

Role of Research Ethics and Academic Integrity in Higher Education: Avoidance of Plagiarism in Research Endeavour

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Abstract

The Research and academic endeavour must cater to ethical practices. Academic ethics is the ethical behaviour and moral principles followed by academician. Academic honesty, integrity and research ethics are the underlying tenets for conducting qualitative research. The originality of the work conducted by researcher has to be established to justify one's creative content in research reports. The students at graduate and post graduate level must be exposed to topics like ethical issues, conduct of research, academic integrity, Academic/Research misconduct, use of citation styles, use of reference management tools, manipulation of data, fabrication and falsification of data and understanding plagiarism. The higher education institutions should be zero tolerant to academic misconduct.

Keywords: *Research Ethics, Academic misconduct, Plagiarism and Copyright/Patent*

Introduction

The academic field of research provides insight, clear and comprehensive directions on a particular topic. The ethics of writing a dissertation involves copyright laws, avoidance of plagiarism and focusses on the significance of incorporating the rules governing research. The journey of research provides immeasurable opportunities for personal and professional growth. According to *Oxford English Dictionary*, ethics is defined as “the rules of conduct recognised as appropriate to a particular profession or area of life”. Clear ethical standards and principles exist regarding rights of human subjects; “Research ethics is a very challenging subject which the research candidate has to face, and which if not addressed correctly may cause the result of the research work to be considered tainted or even invalid” (Remenyi et al., 1998, p.115). The researcher must plan, conduct and involve in an ethical research.

The academic institutions affirm or declare the code of ethics for conducting research and academic activities in transparent manner. Fishman defines academic integrity as a “commitment to five fundamental values: honesty, trust, fairness, respect and responsibility”. The ethical issues surface in all aspects of conducting research from gathering information to referencing accurately. The dissertation study must address certain core ethical issues such as data collection, data analysis and interpretation and respect or access to a research site. The professional organisations adhere to their own standards or codes of ethics to guide research activities. Rossman and Rallis point out these guidelines “serve as standards for the ethical practice of research and are based on moral principles such as utilitarianism (the greatest good for the greatest number), theories of individual rights (the rights of the individual may supercede the interests of the greatest number), and theories of justice (fairness and equity)” (pp. 48-49). The

ethical researcher must be nonprejudiced, precise and candid throughout all phases of dissertation.

Institutional Review Boards (IRB)

The members of IRB's in colleges, universities and research institutions play a pivotal part in ensuring the research ethics- from reviewing to approving research conducted at their institutions. Their main role is to protect participants from "stress, discomfort, embarrassment, invasion of privacy or potential threat to reputation" (Madsen, p. 80). The submission of proposal to IRB should adhere to detailed information about study, act of consent, selection of participants and protection of confidential information. The questionnaires, interviews, experiments and observations can be conducted with the prior knowledge of IRB, who may recommend changes within the original proposal. IRB Committee's permission is obligatory before collecting data and they undertake two basic types of requests: expedited review and full review. Expedited review is productive when there is trifling risk to participant. According to Rudestam and Newton:

The criterion of minimal risk could pertain to research involving brief questionnaires that do not address questions likely to be disturbing to the participants. Questions regarding favoured sports or preferred television programs are probably not disturbing; questions regarding childhood victimization, current mental status, and alcohol or drug abuse probably are. (*Surviving your Dissertation*, p.277)

Rights of Human Subjects

The involvement of human subjects in research brings forth a challenging ethical dilemma. The participants in a research study must be entitled to certain rights related to Informed Consent and Confidentiality.

Basic Elements of Informed Consent

Informed consent is pivotal in developing a trust between investigator and human subjects. It

becomes the sole responsibility of the researcher to elaborate the objectives and methodologies of research in getting consent. In seeking informed consent, the United States Department of Health and Human Services, Code of Federal Regulations identified the following information shall be provided to each subject.

1. A statement that the study involves research, an explanation of the purposes of the research and the expected duration of the subject's participation, a description of the procedures to be followed, and identification of any procedures which are experimental.
2. A description of any reasonable foreseeable risks or discomforts to the subject.
3. A statement describing the extent, if any, to which confidentiality of records identifying the subject will be maintained.
4. A statement that participation is voluntary, refusal to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which the subject is otherwise entitled, and the subject may discontinue participation at any time without penalty of loss of benefits to which the subject is otherwise entitled. (pg. 14-15)

It is crucial to note that informed consent is not mandatory for all studies. In *Surviving your Dissertation*, Rudestam and Newton pointed out that methodologies such as "secondary analysis of data, archival research, and the systematic observation of publicly observable data, such as shoppers in a suburban mall" may require only "expedited review" due to their classification of "minimal risk" (p. 276).

Confidentiality

The participants included in the research study must be intimated about the data collected, its further use in future studies and confidential nature. The names of the individuals should not be unfolded in and throughout the research study. No one other than the researcher must have access to data collected. Secrecy is maintained by researchers through using fictional names and combining the data so that individual responses are

incorporated under the total aggregated data. In *Planning Ethically Responsible Research*, Sieber lists out measures to protect privacy such as keeping the confidentiality of names, occupation, ethnic background while transcribing from the audio tape or in writing up the case study and such tapes will be destroyed after the publication of the research report.

Ethical Issues in Data Collection

The researchers must employ gathered data for the study purpose. In the social sciences, data are collected primarily through questionnaires, interviews, participant observations and action research approach. Use of internet and other technologies also require prior permission from the participants for the smooth conduct of study. Seven main principles have been described by the National Ethical guidelines in India as guiding the conduct of ethical research – “social and clinical value, scientific validity, Fair subject selection, Favourable risk-benefit ratio, independent review, Informed consent and Respect for Potential and enrolled subject” (ICMR Ethical Guidelines_2017.Pdf.).

Access to Research Sites

In *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, Stake remarked, “Qualitative researchers are guests in the private spaces of the world. Their manners should be good and their code of ethics strict” (244). The authoritative people in charge of the research sites or “gate keepers” control access to the site. It is the ethical responsibility of the researcher to inform the persons in charge about the goals of the study; how it may affect the working of the organization and its members; how the findings of the study would help the organisation.

Recording Data

Audio and video recording must confirm to the ethical dimensions. As part of obtaining greater accuracy, researchers need to record unstructured or semi structured interviews by properly informing them about ways in which recordings will be used, stored or destroyed following data

transcription and confidentiality using fictitious names and codes.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Data analysis is a crucial stage in research; if done wrongly can mislead others in interpreting data. The ethical issues of fabrication and falsification of data need to be evaded in data analysis and interpretation, as it leads to data distortion. It is unethical to cover up the results as the accuracy of data is of paramount importance. The validation strategies like triangulation, member checking, audit trail, peer debriefing and external auditing validate the precision of the data.

Ethical Issues in Reporting Research Findings

Honesty, accuracy and objectivity are the hallmarks to report research findings. Ethical researchers do not practice selective reporting, concealment of negative results and omission of troubling data for misleading purposes. In *Avoiding Plagiarism*, Roig states that:

Researchers have an ethical responsibility to report the results of their studies according to their a priori plans. Any post hoc manipulations that may alter the results initially obtained, such as the elimination of outliers or the use of alternative statistical techniques, must be clearly described along with an acceptable rationale for using such techniques. (p. 35)

Plagiarism

Plagiarism or the theft of ideas and words is considered to be a serious offence in academics and research. Viewed as an academic malpractice or crime it adversely affects one’s career, reputation and dignity. The *Oxford English Reference Dictionary* defines plagiarism as “the action or practice of plagiarizing; the wrongful appropriation or purloining, and publication as one’s own, of the ideas, or the expression of the ideas (literary, artistic, musical, mechanical, etc) of another” (Pearsall and Trumble, 2008). The manifold appearances of plagiarism include reproduction of ideas, use of words or statements of another person

as one's own without acknowledgement and the use of material taken from an agency. The system of referring and writing a research work by acknowledging and informing through proper citation is crucial to avoid plagiarism. In *The Craft of Research*, different instances of plagiarism are recorded:

You plagiarize when, intentionally or not, you use someone else's words or ideas but fail to credit that person. You plagiarize even when you do credit the author but use his [or her] exact words without so indicating with quotation marks or block indentation. You also plagiarize when you use words so close to those in your source, that if you placed your work next to the source, you would see that you could not have written what you did without the source at your elbow (Booth et al. p.167)

The line between paraphrasing and plagiarizing sometimes becomes obscure. Paraphrasing is simply reaffirming the statement of others and then citing the source. The correspondences of the words or rearrangement of sentences close to the original determine the degree of plagiarizing. A researcher must refrain from biased or discriminatory language. Rudestam and Newton offered the guidelines in *Surviving your Dissertation* such as "substitute gender-neutral words and phrases for gender biased words, avoid gender –biased pronouns and avoid language that suggests evaluation or reinforce stereotypes". (284-288)

The availability of access to literature through digital platforms had made it easy for offenders to make use of the contents with ease. But the same technology helps academic authorities and reviewers in identifying plagiarism. Plagiarism detection tools such as Turn-it-in, I Thenticate and Urkund are now familiar to the academic parlance. The website plagiarism.org in its webpage <https://www.plagiarism.org/article/what-is-plagiarism> lists the various instance which will be considered as plagiarism. The act of transforming

other's work as one's own, doubling words and sentence structure from works without giving acknowledgement, improper quote and unreliable information about quotation come under instances of plagiarism. A researcher or author should use suitable citations like APA or MLA styles of referencing. Self- plagiarism is obnoxious without providing proper citations.

Copyright Law

The policy of copyright defends the creative works of authorship, including both published and unpublished works. The individual or the firm entitled with the copyright has the privilege to replicate the concerned work for a period of 70 years after the author's death. This legal policy also protects dissertation from illegal use and prohibits the use without proper citation. The researchers place copyright notice on dissertation as a defensive mechanism. The works with outdated copyrights need not require any permission. Academic honesty demands one to acknowledge all sources in educational and research purposes. Illegal use results in copyright infringement and piracy.

Academic Misconduct/ Issues related to Research Data

The defilement or breach of the code of ethics is exposed to strict penalties on research scholars and faculty members. American Psychological Association (2015) observes that "Research misconduct occurs when a researcher fabricates or falsifies, manipulates or tempers the data or plagiarises information or ideas within a research report".

1.Fabrication

The practice of supplementing false data to real data and its recording and reporting in research output is termed as fabrication of data. Accordingly, experiments and surveys are omitted to suit their objectives or hypothesis. The intense competition in science for publication, recognition and funding are reasons behind fabrication of data.

2.Falsification/ Tempering

It is the act of misrepresenting research materials and the process also involves amending, modification and concealing data without scientific or statistical basis.

3.Intentional omission of data

The researcher omits data/ result which do not agree with their hypothesis. It is the obligation of the researcher to report the data during the research.

4.Passing another researcher's data as one's own

The practice of publishing other authored works is an absolute ethical violation. The basic details like names and contact address will be modified and subject to publication.

5.Intentional negligence of acknowledging previous research

Improper acknowledgement of previous research works become an unethical practice and peer review process will spot out the omission.

6.Defamation

The researcher must be cautious enough to handle individuals, groups or organizations without any defaming statements.

7.Ghost Writing

Some websites initiate writing of articles or research papers including books/thesis on monetary basis. Their contribution is broadly termed as ghost writing.

Initiatives of MHRDC and UGC

Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India has become very sensitive to ethical issues related to academic publication. Under their guidance, UGC, Statutory councils and Universities have become sensitive and vigilant. As per UGC Regulations related to PhD 2009(MPhil PhD clarification. Pdf) submission of all MPhil dissertation and PhD Thesis to INFLIBNET has

become mandatory. The practice and implementation of academic reliability and avoidance of plagiarism in Higher Educational scenario was endorsed by UGC in July 2018. This is an eye-opening legal initiative. Anti-Plagiarism softwares like Turnitin, iThenticate and Urkund match the content with published sources available online.

Conclusion

“Ethics can be considered a sort of practical or professional morality that enables boundaries for the work of research to be played fairly” says Stewart in *Research Ethics*. Since honesty, integrity and ethics are the basic essentials of an enriching research environment, teachers, Professors and academicians must mould and carve out the best, creative and purposeful research from the young minds. The prevailing acts in research like Copyright Act, Intellectual Property Rights Act and Acts related to Patents must be respected by a researcher and cannot be exploited for commercial publications. The researchers must be trained to become critical and analytical thinkers who must ensure academic integrity and honesty. Maintaining integrity in education and research shouldn't be limited to higher educational institutions. The ideals of academic integrity must be indoctrinated in school children who are going to be the senior researchers and scientists tomorrow.

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