Indian research scholars. The analysis of columns (1), (3) & (4) reveal very interesting results:

- In all the cases American research scholars are more ethical compared to the Indian research scholars.
- The way the Indian scholars think about themselves and how they perceive about other Indian scholars is mind boggling. Please compare the results in (3) & (4)

- The Indian scholars think themselves as more ethical – however, definitely less than that of US. 4 to 33 percent of scholars say that they had been unethical under different unethical activities.
- Indian scholars also perceive that other Indian scholars are less ethical. Under different classifications of unethical activities, the unethical perception ranges from 44 to 69 percent.
- In the US survey, the respondents have indicated one ethical activity only.
- While in Indian survey, the respondents have indicated more than one unethical activities and hence the sum of unethical activities are more than 100.

6. Why low score in India in Research Ethics?

What are the reasons for a sad ethical scenario in Indian Research Ethics? The author interviewed a few highly learned professors from leading Indian Universities and Institutes. Their version for such a low ethical profiles are as follows:

- Try to copy
- Try for imitations
- Total system corruption
- Follow unethical practices
- No research originality
- Unreliable statements
- Dishonest people masquerade as masters
- Honest people missing in University management
- Pursuing research in the same direction as of other researchers
- Lack of basic capability for research
- Can not deliver good research
- Unethical competitions galore
- Promotions linked to Ph.D, leads to malpractices
- Written guidelines on research ethics not existing in many universities.
- Where guidelines available – not followed

7. Suggestions for Improvements in Research Ethics

- Government
 - Political will for ethics in private & public lives and education systems
- Students/Research students

- In school level, inculcation of values and ethics
 - Continue the same at university level
 - Teaching Subject 'Research Ethics' compulsory, besides 'Research Methodology' for Ph.D.
 - Checklists for ethics adherence
 - Continued adherence for Research Ethics
 - Financial benefits for research performance, not for Ph.D. degree alone.
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- Research Guides
 - Appropriate guide with ethical orientation
 - Pool of guides – qualitative selection procedures for guides
 - Evaluation of guides on a regular basis

 - University
 - Education management by people committed to ethics

8. Conclusion

Researchers have to recognise their responsibility to ensure that they evenly balance their drive for innovation with sound ethical practices.

References:

- (1) Google search on 'Ethics Research'
- (2) The author's survey on 'Ethics Research'