

The Ethical Dilemma in Educational Research

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Abstract

There has been increased discomfort by business firms in allowing student researchers to collect data from their organizations. Most managers from the organizations feel bothered by researchers and deny them access to information instead of facilitating creating knowledge based economy through research. This paper established the ethical measures institutions of higher learning have put in place to exercise controls over research through Institutional Ethics Committees (IEC), to ensure that they offer pre-clearance to researchers and maintain a cordial relationship between academic institutions and business organizations that are interested in protecting their corporate image. The objectives were: To find out ethical factors considered by IEC before clearing researchers to collect data from organizations. To examine ethical considerations in the final research reports in institutions of higher learning. Interviews and document analysis were used to collect data. Findings revealed that submission of a research ethics proposal is not emphasized by institutions of higher learning. Many ethical issues are not considered by researchers. Institutional ethics committees should be formed to deal with research ethics.

Keywords: ethics, knowledge, educational, research.

1. Introduction

Research is important in generating knowledge and in creating knowledge based economy. It is supposed to be seen as boon or as beneficial both to the institutions of higher learning and to the organizations where data is collected. However, there has been increased discomfort by business firms in allowing student researchers to collect data from their organizations. They view research as a bother. Most managers from the organizations feel bothered by researchers and deny them access to the organizations, forcing researchers to opt for other willing organizations that allow them to collect data. Managers from business firms complain that they do not like seeing names of their organizations all over the shelves in institutions of higher learning as they believe some of the issues discussed in the research reports can significantly affect their corporate image, the perception that the general public holds about a particular business. It meant that researchers do not observe research ethics. "Ethical concerns should be at the forefront of any research project and should continue through to the write-up and dissemination stages" (Wellington, 2000:3) Research ethics is important because it ensures that there is professional responsibility, avoidance of exploitation of research participants. Failure can make research harmful: to research participants, to individual researchers, to organizations and to the research community. Indeed, ethical malpractice exist hence there is need for the institutions of higher learning to consider on how to deal with ethical issues in research seriously. All educational research should be conducted within an ethic of respect for: the person, knowledge, democratic values, the quality of educational research and academic freedom. Ethical concerns should be at the forefront of any research report and should continue through to the write-up and dissemination stages of all researched work.

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Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study were:

- To find out ethical factors considered by IEC before clearing researchers to collect data.
- To examine ethical considerations in the final research reports in institutions of higher learning. Interviews and document analysis were used to collect data.

2. Literature Review

Literature was reviewed on corporate image of organizations and its implications for having research ethics in institutions of higher learning.

Corporate Image

Corporate image refers to how an organization is perceived. A corporate image is the perception that the general public holds about a particular business. Many companies invest a great deal of time and other resources in an effort to influence the opinion that consumers hold about the products offered by the business, as well as the business itself. This process of cultivating positive public relations extends to not only interaction with consumers, but also ongoing interaction with the media, labor unions, industrial associations, and other entities that have a direct and indirect impact on public opinion (Prosser, 2000). Therefore, research carried out in an organization without observing ethical issues of confidentiality and the researcher mentions the name of the organization can significantly affect its corporate image if the issues discussed are negative.

Corporations are not the only form of organizations that create these types of images. Governments, charitable organizations, criminal organizations, religious organizations, political organizations, and educational organizations all tend to have a unique image. This explains why research should be guided by ethical considerations irrespective of where it is carried out. The Revised Ethical Guidelines of the British Educational Research Association (BERA) reports that,

“The underpinning aim of the guidelines is to enable educational researchers to weigh up all aspects of the process of conducting educational research within any given context (from student research projects to large-scale funded projects) and to reach an ethically acceptable position in which their actions are considered justifiable and sound.” (BERA 2004: 3).

Research ethics are fundamental in making those involved feel that research is beneficial or a bother, even though research is vital in generating knowledge and in creating knowledge based economy.

Research Ethics

An ‘ethic’ is a moral principle or a code of conduct which governs what people do. It is concerned with the way people act or behave. The term ethics usually refers to the moral principles which are held by a group or even a profession (Wellington, 2000). Research Ethics is a body of principles governing right and wrong during the research process. It refers to the appropriateness of the researchers’ behaviour as they carry out research in relation to the research participants, plagiarism and fraudulent activities relating to research.

The Revised Ethical Guidelines of the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2004) support the need for institutions of higher learning to exercise controls over research through Institutional Ethics Committees (IEC), to ensure that they offer pre-clearance to researchers who complied with all ethical considerations in the study.

Ethical Issues in Human Participants’ Research

There are several ethical issues that must be considered when designing research that will utilize participants who are human beings. Sociologists need to be aware of having the responsibility to secure the actual permission and interests of all those involved in the study. They should not misuse any of the information discovered, and there should be a certain moral responsibility maintained towards the

participants. There is a duty to protect the rights of people in the study as well as their privacy and sensitivity. The confidentiality of those involved in the data generation must be carried out, keeping their anonymity and privacy secure (ESRC, 2005; Creswell, 2007).

The primary concern of the investigator should be the safety of the research participants. This is accomplished by carefully considering the risk/benefit ratio, using all available information to make an appropriate assessment and continually monitoring the research as it proceeds.

The scientific investigator must obtain informed consent from each research participant. This should be obtained in writing (although oral consents are sometimes acceptable) after the participant has had the opportunity to carefully consider the risks and benefits and to ask any pertinent questions. Informed consent should be seen as an ongoing process, not a singular event or a mere formality.

The investigator must explain how privacy and confidentiality concerns will be approached. Researchers must be sensitive to not only how information is protected from unauthorized observation, but also if and how participants are to be notified of any unforeseen findings from the research that they may or may not want to know.

Ethical Principles that Govern Research with Human Subjects

There are three main ethical principles that concern human subjects: The first ethical principle is autonomy, which refers to the obligation on the part of the investigator to respect each participant as a person capable of making an informed decision regarding participation in the research study. The investigator must ensure that the participant has received a full disclosure of the nature of the study, the risks, benefits and alternatives, with an extended opportunity to ask questions. The principle of autonomy finds expression in the informed consent document.

The second ethical principle is beneficence, which refers to the obligation on the part of the investigator to attempt to maximize benefits for the individual participant and society, while minimizing risk of harm to the individual. An honest and thorough risk/benefit calculation must be performed.

The third ethical principle is justice, which demands equitable selection of participants, avoiding participant populations that may be unfairly coerced into participating, such as prisoners and institutionalized children. The principle of justice also requires equality in distribution of benefits and burdens among the population (Creswell, 2007; Wellington, 2000).

Components of an Ethically Valid Informed Consent for Research

For an informed consent to be ethically valid, it must have: *Disclosure*: The potential participant must be informed as fully as possible of the nature and purpose of the research, the procedures to be used, the expected benefits to the participant and society, the potential of reasonably foreseeable risks, stresses, and discomforts, and alternatives to participating in the research. There should also be a statement that describes procedures in place to ensure the confidentiality or anonymity of the participant. The informed consent document must also disclose what compensation and medical treatment are available in the case of a research-related injury. The document should make it clear whom to contact with questions about the research study, research subjects' rights, and in case of injury. *Understanding* is the second component. The participant must understand what has been explained and must be given the opportunity to ask questions and have them answered by one of the investigators. The informed consent document must be written in lay language, avoiding any technical jargon.

Voluntariness

Voluntariness is the third component. The participant's consent to participate in the research must be voluntary, free of any coercion or promises of benefits unlikely to result from participation. Competence is also important. The participant must be competent to give consent. If the participant is not competent due to mental status, disease, or emergency, a designated surrogate may provide consent if it is in the participant's best interest to participate. In certain emergency cases, consent may be waived due to the lack of a competent participant and a surrogate. Consent should be sought from participants. The potential human subject must

authorize his/her participation in the research study, preferably in writing, although at times an oral consent or assent may be more appropriate (Creswell, 2007).

Fully Informed Consent

Fully Informed Consent of prospective participants should provide information about: the aims and nature of the research, identity and contact details of researchers, likely duration of research and their involvement, who will have access to data, how data will be stored, possible consequences of participation and of the research, whether participants would have right to see/amend transcripts, comment on provisional data analyses and how results are likely to be disseminated.

Standard Ethical Principles to Research Participants Include

Participants' right to withdraw from study; confidentiality, whilst researchers know who has provided data, they should not make this known to others. Anonymity should be observed. Researchers should not use true names of participants but they can use fictitious names or codes. This ensures that non-traceability of the generated data. Protection of participants' welfare – attempt to ensure that participants are not harmed or detrimentally affected by the research should also be observed. Respect for participants' right to privacy, respect for knowledge where objective truth should be reported. Sensitivity to differences relating to age, culture, disability, race, sex, religion and sexual orientation should also be considered (ESRC (2005).

A research ethics proposal should be submitted to the Institutional Ethics Committees (IEC) for review and it should include: a completed Statement of Research Ethics, a brief statement of how they propose to gain access to research participants, a draft participant information sheet, a draft participant consent form and signatures of student and supervisor (Lewis, 2004). It should be not that some of the discussed ethical concerns in research may be applicable in certain contexts and not others. Researchers should therefore use their own discretion to know the ethical concerns applicable in their study.

3. Methodology

Qualitative research methodology was used. It is used to gather in-depth understanding of issues that concern education such as the role of research in generating knowledge to create knowledge based economy (Cohen, 2007). The paradigm was appropriate for the study because the researcher could gather in-depth understanding of the ethical measures institutions of higher learning have put in place to exercise controls over research through Institutional Ethics Committees, to ensure that they offer pre-clearance to researchers and maintain a cordial relationship between academic institutions and business organizations that are interested in protecting their corporate image. The study population was thirty. Fifteen from middle level colleges that instruct business courses and fifteen from universities. The instruments for data collection were interviews and document analysis.

Interviews enable researchers to get data about what a participant thinks, beliefs, the perceptions of the participant and the reasons for thinking in a certain way or for doing certain things (Cohen et al., 2007; Jwan & Ong'ondo, 2011). The researcher used interviews to generate data about ethical issues considered by IEC before clearing researchers to collect data from organizations. Thirty members of staff that deal with research in institutions of higher learning were interviewed. Document analysis was also used to generate data.

Documents are considered to be a powerful source of data in qualitative research (Jwan & Ong'ondo, 2011). According to Yin (2003), documents are good for corroboration of data from other sources. The instrument for data generation was used to corroborate information from interviews. The researcher analyzed a total of fifty research reports, to examine ethical considerations in the final research reports in institutions of higher learning.

In qualitative research, data is always in the form of words. Yin (2003) asserts that qualitative researchers ought to analyze data by looking at it, assigning categories, and coding emerging issues into themes relevant to the research objectives. Data was analyzed and reporting of findings was done according to emerging themes relevant to the study objectives.

Ethical Considerations

According to the Economics and Social Research Council (ESRC, 2005), research ethics refers to the moral principles that guide a researcher to behave appropriately to observe the rights of participants and follow the right procedure during the research process up-to the time the research results are published (Creswell, 2007). The researcher got permission from the management before accessing participants. Anonymity of participants and institutions of higher education used in the study was observed plus confidentiality of the generated data.

4. Findings and Discussion

Ethical Issues Considered by Institutional Ethics Committee before clearing Researchers

Data generated through interviews revealed that institutions of higher learning in the study did not have an Institutional Ethics Committee. They argued that the panelists that oversee proposal presentations check the documents for the ethical issues to be observed. Student researchers from the institutions do not have to write and submit a research ethics proposal as it is not a requirement.

Ethical Issues in Analyzed Documents

Interview data did not corroborate with data generated through document analysis. As much as those interviewed from five middle level colleges said that research proposal presentation panelists check ethical issues in the research proposal, they did not have a section on research ethics in their institutional layout of proposal and project report writing. Proposal presentation was focused on checking whether the student researchers had all sections well written according to the format of the different institutions, and the instruments of data generation, if they were well developed to be cleared to proceed to the field to collect data. However, they had letters from their institutions authorizing them to proceed and collect data and letters from the organizations where they had collected data attached on the documents as appendices. Generally, the ethical issues considered in the analyzed documents were as summarized in table 1.1.

Table 1.1: Ethical Issues in the Analyzed Documents

Ethical Issues in the Analyzed Documents	
➤	Letter of authority to collect data
➤	Letter confirming that data was collected from the organization
➤	Privacy of participants, not mentioning their names
➤	Plagiarism

As discussed earlier, corporate image of a business organization is the perception that the general public holds about a particular business. Many firms invest resources in an effort to influence the opinion that consumers hold about the products offered by the business, as well as the business itself. This practice of cultivating positive public relations extends to interaction with consumers, the media, labor unions, industrial associations, and other entities that have a direct and indirect impact on public opinion. Institutions of higher learning interact with business organizations in many ways including research. Researchers access organizations and collect data which if not handled ethically, can cause significant harm to an organization.

Research ethics is supposed to ensure Professional responsibility, to avoid of exploitation of research participants. Research can be harmful: to research participants, to individual researchers, to the organization where data is generated and to the relationship between business organizations and institutions of higher learning if research ethics is not observed. Table 1.1 reveals that ethical malpractice exists. Many ethical issues were not considered by researchers as per the generated data from the documents. Research ethical issues not considered is summarized in table 1.2.

Table 1.2: Ethical Issues Not Considered in the Analyzed Documents

Ethical Issues Not Considered in the Analyzed Documents	
➤	No Informed Consent Form
➤	Discussion mentioning the name of the organization without a written consent
➤	Not using fictitious names for organizations or codes to observe anonymity and confidentiality
➤	Not observing non- traceability of data generated
	Referring to research participants as 'subjects'

Lack of an informed consent form meant that participants were not informed as fully as possible of the nature and purpose of the research, the procedures to be used, and the expected benefits to the participant and/or society, the potential of reasonably foreseeable risks, stresses, and discomforts, and alternatives to participating in the research. Mentioning names of organizations even in the topic without a written consent is unethical. It is also against confidentiality, anonymity and traceability as data can be easily traced to whoever gave the information. Referring to people who participated in research as 'subjects' is considered unethical in contemporary research. They should be referred to as 'participants' because they actively interact with researchers in the process of generating data.

5. Conclusion

Institutions of higher learning have not put in place significant ethical controls over research through Institutional Ethics Committees), to ensure that they offer pre-clearance to researchers and maintain a cordial relationship between academic institutions and business organizations that are interested in protecting their corporate image. This has been the main cause of increased discomfort by business firms in allowing student researchers to collect data from their organizations. Many business organizations are not comfortable to see names of their firm's all over library shelves written without their written consent, which they would not give if they were consulted. This has been happening because researchers do not consider confidentiality, anonymity and non- traceability issues of research ethics among others. Institutional research ethics committees are important to oversee ethical issues in research, they should not be limited to hospitals but they are necessary in all institutions associated with research.

6. Recommendations

Based on the above findings, the researcher recommends that:

- All institutions of higher learning should have an Institutional Research Ethics Committee (IREC) to review ethical issues in research proposals before clearing student researchers to collect data. A research ethics proposal should include: a completed statement of research ethics, a brief explanation of how the researcher intends to gain access to the organization and research participants, a written consent form, how they will observe confidentiality, anonymity and non- traceability of the information to both the research participants and the organizations where data was collected. Emerging ethical issues in research should be updated by IREC in the institutions of higher learning.
- Business organizations should form an institutional research review boards to foresee their relationship with learning institutions and review research to be carried out in their organizations specifically focusing on whether ethical considerations are considered to cushion the corporate image of the firm. The board or committee can advice the researchers to include missing ethical issues before they are allowed to collect data from the organization. This would facilitate creating knowledge based economy through research instead of denying researchers access to organizations.

➤ Institutions of higher learning should ensure that their research reports including research projects written by diploma students have a section in the document that explains the ethical considerations observed in the document.

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