

Toward an Understanding of Ethical Issues in Cross-Cultural Research

Yousef Sahari¹, Hashim Asiri², Eisa Asiri³, Ahmad Assiri⁴

¹Bisha University, Faculty of Sciences and Arts in Belgarn, Saudi Arabia
yousef_sahari[at]hotmail.com

²King Khalid University, Faculty of Languages and Translation, Saudi Arabia.
hashim.asiri[at]gmail.com

⁴King Khalid University, Faculty of Languages and Translation, Saudi Arabia
eisa1408[at]hotmail.com

⁵Department of General Courses, King Abdulaziz University
aassiri1[at]kau.edu.sa

Abstract: *The role of research in society is extremely important as it helps us to understand the world around us and to make the right decisions. Because research is sometimes concerned with the collection of data from people, ethical issues arise regarding the way in which researchers should treat the people who provide the data. The most important ethical considerations for research involve three key concepts: ensuring voluntary and informed consent, maintaining confidentiality and anonymity, and protecting the respondents from harm (Fontana & Fray, 2005). In this paper, the ethical issues concerning informed consent, deception, and confidentiality and anonymity will be discussed, and some possible solutions to problems related to these issues are presented. Moreover, difficulties associated with applying ethical concepts in some cultures to meet and satisfy the requirements of ethics committees in Western universities will be examined.*

Keywords: Research, ethical dilemmas, Cross-Culture ethical challenges, Confidentiality, Arabic culture, Anonymity

1. Introduction

There is no doubt that academic research contributes to the progress and prosperity of nations at all levels. One of the most important requirements for research, especially those involving the human and animal elements, namely, is to obtain ethical clearance in order to conduct such research. However, full adherence to the principles of ethics of academic research may not be possible in some cultural contexts. This paper therefore attempts to highlight the most major requirements for obtaining permission to conduct research, in addition to the ethical challenges that researchers may encounter and preventing them from full complying properly with the ethical norms when carrying out research in developing countries.

2. Informed Consent

Informed consent is considered one of the most important steps in the research process and must be obtained before the commencement of the research. According to the American Educational Research Association (AERA; 2011), informed consent informs research participants about the topic and the aim of the research, what rights they have and what they are being asked to do, and the possible risk and potential consequences of participating in the research. These principles appear to be straightforward and easy to apply; however, they can pose ethical dilemmas for researchers. In this section, some of the ethical issues regarding informed consent will be discussed.

One of the slightly complicated issues involving informed consent concerns how much information the researchers

should share with their participants. Some linguistic scholars believe that research participants should be informed of only the basic facts about the research (Oliver, 2010). However, there are some cases in which participants are interested in knowing more about the research, and they may consider basic facts as insufficient to solicit their taking part in the research. Grover (2004) pointed out that researchers have the power to determine which information is beneficial or damaging to the welfare of the individuals and the community affected by the study. However, all participants should be informed of at least the fundamental facts about the research.

In addition, the manner that is used to obtain the informed consent is very important and varies from one culture to another. Rossman and Rallis (2011) indicated that a translated text of the informed consent may be needed when the potential participants cannot communicate in English, for instance. They argued that culture can affect and change the way that informed consent is delivered. In other words, in some cultures, participants may not need to sign an informed consent because to sign a written agreement before taking part in research may be seen as inappropriate and suspicious. In Arabic culture, for example, an individual's word has power, and people tend to be orally oriented. To put it more precisely, in many cases in their daily lives, there is no need for written agreements, and they consider spoken agreements as enough. With the exceptions of medical research and experiments, it is rare for researchers to obtain informed consent in a "formal" manner, i.e., by signing the consent. Such behavior may reduce the number of participants because they may think that the reason the researcher wants

them to sign an informed consent is to avoid responsibility for risks and dangers involved in the research.

3. Deception or Covert Research

The concept of deception was and still is one of the topics discussed significantly and debated among sociologists. The basic concept is that, if deception is not used in research, the participants will behave differently compared to how they would behave if deception is used. Sadker (as cited in Rossman & Rallis, 2011) indicated that there are some situations in which researchers cannot discover some important facts without using deception. These facts are hidden, and discovering them requires observing the research subjects while they are behaving naturally. If the participants are informed in detail about the phenomena that are being studied, they might pay too much attention to these issues, and the research findings may not be as accurate as expected. Therefore, the reliability and the validity of the research are adversely affected. Punch (1994) argued that researchers should not be too direct and honest and explain everything to the participants. He indicated that it is normal for people, regardless of their background, to hide some truths and not show their intentions and feelings clearly and that the same should be applied to the research field. However, he emphasized that care must be taken to avoid inflicting any kind of harm on participants. Douglas (as cited in Patton, 1990) argued that any and all kinds of covert research should be regarded as acceptable for discovering the truth and that the majority of people have good and convincing reasons to hide from others some aspects of their lives. He mentioned that “instead of trusting people and expecting trust in return, one suspects others and expects others to suspect him. Conflict is the reality of life; suspicion is the guiding principle. . . . It is a war of all: No one gives anyone anything for nothing, especially truth” (p. 210)

Conversely, there are some scholars who oppose the use of covert research because they believe that it is an unethical way to obtain information and such conduct will affect negatively the researcher’s reputation. Miller and Wendler (2004) stated that any deception used may undermine the mutual trust that researchers and participants have established and that this may have a direct and a negative impact on the number of participants who will take part in the research in the future. Personally, I believe that deception or covert research should not be used under any circumstances, for several reasons. First, if the researcher deceives his or her participants, there is a probability that the researcher will also deceive readers by misrepresenting the research findings. Second, I believe in the idea that if you based your project on even one false and invalid basis, the whole project is viewed as not valid as well. Another reason is that researchers are usually educated people, and they set a good example for other people by adhering to ethical values. Dörnyei (2007) pointed out that there are some factors in life more important and valuable than conducting research. However, there are certain solutions that can be implemented in some situations. AERA (2011) guidelines state that deception should not be used unless it is necessary to do so and the potential benefits to the study outweigh the need to

be open. Another possible solution is to give the participants general information about the study instead detailed information (Oliver, 2010). For instance, if the researcher wants to see how non-English students use the past tense, the researcher can inform students that the purpose of the study is to see how students talk about their experiences. By doing so, the researcher can obtain accurate data without causing any harm to the participants. Another solution is that the researcher can state in the informed consent that there is deception in the study, the use of which has been approved by an ethics committee, and that participants will be informed about the nature of the deception at the end of the study (Wurtz, 2011).

4. Anonymity and Confidentiality

Anonymity and confidentiality are related but different concepts (Wiles, Charles, Crow, & Heath, 2006), and the difference between them is often misunderstood. The Longman Dictionary defines confidentiality as not telling information to someone else, whereas it defines anonymity as an unknown name or person. According to Blumer (2001), an anonymous study design is one in which the data cannot identify any particular research participant, not even by the researcher, whereas confidentiality is the safeguarding of information obtained in confidence during the course of the research study.

The anonymity of the participants and the confidentiality of their data are not only basic rights of research participants but are also considered as the most essential ethical factors in research. Therefore, researchers should keep their participants’ data and information confidential and their identities anonymous. However, Dörnyei (2007) pointed out that there are some cases, especially educational ones, in which the name of the participant needs to be identified, for example, if the research wants to match the progress on or performance of various tasks. Moreover, Rossman and Rallis (2011) indicated that there is an ongoing argument against anonymity. Those who hold this position believe that keeping the identities of the participants anonymous will prevent them from benefitting from the study. They argue that the participants themselves should determine whether they want to be named. Nevertheless, Rossman and Rallis recommended that researchers in general and novices in particular should mask the identity of the participants.

Issues of anonymity and confidentiality influence professional research guidelines for social scientists. The management of confidentiality and anonymity is closely linked with the management of consent, through which research participants are informed of how confidentiality and anonymity will be managed during and after research. In other words, participants need to be made aware of what will happen to the data, how it will be used, and whether their data will be kept confidential and anonymous. In addition, research participants should be informed about the implications of their participation regarding confidentiality and anonymity.

Although confidentiality is extremely important in research,

there are indeed some occasions in which researchers should violate the confidentiality of some participants. For example, researchers may be required by law to disclose some confidential information about research participants who have been involved in or committed crimes or are about to do so. Furthermore, researchers may sometimes find themselves in situations in which their responsibilities toward society force them to break the confidentiality of participants, for instance, if a participant is a victim of a crime or at risk. In such cases, the researcher has a moral, rather than a legal, duty to disclose a participant's identity. According to Masson (2004), this issue is, to some extent, difficult for practitioner researchers because they have a professional responsibility to report situations or individuals about whom they have concerns to their managers or other professionals; otherwise, they risk disciplinary action if they do not do so.

There are some cases in which researchers break the confidentiality of research participants unintentionally. Wiles, Charles, Crow, and Heath (2006) pointed out that, because researchers usually conduct their research with limited help and support, they may feel at some phase that they need to "offload" their findings or difficulties to their friends or relatives (p. 21). For example, in my home country and in particular in its universities, it is normal for academic staff members to talk to each other about participants, and they may inadvertently reveal some information that might be considered as unethical by Western academic standards. This situation is further discussed in this paper under the section titled "Ethical Issues and Cross-Cultural Practices." Another example that I have experienced is that my instructor in translation courses showed the class some examples of poor translations and asked us to evaluate them. These translations belonged to students who completed the courses previously and are identifiable as the translations' authors. Such breaking of confidentiality can cause psychological harm to those students, especially if their translations are poorly translated.

However, there are some possible solutions that can help researchers to maintain the anonymity and the confidentiality of participants. First for those participants wish to be identified in a research report, researchers should prepare a written agreement which states clearly the main responsibilities of the research relationship. Second, researchers can remove all names and refer to participants by using numbers, letters or even fictional names (Oliver, 2010). By doing so, it would be difficult to for readers to make a connection between a particular point of view and specific participants. With regard to confidentiality, First and foremost, it should be explained clearly in the informed consent. Second, potential participants should be informed about all elements of the confidentiality promise (Oliver, 2010). In other words, researchers should have an explicit statement about people who will access to or/and read and examine the data.

5. Ethical Issues and Cross-Cultural Practices

It is widely known that students from different cultural background come to Western countries to study in their universities. While these students are studying abroad, they may conduct research and collect data in their home countries. Before doing so, students need to follow procedures to obtain ethical clearance from ethics committees in Western universities. Ethics committees always stress the importance of certain principles, such as informed consent, privacy, confidentiality, and participants' right to withdraw from the research. Even though these principles seem to be universal, the reality is that they are not always applicable. Hamid (2010) indicated that ethical principles in Western countries "are overly wordy and not necessarily socio-culturally appropriate" (p. #). Therefore, some of these principles in Arabic and other cultures either do not make sense or are difficult, if not impossible, to abide by.

One of the most essential parts of informed consent is the right of participants to withdraw from the research at any time (AERA, 2011). However, there are some cultures, Arabic included, in which applying these principles is challenging, particularly in educational fields at all levels. One of the reasons is that teachers and instructors in schools and universities have authority and influence over their students that make it almost impossible for students to exercise their right to withdraw. In this regard, Zeni (2001) noted that teacher researchers may have control over their students and coerce them to participate. Thus, in such cases, participation is not voluntary, and the results and findings of the study may not be accurate. For example, if the instructor hands out some questionnaire for his or her students to fill out, almost no one can refuse to participate on the grounds that the participation is voluntary. The main reason is that students are concerned about their grades and do not want to have a bad relationship with their teachers. Moreover, showing respect and obedience to teachers is "socially binding" "in some cultures (Hamid, 2010). In this regard, Anderson (1989) noted that researchers are obligated to "protect persons who might appear to be volunteers but are not truly because their circumstances exert undue influence" (as cited in Bournot-Trites & Belanger, 2005, p. 210). However, it is not easy for an outsider researcher to know whether the students' participation is voluntary or they are being forced to participate.

There are some ethical dilemmas that researchers may encounter in home setting interviews. In other words, researchers are obligated to behave according to cultural conventions even if such behaviors are considered unethical according to ethics in Western universities or communities. Yee and Andrews (2006) pointed out that researchers in home settings should act as proper guests not as professional researchers. The ethical issues faced range from hospitality to privacy and confidentiality. For example, participants will insist that the researcher come to their homes for lunch or dinner. In some cultures, it is considered shameful to not offer a visitor something to eat or drink. By refusing such an

invitation, a researcher may offend the hosts, especially those who belong to poor or disadvantaged families.

The concepts of privacy and confidentiality as used in Western universities are not applicable in some cultural contexts (Hamid,2010).In some rural areas, maintaining these concepts is challenging because dwelling places are often open to neighbors .Yee and Andrews (2006) mentioned that maintaining the privacy and confidentiality in a home setting interview is a demanding task because it is impossible to identify beforehand who will be present in the interview .Moreover, in some rural places, people may consider a researcher's visit to their home town as a public event (Hamid,2010). For instance, when a researcher came to my hometown to collect census data, young people, myself included, followed the researcher from one house to another. He asked in his interviews some questions that are considered confidential according to Western cultural norms. However, no one cared about the concepts of privacy and confidentiality.

Thus, it is clear from the examples above that inside researchers have the required knowledge and background about social and cultural values to behave in appropriate ways toward participants. Zeni (2001) indicated that "the insider has responsibilities and relationships that are fundamentally different from those of an outsider doing research" (p. xii).Furthermore, Hamid (2010) pointed out that

Western approaches to ethics are based on an individualistic view of society which does not characterize many societies in Asia or Africa. These societies, in general, view individuals as closely integrated into community and social networks. Therefore, the concepts of self and "other" and related notions of privacy and confidentiality as applied to research ethics in Western academia appear significantly different, if not entirely irrelevant, in these societies. (p. 267).

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, as Rossman and Rallis (2011) indicated that there is no easy solutions that can be applied in all ethical cases in research. However, in this paper some of the major ethical dilemmas have been discussed and some solutions have been presented .The main issues discussed In this paper are regarding the informed consents, using deception in research and anonymity and confidentiality of participants. In addition to what extent applying and abiding by the ethical principles is possible and achievable

References

- [1] AERA.2011.'Ethical Standards'.
<http://www.aera.net/AboutAERA/AERARulesPolicies/CodeofEthics/tabid/10200/Default.aspx>
- [2] Bournot-Trites, M., & Belanger, J. (2005).Ethical dilemmas facing action researchers. *Journal of Educational Thought*, 39(2), 197–215.
- [3] Bulmer, M. (2001).The ethics of social research. In N. Gilbert (Ed.).*Researching social life* (pp. #-#).London: Sage.
- [4] Dörnyei, Z. (2007). *Research methods in applied linguistics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- [5] Fontana, A., & Frey, J. H. (2005). The interview: From neutral stance to political involvement. *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 3, 695–727.
- [6] Grover, S. 2004. What's human rights got to do with it? On the proposed changes to SSHRC ethics research policy. *Journal of Academic Ethics*,2(3), 249–262.
- [7] Hamid, M. O. (2010). Fieldwork for language education research in rural Bangladesh: Ethical issues and dilemmas. *International Journal of Research & Method in Education*, 33(3), 259–271.
- [8] Masson, J. (2004).The legal context. In S. Fraser, V. Lewis, S. Ding, M.Kellett, &C. Robinson (Eds.),*Doing research with children and young people* (pp. #-#). London: Sage.
- [9] Miller, F. G., &Wendler, D. (2004).Assessing the ethics of ethics research: A casestudy.*IRB: Ethics & Human Research*, 26, 9–12.
- [10] Oliver, P. (2010). *The student's guide to research ethics*: Open University Press.
- [11] Patton, M. (1990).*Qualitative evaluation and research method* (2nded.). Newbury Par, CA: Sage.
- [12] Pearson Longman. (2009). *Dictionary of Contemporary English*. London: Allyn& Bacon.
- [13] Punch, M. (1994).Politics and ethics in qualitative research. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- [14] Rossman, G. B., & Rallis, S. F. (2011). *Learning in the field: An introduction to qualitative research*. Place of Publication: SAGE.
- [15] Wiles, R., Crow, G., Heath, S., & Charles, V. (2006, July).Anonymity and confidentiality. Paper presented at the ESRC Research Methods Festival, University of Oxford, UK.
- [16] Wurtz, K. (2011). Ethical issues affecting human participants in community college research. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 35(4), 301–311.
- [17] Yee, W.C., & Andrews, J. 2006. Professional researcher or a "good guest"? Ethical dilemmas involved in researching children and families in the home setting. *EducationalReview*,58, 397–413.
- [18] Zeni,J. (Ed.).(2001).*Ethical issues in practitioner research*.New York: Teachers College Press.