

UNIT SEVEN

Ethical Considerations in Research

★ Unit Introduction

Dear learners as you know all professions are guided by a code of ethics. Research is not an exception. The unit briefly assesses the definition of ethics and ethical considerations in research. You are required to be obliged ethically to work under a certain code of conduct while conducting a research. Prior to that, however you need to come up with some understanding of the meaning of ethics. Hence, you will be able to understand ethical issues to be kept in mind in conducting research.

Section I. Definition of Ethics

★ Overview

Dear students, in any society we can find a number of ethical values that govern the smooth relationship among its members. Thus, this section provides you general information about the concept of ethics and professional ethical code. Thus, we hope that the lessons in this section serve you as a prerequisite for detail study and understanding of the forthcoming lessons of the unit.

Definition of ethics

? *Where does the word ethic come from? What does it mean?*

The term ethics come from the Greek word '*ethos*'. In ancient time the term was given such meanings as custom, temperament, character and way of thinking. In ancient philosophy the term was also used to implicate the terminological meaning for permanent character of social and physical phenomenon. For example, the ethos of water (water is liquid); the ethos of fire (it burns)...etc.

Webster's New World Dictionary defines '*ethics*' as "the study of standards of conduct and moral judgment: the system of morals of a particular person, religion, group, etc". It can also be defined as, "the branch of philosophy that is concerned with the study and analysis of what is good and what is bad, what is right and what is wrong". It also attempts to arrive at an

understanding of the nature of human values, of how we ought to live, what constitutes the right conduct and good life for human beings and what is the good reason for acting in one way or the other.

The definition tells that ethics has a deep concern on human actions, and it studies these actions with respect to their being right or wrong. This indicates that the subject matter of ethics is contributed more by the actions of individuals and social groups. These actions are mainly related with voluntary actions of thoughtful nature.

? What are principles of conduct?

According to *Collins Dictionary* ethical means ‘in accordance with principles of conduct that are considered correct, especially those of a given profession or group’. The keywords here, ‘principles of conduct’ and ‘considered correct’, raise certain questions:

- What are these principles of conduct?
- Who determines them?
- In whose judgment must they be considered correct?

‘What are these principles of conduct?’ is the most important question as it addresses the issue of the contents of ethical behavior in a profession. As the code of conduct varies from profession to profession, it is not possible to provide a universal answer to his question. Establishment of code of ethics is a necessity for each and every profession. For all practical reason in almost all professions, wrong way of conduct should be differentiated from the right. Literatures, reveals that the need to set higher moral standards initially felt in such professions as medicine, law, education, science, journalism and the arts.

? What is professional ethical code?

Professional Ethical code can be broadly classified into specific field related ethical codes and general (universal) professional ethical codes. Universal professional ethical codes refer to those ethical codes that can be referred and complied by all professions altogether. In other words, workers in all professions are expected to adhere themselves to a common disciplinary rules or universal professional ethical codes. On the other hand, specific professional ethical codes are code of ethics that help to shape the behavior of workers in the same areas of specialization., by sowing the right way of conduct in that specific field from the wrong way of conduct.

However, in research any dilemma stemming from a moral quandary is a basis of ethical conduct. There are certain behaviors in research—such as causing harm to individuals, breaching confidentiality, using information improperly and introducing bias—that are considered unethical in any profession.

The next question is: In whose judgment must a code of conduct be considered correct? Who decides whether a particular practice is wrong? If a procedure is carried out wrongly, what penalties should be imposed? It is the overall body of professionals or government organizations that collectively develops a professional code of conduct and forms a judgment as to whether or not it is being followed.

Overview

Dear students, the previous section discussed about the concept of ethics and professional code of ethics. This section presents to you the lesson on ethical considerations in research. The knowledge of the lesson helps you to adhere to some code of conducts while conducting a research.

2.1 Ethical Considerations in Research

? *What ethical issues should be considered while conducting a research?*

There are many stakeholders in a research activity; so it is important to look at ethical issues in relation to each one of them. The various stakeholders are:

1. the participants or subjects
2. the researcher
3. the funding body

2.1.1 Ethical issues concerning research participants

There are many ethical issues in relation to participants of a research activity.

➤ Informed consent

In every discipline it is considered unethical to collect information without the knowledge of participants and their expressed willingness and informed consent. Informed consent implies that subjects are made adequately aware of the type of information you want from them, why the information is being sought, what purpose it will be put to, how they are expected to participate in the study, and how it will directly and indirectly affect them. It is important that the consent

should also be voluntary and without pressure of any kind. Moreover, all-informed consent procedures must meet three criteria: participate must be competent to give consent; sufficient information must be provided to allow for a reasoned decision, and consent must be voluntary and uncoerced.

➤ **Confidentiality and anonymity**

Sharing information about a respondent with others for purposes other than research is unethical. You need to make sure that at least the information provided by respondents is kept anonymous. Therefore, you need to ensure that after the information has been collected, its source cannot be known.

➤ **The Possibility of causing harm to participants**

Is the research going to harm participants in any way? Harm includes not only hazardous medical experiment but also any social research that might involve such things as discomfort, anxiety, harassment, invasion of privacy, or demeaning or dehumanizing procedures.

When you collect data from respondents or involve subjects in an experiment, you need to examine carefully whether their involvement is likely to harm them in any way. If it is likely to, you must make sure that the risk is minimal. Minimum risk means that the extent of harm or discomfort in the research is not greater than ordinarily encountered in daily life. If the way information is sought creates anxiety or harassment, you need to take steps to prevent this.

➤ **Seeking sensitive information**

Information sought can pose an ethical dilemma in research. Certain type of information can be regarded as sensitive or confidential by some people and thus an invasion of privacy. Asking for this information may upset or embarrass a respondent. However, if you do not ask for the information, it may not possible to pursue your interest in the area and contribute to the existing body of knowledge.

For most people, questions on sexual behavior, drug use and shoplifting are intrusive. Even questions on marital status, income and age may be considered to be an invasion of privacy by some. In collecting data you need to be careful about the sensitivities of your respondents.

➤ **Deception**

The withholding of information or the misleading of participants is unethical (unacceptable) if the participants are typically likely to object or show unease once debriefed. When this is in

doubt, appropriate consultation must precede the investigation. Consultation is best carried out with individuals who share the social and cultural background of the participants in the research. Intentional deception of the participants over the purpose and general nature of the investigation should be avoided whenever possible. Participants should never be deliberately misled without extremely strong scientific or medical justification.

➤ **Withdrawal from the investigation**

At the onset of the investigation investigators should make plain to respondents their right to withdraw from the research at any time, irrespective of whether or not payment or other inducement has been offered. It is recognized that this may be difficult in certain observational or organizational settings, but nevertheless the investigator must attempt to ensure that participants (including children) know of their right to withdraw. In the light of experience of the investigation, or as a result of debriefing, the participant has the right to withdraw retrospectively any consent given, and to require that their own data, including recordings, be destroyed.

2.1.2 Ethical issues relating to the researcher

➤ **Avoiding bias**

Bias on the part of the researcher is unethical. Bias is different from subjectivity. Subjectivity is related to your educational background, training and competence in research and your philosophical perspective. Bias is a deliberate attempt either to hide what you have found in your study, or to highlight something disproportionately to its true existence. It is the bias that is unethical and not the subjectivity.

➤ **Using inappropriate research methodology**

A researcher has an obligation to use appropriate methodology in conducting a study. It is unethical to use a method or procedure you know to be inappropriate (e.g. selecting a highly biased sample, using an invalid instrument or drawing wrong conclusions)

➤ **Providing incentives**

Is it ethical to provide incentives to respondents to share information with you? Some researchers provide incentives to participants for their participation in a study, feeling this to be quite proper as participants are giving their time. Others think that the offering of inducements is unethical. But, most people don't participate in a study because of incentives, but because they realize the importance of the study. Therefore, giving a small gift after having obtained the information, as a

token of appreciation, is not unethical. However, giving a present before data collection is unethical.

➤ **Incorrect reporting**

To use an appropriate methodology, but to report the findings in a way that changes or slants them to serve your own or someone else's interest, is unethical.

➤ **Inappropriate use of the information**

The use of information in a way that directly or indirectly adversely affects respondents is unethical. Can information be used to adversely affect the study population? If so, how can the study population be protected? As a researcher you need to consider and resolve these issues. Sometimes it is possible to harm individuals in the process of achieving benefits for organizations.

2.1.3 Ethical issues regarding the sponsoring organization

➤ **Restrictions imposed by the sponsoring organization**

Most research in the social sciences is carried out using funds provided by sponsoring organizations for a specific purpose. The funds may be given to develop a program or evaluate it; to examine its effectiveness and efficiency; to study the impact of a policy; to test a product; to study the behavior of a group or community; or to study a phenomenon, issue or attitude. Sometimes there may be direct or indirect controls exercised by sponsoring organizations. They may select the methodology, prohibit the publication of 'what was found' or impose other restrictions on the research that may stand in the way of obtaining and disseminating accurate information. Both the imposition and acceptance of these controls and restrictions are unethical, as they constitute interference and could amount to the sponsoring organization tailoring research findings to meet its vested interests.

➤ **The misuse of information**

How is the sponsoring body going to use the information? How is this likely to affect the study population? Sometimes sponsoring organizations use research as a pretext for obtaining management's agenda. It is unethical to let your research be used as a reason for justifying management decisions.