

Chapter 5

Research Ethics in the Social Sciences

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ABSTRACT

The formulation of Charters for research ethics and Codes of conduct has been growing in the last few decades, on the one hand due to a renewed awareness of the ethical dimensions of research governance and the relationship between regulators and researchers, and on the other hand for the expansion of possibilities achieved by innovation in information and communication technologies. The voluntary involvement of research participants, risk management and prevention, data protection, community engagement, reflexivity of researchers are some of the centres of gravity of a debate that involves researchers, institutions, and citizens.

INTRODUCTION

At the international level, “Charters” and “Codes of behavior” were published for guiding human and social science research in the last few years. Their aim was both: to define guidelines for the researchers’ behavior, and to provide research projects with features that make them acceptable in terms of ethical clearance, which is becoming a more and more essential prerequisite to access funds.

As Sutrop et al. (2020) wrote “The increased interest in writing codes of ethics for scientists may also be somehow related to various growing pressures upon scientists: pressure to publish (“publish or perish”), tight competition for research funds, anxiety about short-term contracts, etc. Also, a lot of scientists have to fulfil different roles [...], and the pressure to cope with conflicting duties makes one ask how to share one’s time, attention, and responsibility so that no commitment is neglected. A classic example in academia is finding time for both, teaching and individual research. There may also be

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conflicting duties within the same role. For example, a researcher may face a conflict between the duty to share data and to protect confidentiality” (p.71).

As more and more researchers are involved in interdisciplinary projects and international research teams and publish in international journals, differences in standards (among different disciplines, different countries, and different institutions) become evident. Hence, the need to negotiate and develop a common understanding of the ethical standards of good research, including its planning, design, and conduct, as well as the dissemination of its results. As of today, however, codes of behavior are not many, and internationally recognized ethical frames are missing, despite their relevance. As a group of experts wrote in a Discussion Document for the Academy of Social Science in the UK “while these codes are often treated as if they were universally applicable, social scientists have demonstrated that they have been shaped by the particular circumstances and contingencies of biomedical research on human subjects” (Dingwall et. al, 2017, p. 111). However, there is a widespread agreement in the debate on the fact that it is necessary to reconsider ethics in the research of social sciences.

Two main reasons motivate such necessity: firstly, the researchers’ participation in multidisciplinary projects is increasing, not only within social studies but also in partnership with medical sciences. Secondly, today’s technological progress allows us to get easy access to and exchange a large amount of data through the Internet. These Big Data create new and extraordinary possibilities to share and analyze them. Thus, in the last few years, the efforts made at the European level and, in specific contexts at the national level, had the double aim of a more in-depth analysis, highlighting the peculiarities of ethical questions regarding social sciences, and of acting at a systematic level, promoting codes and guidelines shared among all social sciences and the research system. At the European level, a great push undoubtedly comes from the European Commission, whose program Horizon requires to fill in an Ethical Issues Table before submitting projects to apply for funds (EC, 2010). In addition to this, in case the research involves human subjects, personal data, human cells or tissues, or features ethical issues reported in the table, a specific Ethics Self-Assessment is required.

SOME HISTORICAL REFERENCES

The project Respect (Professional and Ethical Codes for Technology-related Socio-Economic Research), financed by the European Commission in the frame of program IST (Information Society Technology, priority 2) and carried out between 2001 and 2003, analyzed about 250 ethical codes of professional associations of human and social sciences (Dench, Iphofen & Huws, 2004). A review of these documents underlines how the topic was dealt with from the particular point of view of single disciplines adopting a wide range of approaches.

For example, the ethical guidelines adopted in 1999 by the Association of social anthropologists from the UK and the Commonwealth (ASA 1999), pose ethical questions in terms of relations and responsibility of the researchers versus the participants to the research, the funders, the colleagues, the discipline, the governments and the society in general. Instead, EFPA, the European association of psychologists, proposes four interdependent principles: respect for the rights and dignity of the person, competence, responsibility and integrity (EFPA 2005). In the early 1980s, the Social Research Association (SRA) was one of the earliest organizations publishing ethical guidelines with the aim of promoting homogeneous ethical practice of research for its members, research centers and professional associations. The SRA Ethical Guidelines, upgraded in 2003, divide the ethical principles into four groups of obligations: to

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