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Ethical Codes in Research in Africa: The Call for Flexibility and Context Specificity

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Abstract

The argument put across in this paper is that, tracing the historical antecedents of the introduction of ethics in research, a strong case can and must be made for research in all fields, whether the natural or social sciences. However, researchers' ethical codes must not be cast-in-stone but must be context specific. This means that ethical codes must be very flexible and escape routes must be permitted for certain kinds of studies, especially in the humanities, where societal dynamics and demand may necessitate the by-passing of certain ethical codes. While doing so, a laissez faire approach must be avoided and monitoring measures must be put in place to curtail abuse. This will allow specific studies being conducted in specific societies to proceed without the challenges created by the need to observe stringent ethical codes. The paper traces the introduction of ethics in research to various historical antecedents in order to make a case for the need for ethics in social research for instance. It is not a holistic objection of the observation of ethical codes and the establishment of ethical boards in academic institutions for instance, but the call for flexibility, balance and context-specificity.

Keywords: *Ethics, Africa, Research, Flexibility, Context-Specificity*

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1. Introduction

Ethical concerns in research have been a major consideration in scholarship for many years. Issues bothering ethical considerations have formed the basis on determining whether a particular research is viable and adapts to ethical provisions or not (Charbonneau, 1984). Thus, in many academic or scholarship environments, one of the determining factors on the viability or otherwise of a study takes into key cognizance the question as to whether the study infringes individual, group or societal ethical provisions and, or rights provisions. In many cases, Ethics Committees are set up to evaluate and scrutinize research proposals to determine whether they have the potential of infringing on certain basic human rights and if so, what measures the researcher has put in place to curtail or minimize these infringements (Collins, 2010). It must be mentioned however that the emphasis on ethics in social research in particular has its origins in history. Thus, the historical antecedents of the emphasis on ethics can be traced to certain key events that threw the light of caution on the need to close the door to a free-for-all and unregulated research procedures, especially where humans are involved and enhance regulations that seeks to protect human dignity and freedom.

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In this paper, I attempt a discussion of the historical antecedents that led to the prioritization of ethical codes in social research. The discussion in one breath makes a case for the need for ethical observations in research based on the historical antecedents and the lessons learnt. Contrarily, concerns are also raised in the viability of ethical codes and ethics committees in specific contexts. It concludes by observing that regardless of the objections and criticisms raised, a *laissez faire* approach to research, especially when mere humans are involved, must be cautiously avoided, while allowing some flexibility for researchers to adapt to societal and cultural conventions or norms based on whichever research fields they find themselves (Adu-Gyamfi, 2015).

2. Historical Antecedents

Since the 1970s the inculcation of ethical codes in experiments and research have become key components of both studies in the natural sciences and social research and it has expanded since then (Aguinis and Henle, 2004). Since then, many academic institutions such as the American Psychological Association (APA) have actively inculcated ethical provisions in their respective research. The APA for instance has implemented these measures to avoid such infringements and violations and to protect both the researcher and the subjects being studied in the psychological research (Aguinis and Henle, 2004).

The word "ethics" has Greek origin in "ethos" which means "the character of a person or a person's disposition" (Aguinis and Henke, 2004). This definition has over the years stretched to cover an aspect of Philosophy that measures how people must conduct themselves, how their conducts are assessed and establishing rules that justify such conducts. In sum, ethical considerations exist to manage behavioral tendencies and to determine their rightness or wrongness based on laid down regulations. This is the mold in which ethics is captured.

According to Aguinis and Henle (2004), the keen interest in ethics in research and scholarship in general was virtually non-existent until the 1960s. This is not to suggest that there were no ethical breaches in research preceding this period (Gregory, 2003) but public and scholarly awareness became visible in the 1960s due to some major outfalls in medical and scientific research. These major outfalls may be described as the final straw that broke the back of the Carmel in the rigorous introduction and observation of ethics in academic research in particular. One of such studies was the Tuskegee Research which studied the long-term effects of untreated syphilis in the long term. This study was deemed to be unethical and an invasion of medical privacy. This outcome led to the various historical studies and the establishment of Ethics Review Boards across the educational and national research spectrum in the United States and indeed, replicated in many other countries (Dyck and Allen 2013). Another historical antecedent worth mentioning is the Nuremberg Code of 1947. According to the *British Medical Journal*, the judgment by the war crime tribunal at Nuremberg known as the Nuremberg Trials, established ten standards by which physicians must abide by when carrying out research on humans. This has become widely accepted as the Nuremberg code and implemented in research ethics worldwide (*British Medical Journal*, 1996). The Nuremberg Code became necessary due to the ethical breaches in research during the second world war. This, *inter alia*, laid emphasis on the need for voluntary and informed consent in scientific research and recognized that subjects have rights to their body and any unnecessary pain and suffering encountered as a result of research must be avoided (*BMJ*, 1996).

The other ethical considerations of the Nuremberg Code include the following: that the research being undertaken must be a fruitful one that benefits humanity at large. Also, the study must be based on historical antecedent or study, preferably previous successful animal experimentation. This means that, where necessary, an experimental study must have been conducted on animals and the results or outcome certified to be safe prior its implementation in humans. Again, the research must be one that avoids injury or death. It also provides that the degree of risk taken must not exceed the one previously determined before the experiment. It further stipulates that proper preparations must be made before the research is done. Also, it mentions that the experiment must be conducted by qualified professionals and not amateurs. The code further states that the subject, if human, is at liberty to opt out of the study at any point and finally, it mentions that the expert(s) in charge of the research or experiment must be willing to terminate the study at any stage when it becomes necessary to do so (*BMJ*, 1996).

Another historical antecedent that has given birth to contemporary ethics considerations in research is the Thalidomide Production, promotion and usage. Thalidomide was a drug used in Europe (although it was then not approved in the United States). Initially, it was recommended by doctors for the treatment of nausea

and to treat sleep deficiencies. However, it was later discovered that the drug produced severe deformities in children and about 12,000 babies suffered significant deformities when they were born by parents who had used the drug. This raised serious concerns in the medical fields and gave birth to stringent ethical concerns (Gregory, 2003).

Furthermore, another historical antecedent worth mentioning, that has contributed to the current emphasis on ethics in research is the fall-out that led to the Helsinki Declaration (1964). The Declaration of Helsinki was officially formalized by the World Medical Association (WMA) in 1964. The WMA outlines ethical principles that bind any research involving humans. Just like the Nuremberg code, the Helsinki Declaration bothers on ethics covering human research where humans are the subjects of study. It is hailed as the pillar on human research ethics and many institutional research ethical codes have been culled from the tenets of the Helsinki Declaration of 1964. In a nutshell, the Helsinki Declaration states that a physician conducting an experiment on humans has a duty of care. This duty of care includes respect for the subject, acknowledgment of the rights to make decisions and the recognition of groups that are vulnerable (Bhutta, 2002).

All the above historical antecedents, namely, the Nuremberg Code which comes as a result of anomalies in human experiment during the second world war, the Tuskegee study on persons suffering long term syphilis, the Helsinki Declaration which sought to streamline medical research and the Thalidomide experience as well as several other ethical fallouts such as the Japanese experiments in the Chinese and many others, contributed immensely and gave credence to current ethical considerations in research globally (Giorgi, 1985).

3. Issues of Context Specificity and Flexibility

Although the resort to ethics in research has been hailed due to its many positives, as already discussed in this paper, many have raised the issues of content and context specificity (Adu-Gyamfi, 2015). The argument has been raised to the effect that what is deemed ethical in one society may not necessarily be so in another, and what is deemed unethical in one academic society may not necessarily be so in another. Adu-Gyamfi (2015) in his study, makes a strong case for a closer look at the establishment of research committees and the rigidity surrounding the adherence to ethical codes in research in Africa for instance. Presenting a comparative study in the application of ethics in research in the United Kingdom and Ghana, and the challenges of contextualization especially in the latter case, is significant to note (Andoh, 2009).

Furthermore, Adu Gyamfi (2015) outlines the ethical dilemmas one may be confronted with in conducting a study in Ghana for instance, Adu Gyamfi (2015) observes that the checklist approach and rigidity with which researchers are to abide by these ethical codes may not practically be viable in the field. Thus, implementation of ethical codes must be context specific and not holistic. An example is where a gatekeeper or an informant demands money before granting access to informants or giving out information. This is a phenomenon many conducting research in some developing or poor societies may encounter. Another typical example where ethics may be compromised is in the study of persons living with HIV/AIDS where a partner who is infected keeps it away from the other partner. It becomes challenging and threatens a potential clash between the moral and the ethical (Kwansa, 2010). The question posed is what the researcher must do in such a situation. Or where an informant has committed a gruesome crime such as murder. How does the researcher juggle the ethical provisions of research vis a vis a moral civic duty to the State (Duncan *et al.*, 2009). These are major concerns.

It must be noted that proponents of these concerns do not object to the subscription of ethics and ethical review boards per se, but they raise substantial arguments that ethical provisions must not be cast in stone and must be couched in such flair of flexibility so as to offer a researcher, especially those who conduct social research in developing societies to adapt (Dunn, 2013). Such flexibility must also be monitored in such a manner that will eschew abuse and exploitation (Andoh, 2009).

4. Ethical Considerations in Social Research

The historical antecedents already discussed have, to a very large extent, informed and shaped current ethical practices in social research. Mention has already been made of the APA inculcating stringent ethical codes in psychological research. These ethical codes have transcended into various ambits of research in the humanities as well as the social sciences (Bhutta, 2022). Current research in the humanities has various streams of ethical considerations. These include the right to privacy. Researchers are admonished to respect the privacy of subjects or informants as and when they become necessary and not invade individual or group privacy in the

name of data collection. Subjects or informants also have the right to decide whether they will grant permission to researchers to study them or not. This must strictly be observed by researchers. Also, informants or participants have the right to confidentiality. In this regard, sensitive information must be kept solely to the researcher and not divulged against the will of the participant or without his consent. Again, researchers must be honest and truthful about relevant details of the research and to allow participants to decide whether to participate or not. Last but not least, participants have the right to be briefed adequately before the study and also after the study as and when the situation demands so. These ethical considerations must be adhered to in social research (Macklin, 1989).

5. Conclusion

The paper has looked at some of the historical antecedents that has given birth to current research ethical practices in the social sciences and humanities. The need for strict adherence to ethics, especially where humans are involved and have been emphasized. Again, the dilemma in applying stringent ethical code that does not take into consideration, societal dynamics has also been looked at (Adu-Gyamfi, 2015). Conducting research in some developing societies calls for relaxation of stringent ethical codes and some flexibility while ensuring that abuses are prevented. In conclusion, it is worth observing that the resort to ethical codes in social research has its umbilical cord in the historical antecedents discussed and are very important to guide research and to prevent abuses as observed in the historical narratives while ensuring that these ethical codes rather enhances research and do pose challenges and blockades to smooth research especially in Africa where the dynamics may be very different from western societies.

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