

# The Ethical Issues in Ethnographic Research

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**Abstract:** *Doing and conducting ethnographic research, the role of the researcher's motivations, design of the research, reflexive nature of the researcher's self, the nature of interpretation of the findings, and above all the moral and ethical stands of the researcher is been scrutinized per se as it deals with human agencies. The moral and ethical issues with its politicization and objectified imposition on the ethnographer are key concern of the present article. The authors are inclined to reflect the major and significant dimensions of ethical issues in ethnographic and/or social research along with its limitations, prejudices, contradictions and complexities in contemporary ethnographic practices in different academic discourses.*

**Keywords:** ethnography, ethics, politics, embodiment, rights

The term 'Ethnography' in social research countenances an extensive gaze through four major theoretical trends-classical, colonial, post-colonial and post-modern that extends its scope to understand the culture(s) under study and their (ethnographer's) own biases of the past with a reflexive interpretation, that speaks the ethnographer's own cultural 'assumptions' and 'prejudices'; as ethnography just not a methodology, but, an expression of history, politics, culture and the essence of being (Clair, 2003; Murchison, 2010; Sanjek, 1996).

Conducting any ethnographic research, ethical issues are indispensable factor, as it is a reality for any ethnographic researcher to getting entry into the field; they need the ethical approval from concerned institutions (Tabatabaei, 2016). No concrete and generalized definition of the term 'ethics' till now being accepted. Ethics can be conceptualized as a set of 'moral' standards and behaviour with human sensitivity and dignity that merges when the culture of the subjects under study, the culture of the ethnographer's own, and the culture of the ethnography itself underlies into the so called issues of 'morality' in social researches (Gilbert, 2001; Tabatabaei, 2016).

With the inauguration of Institutional Review Boards in the mid 1970s, a couple of principles were 'imposed' to the ethnographers in the name of 'ethics' when dealing with human 'subjects', are- a) obtaining the consent of the people to be selected under study, and b) protecting their risks, privacy and dignity (Murphy and Johannsen, 1990). This 'universal' imposition on the ethnographers to documenting culture began a controversial arena in social research in the question of the 'rights' of the human agencies from 'global' to 'local' level. The situation has had a quest for the ethnographer to understand the human actors from multiple and different levels that also instigates the ethnographers to understand the irreducible issues of 'ethical pluralism' in contexts (Goodale, 2006). From this stance, ethnography may be conceptualized as a combination of ethics and epistemology-means ethnographers interacts to the human agencies not only from their analytical point of discussion on the 'products' and as the frame of production of knowledge that state the textual analysis by minimizing the 'structured' and 'sophisticated' approaches (Desmond, 2014).

At this juncture, three factors a social researcher and/or an ethnographer may consider for the formation of any research design- a) the objective power relations, b) the discourses of the 'self' and 'subjective projection' with ethical principles, and c) emotions, sensitivity and motivations of the 'embodied' social actors who performs normative and ideological practices (Schofer, 2012).

This is a significant issue that ethical practices in social research is obviously without universal and/or taken for granted 'format', because each research is unique in its nature, the looks and frames of the researcher, the 'habitus' and 'embodiment' of human actors or respondents, differences of age, sex, and other social 'hierarchical' groupings, and above all the proximities of the 'researcher' to the 'researched' (Hemmings, 2009).

In this connection it will be worth mentioning that many social researchers not even maintained the 'conventional' ethical 'codes'; neither they clearly pointed out their 'moral' stands into the 'fieldwork', nor they 'bracketed out' the entire research process (Brannan et al., 2007). The multiple layers of ethicalization of any research practice became much debatable issue when the contextual and dynamic facets of the research objectives passes through critical scrutiny of 'morality', 'sensitivity' and 'categorization'; as the entire process of ethicalization depends on 'leadership', 'strategic positioning' and 'external dispositions' (Romani and Szkudlarek, 2014). The ethical stands of social research therefore extend its gaze to 'dialogic', 'case-based', 'inductive' and 'process focused' (Markham and Buchanan, 2017).

In conclusion, this will be better to say that 'morals' and 'ethics' in respect to social and/or ethnographic research are often seemed to be synonymous, but there is difference i.e. 'morals' refers to the normative rights and responsibilities in its 'idealistic' form, whereas 'ethics' refers to the implementation and 'embodiment' of these aspects in action and/or in practice (Castaneda, 2006). The 'structured' guidelines of ethics in ethnographic practices from different national and international organizations actually instigate the reality of ethnographic 'best practices' and therefore politicize the 'realities' in the name of ethics, consents, rights, and morals (Lederman, 2006).

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