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REVIEW ARTICLE

ETHICS IN SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH INVOLVING HUMAN PARTICIPANTS: CULTURAL CHALLENGES FOR RESEARCHERS IN KENYA

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ABSTRACT

In this paper we discuss the essential ethical issues that have often been ignored in social science research involving human participants in Kenya. In most researches conducted in the universities, the ethical committees, if any, normally pay more attention to ethics when handling researches that deal with human medicine, health, biotechnology and related issues. Not much attention is paid to ethical requirements predominantly because of cultural orientations that do not conform with these research requirements. Nevertheless, we argue that the same scrutiny done in medical researches should be extended to social science research. We base our argument on observations and readings from several postgraduate theses across disciplines in the universities in Kenya. We note that there are hardly any subsections within the theses on ethical considerations even though the researches are laden with matters of ethical concerns ranging from anonymity to use of vulnerable groups such as pupils in schools. We argue that in the process of creating knowledge for sustainable development through research, and in order to be part of the fast expanding world of academic community, social science researchers in Kenya dealing with human participants should give due regards to international as well as local ethical demands. We, therefore, propose that there is need for ethics committees in the universities that are mandated to scrutinise all research proposals beyond the focus on health sciences.

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INTRODUCTION

Research ethics refers to the moral principles that guide research from its inception through to its completion and publication of results (ESRC, 2005). Ethics embody individual and communal codes of conduct based upon adherence to a set of principles which may be explicit and codified or implicit, and which may be abstract and impersonal or concrete and personal (Zimbardo, 1984). Ethical considerations are normally emphasised in all research situations involving human participants. For example, Mason (2002: 41) emphasises that qualitative researchers are normally called upon “not only to carry out data generation and analysis morally...but also to plan our research and frame our questions in an ethical manner too”. Thus, “to say that the goal of research is production of knowledge, then, is not to say that this goal should be pursued at all costs” (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007: 209) without due regard to ethics. Therefore, as with any other human activity, there are ethical issues surrounding social science research which need to be dealt with. In our discussion, we take the position that all social science researchers gathering data from human participants should carefully and systematically consider the ethical dimensions to their work, since these are not always immediately apparent. We start with a discussion on the

current trend of referring to people from whom we gather data as ‘participants’ and not ‘subjects’. This is followed by an explanation on why we find it important for social science researchers to pay attention to ethical requirements and then focus on the key ethical requirements. The paper ends with an outline of recommendations for those intending to undertake social science research that involve human participants.

Why is it important to pay attention to ethics in social science research?

Democracy, respect for truth and respect for persons

Literature reveals different ways of classifying ethical requirements. For example, Bassey (1999:73) suggests that ethical issues be discussed under three titles “democracy, respect for truth and respect for persons”. In terms of respect for democracy, he emphasises the importance of guaranteeing the participants freedom to give solicited information and to see what the researcher reports about them; even as the researcher exercises his or her own freedom to carry out the research. Respect for the truth, according to Bassey, is exercised by ensuring that the entire process of research does not involve any deception. Respect for persons involves conducting the study in a way that does not infringe upon the dignity and privacy of the participants.

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### Cost benefit analysis

On the other hand, Cohen *et al.* (2007:51) adopt a cost-benefit analysis arguing that a major ethical dilemma is that which requires researchers to strike a balance between the demands placed on them as professional scientists in pursuit of truth, and their participants rights' and values potentially threatened by the research. They refer to this as the 'cost - benefit ratio'. In this regard, they consider that ethical issues may arise from the following aspects of the research:

- Nature of the project itself - e.g. a topic on ethnic or racial differences in intelligence.
- The context of the research - e.g. prison.
- The procedures to be adopted - e.g. producing high levels of anxiety.
- Methods of data gathering - e.g. covert observation.
- The nature of the participants - e.g. emotionally disturbed youth.
- The type of data collected - e.g. highly personal and sensitive.
- What is to be done with the data - e.g. may cause embarrassment to participants (Cohen *et al.*, 2007:51).

In line with Cohen *et al.* (2007) cost - benefits analysis, it is necessary to highlight the general benefits of social research. Thus, in considering the benefits, harm and risks in conducting research, it is important to ensure that the expected benefits are great and the risks of these benefits not being achieved are correspondingly low. Some of these benefits may include:

- Research as an intrinsic good.
- Contribution to knowledge.
- Development of theories.
- Improvement to lives.
- Training researchers.
- Enhancing reputation/image.
- Increasing commercial success.
- Entertainment and enjoyment.
- Personal development.
- Career development (Oates, 2006: Cohen *et al.*, 2007).

### Invading private space

In social life, various reasons have been advanced for creating ethical frameworks for research. One main reason is that social science researchers are guests in a private space of the world and therefore their manners should be good and their code of ethics strict (Burgess, 1989; Stake, 2005). Stake argues that a kind of silent informal contract normally exists between the researcher and the researched which provides the participants with a protective cover. Equally, it has been argued that ethical approaches to research do not reduce the credibility (internal validity) and dependability (reliability) of it but highlight the contextual complexities within which it is carried out (Kelly, 1989). To be ethical, a research project needs to be designed to create trustworthy (valid) outcomes if it is to be believed to be pursuing truth. Apart from this, the generalisability of findings (if that is the intention) from one situation to another is dependent on research being carried out ethically. Trying to

answer questions from an inappropriate sample or data set, or choosing an inappropriate unit of analysis, may lead to misleading findings and undermining their transferability (Bassey, 1999). Nevertheless, the assurance of ethical conduct of social research is a complex matter, needing a supporting infrastructure. Many researchers usually argue that any reasonable person knows what is ethical and what is not and so it can simply be left to the researcher to behave in any ethically sound way. In Kenya, for example, many researchers only think of ethical matters when conducting medically related research - which they feel may endanger human life, and not much in social research. However, in the last few years there has been a massive growth in concern about and regulation of research ethics, especially in Western Europe, US and Australia/New Zealand (Oates 2006) and this cannot be ignored in Kenya too because of the global nature of research.

### Key ethical considerations in social science research

Verdugo (1998) points out that social science scholars encounter many ethical conundrums when studying human behaviour. As such, different countries have governing bodies that have developed dynamic standards to guide researchers' conduct in their field. But, most significantly, there are some general moral principles that most researchers would agree on. These are discussed next.

#### 'Participants' and not 'subjects'

One of the latest developments in social science research, and indeed all research, involving human beings is the move away from the use of the term 'subjects' to refer to people from whom we gather data to the use of the term 'participants'. Thus, it is now common practice to refer to people who serve as data sources for research as 'participants' (Oates, 2006). Oates, rightly, argues that this recognises the participants' active role in the research process and replaces the term 'subject' which, has been viewed as derogatory and portraying people as passive recipients rather than active agents. He goes on to explain that in some type of social research the people providing the data are relatively passive, for example, in completing a multiple-choice questionnaire, while in other types of study, such as qualitative or ethnographic interviews, people are much more actively engaged. But the thrust of the shift to the term 'participants' is to recognise that people providing data for a study do themselves have a stake in the process, they are giving up their time and allowing an intrusion into their private space. "It is thus in this spirit of recognising people's rights to have their human dignity respected that the term 'participants' is promoted" (Oates, 2006:201) regardless of the instruments used for gathering data - whether questionnaire or interviews.

#### Informed consent

This is defined as "the procedures in which individuals choose whether to participate in an investigation after being informed of facts that would be likely to influence their decisions"(Diener and Crandall, 1978 in Cohen *at al.*, 2007:52). This definition entails the ideals of 'competence' - which means that responsible, mature individuals will make

correct decisions if they are given relevant information. It also entails 'voluntarism', 'full information' and 'comprehension' – that the participants fully understand the nature of the project. It is thus advised that all research participants must be given accurate and detailed information about the research and their express consent be assured before any research activity can take place (Bassey, 1999; Burgess, 1989; Gillham 2000; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007; Mason, 2002; Stake, 2005; Yin, 2003). Ethics requires that researchers inform participants of the general nature of the research so they can make an informed decision about whether or not to participate in the research (Verdugo, 1998). Where interviews are conducted and audio-recorded, the participants should be reminded that the discussions would be audio-recorded and that those who do not want to be audio-recorded are free to withdraw. Nevertheless, we observe that while some cultures may not be stringent about informed consent, in others there are strict controls for informed consent (Cohen *et al.*, 2007). The need for informed consent arises from the participants' right to freedom and self-determination. As such, the participants have the right to refuse or withdraw even when the research has started.

It can, however, be argued that in some research methods it is impossible to seek informed consent. For example, Van den Hoonard (2002) argues that the notion of informed consent can be a problem, especially in observational research where it can be difficult to clarify all the issues to be observed because in most cases the issues emerge in the course of observation. The same applies to covert observation such as observing how people take bribes – in which case seeking informed consent would compromise the behaviour being observed. In such circumstances the principle of greater public good prevails. Otherwise, potential participants should always be informed in advance and in understandable terms of any potential benefits, risks, inconvenience or obligations associated with the research that might reasonably be expected to influence their willingness to participate. Thus, no data should be gathered from people who have not consented, been given clear statement about why information is going to be collected, or been told how it is going to be used (Burgess, 1989; Cohen *et al.*, 2007; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). The extent and detail of the process of gaining informed consent depends on the nature of the research. In many cases, for example in our schools, researchers get access from the school principals and teachers but do not bother to get consent from students. This is unethical and is not encouraged in academic research.

Equally, consent should always be gained in a consistent manner and sufficient time allowed for a potential participant to consider their decision between the information and the gaining of consent. In essence, attempts should be made to avoid perceived or real coercion in getting participants involved in research. For example, a researcher teaching at university might decide to circulate questionnaires to his/her students; in which case the students will not want to disappoint the lecturer leading to implicit coercion. Definitely, conscientious students may feel that they have to complete the questionnaire, or else compromise their relationship with the lecturer. This suggests that the researchers are cashing in on this fear to reduce attrition rates in the study (Cohen *et al.*, 2007).

Getting informed consent should normally involve the use of an information sheet about the research and what participation involves, and a signed consent form - where practicable. We, however, note that in Kenya, the idea of signing consent forms which is now common in other parts of world could cause suspicion and affect the fieldwork. People fear signing such documents. Still, the researcher should, in such circumstances, get verbal consent from the participants and mention it in their thesis/project report.

In exceptional circumstances where the nature of the research design requires it, no research should be conducted without the opt-in informed consent of participants. Where participants are involved in longer-term data collection, the use of procedures for the renewal of consent at appropriate times should be considered. Participants should be informed clearly that any data that they have provided will be destroyed if they so request and that there will be no resultant adverse consequences.

As Cohen *et al.* (2007) point out, some of the grounds for informed consent include:

- Participants must be in a position or old enough to understand the choice that they are making.
- Disclosure of purposes of research.
- Disclosure of any risks to participants.
- A provision allowing participants to withdraw at any time.

Overall, "The researcher should do all he or she reasonably can to ensure that the information made available, and the conditions under which it is received and (as it were) processed encourage the belief that consent granted is fully informed and voluntarily given" (Gregory, 2003:39).

### **Confidentiality and anonymity**

Anonymity "means that we do not name the person or research site involved but, in research, it is usually extended to mean that we do not include information about any individual or research site that will enable that individual or research site to be identified by others" (Walford, 2008b, p. 84). This means that although the researcher knows who have provided the information or are able to identify participants from the information given, they will in no way make the connection known publicly thus the boundaries surrounding the shared secret will be protected (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995/2007). It is most frequently initially offered by researchers as part of an access strategy. Walford (2008b) argues that depending on the type of findings if the sites and people are named then writers could be sued for libel in a way that is difficult to do where names are not used. However, Jan Nesper (2000) sees anonymization as a representational strategy where the fact that we do not name a site gives the findings of the research some sense of generalizability. That is, if we do not give details about the site, it becomes a more 'general' place - just one example of many. Researchers thus "implicitly invite readers to see their findings as being applicable to other situations" (Walford, 2008b p. 90). It, therefore, implicitly gives the writer and reader the chance to

broaden the findings of each study beyond the situations investigated in terms of time.

Confidentiality, as Walford (2008b) argues, is more challenging because it implies that the information is private or secret. The implication is that what is being said should not be passed on to others. If, in an interview, someone states that what they are about to say is confidential then take it to mean that (while they wish me to know the 'facts' or the 'full story') they do not wish that it be passed on to anyone else. It is ethical, of course, for researchers to keep confidential any information and that they receive in this way—but it is totally ludicrous to offer confidentiality to respondents about the totality of the information that they give to researchers. That is why we explain to them that the information they give may be published in a journal article or a book. Confidentiality and anonymity are also used to try to reduce participants' fears and encourage them to take part in research (Walford, 2008a; 2008b). Walford (2008b) observes that it is an almost unquestioned belief that anonymity for individuals and research sites should be the standard ethical practice for social science and educational research. As discussed in BERA (2004): The confidential and anonymous treatment of participants' data is considered the norm for the conduct of research. Researchers must recognise the participants' entitlement to privacy and must accord them their rights to confidentiality and anonymity, unless they or their guardians or responsible others, specifically and willingly waive that right. In such circumstances it is in the researchers' interests to have such a waiver in writing. Conversely, researchers must also recognise participants' rights to be identified with any publication of their original work or other inputs, if they so wish. In some contexts it will be the expectation of participants to be so identified (p. 23).

However, issues of confidentiality and anonymity generate a lot of arguments. For example, Oats (2006) notes that the duty of confidentiality is not absolute in law and may in exceptional circumstances be overridden by more compelling duties such as the duty to protect individuals from harm. Where a significant risk of such issues arising is identified in the risk assessment, specific procedures to be followed should be specified in the protocol. This becomes necessary in case study researches where many of our graduate students as well as senior researchers specify the cases, e.g. 'a case study of...'

Confidentiality and anonymity is a lot easier with 'blind' questionnaires. However, in face-to-face interviews the researcher needs to promise confidentiality and anonymity. One way of ensuring anonymity is by not using participants' real names, thus using codes. The most important issue here is that even where explicit written consent is given, researchers should respect and preserve the anonymity of participants' identities at all times.

### Privacy

Privacy is more than confidentiality. It means the person has the right not to take part in the research, not to answer questions and not to be interviewed. This can be easily violated during the process of research and denied when

completed. It also depends on the information gathered as some are more sensitive than others e.g. religious preferences, sexual practices, income, racial and/or ethnic prejudice etc. It also depends on where the information is gathered - e.g. at home, offices and so on. It is also noted that sometimes researchers may choose to relinquish their privacy. For researchers, it is significant that writing up research has to be carried out ethically so that the presentation of the data both respects participants' right to privacy and sustains the right of society to know about the research (Cohen *et al.*, 2000).

### Protection from harm

Researchers should not, at all times, deceive participants about any aspects of the study that would cause them physical harm or excessive emotional discomfort (Bassey, 1999). Hammersley and Atkinson (1995/2007) observe that while educational and social science research may not pose grave physical dangers as experimentation in medical profession, or atomic science, it still poses serious harm to individuals and institutions that may suffer long after the study. Similarly, any other potential physical or psychological harm, discomfort or stress to human participants that a research project might generate should be avoided. In social science research this includes risks to participants such as:

- Personal social standing, privacy, personal values and beliefs, including the adverse effects (to them) of revealing information that relates to illegal, sexual, or deviant behaviour.
- their links to family and the wider community,
- their position in occupational settings,

Therefore, social science researchers, and indeed all researchers, must make every effort to minimise the risks of any harm either physical or psychological arising for any participant, researcher, institution, funding body or any other person. Every researcher should carry out a risk analysis and, where significant risks are identified, should specify a risk management and harm alleviation strategy in the protocol (Oates, 2006). Equally, participants should be given information as to whom they may contact in the event of any issues arising in the course of the research that cannot be resolved with the researcher or members of the project team. This can be done by giving the contacts of the researcher's institution. Where applicable, researchers should comply with the requirements of the Data Protection Act, the Freedom of Information Act and any other relevant legal frameworks governing the management of personal information in Kenya or in any other country where the research is conducted.

According to Cohen *et al.* (2007), risks can arise under the following circumstances:

- Vulnerable groups – e.g. children and young people, those with a learning disability or cognitive impairment, or individuals in a dependent relationship.
- Sensitive topics – e.g. participants' illegal or political behaviour, their experience of violence, their abuse or exploitation, their mental health, their gender or ethnic status.

- Where permission of a gatekeeper is normally required for initial access to members – e.g. ethnic or cultural groups, members of the armed forces or inmates and other members of custodial or health and welfare institutions.
- Deception or research conducted without participants' full and informed consent at the time the study is started.
- Access to records of personal or confidential information, including genetic or other biological information.
- Inducing psychological stress, anxiety or humiliation or causing more than minimal pain.
- Intrusive interventions – e.g. the administration of drugs or other substances, vigorous physical exercise that participants would not normally encounter in their everyday life.

Thus, as Angrosino (2005:737) suggests, we should ensure that the means used in getting data does not cause more harm than necessary to achieve the value. That is, the end should not be taken to justify the means. We must be careful to ensure that the means used to insert oneself to the social network using photographs or personal records do not cause disproportionate harm. As such, the means used to achieve the value should not undermine it. The researcher must also make sure that the research techniques do not undermine or ridicule the participants as well as consider whether it is worthwhile undertaking a piece of research by weighing up the balance of harm and benefit that arise to participants and to society from carrying it out (de Laine, 2000). To this end, we emphasise Gregory's (2003) advice that research should always be undertaken in a manner that presents minimum risk to both the participants and the researcher.

### Deception

Classifying deception as an ethical breach reflects society's general contempt for lying (Verdugo, 1998). Yet, researchers use deception regularly and, therefore, scholars have developed language and methods for making this practice more palatable. An example of deception researchers commonly engage in involves intentionally misleading participants about the nature of the study in which they are participating (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). For instance in Kenya, educational researchers conducting a study about how students of different ethnic communities interact with one another may conceal the purpose of the study, so that the participants do not act unnaturally (given the ethnic polarisation in the country). At other times even researchers whose work is overt sometimes engage in active deception, for example, participants may be given a false impression that the researcher "agrees with their views when he or she does not" (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995, p. 265).

However, as Verdugo (1998) argues, social science researchers shouldn't design a study that incorporates deception unless they have determined that there is no other way to conduct the research, and that the deceptive techniques are justified by the study's potential value. If the researchers use deception, they must reveal this to the study participants at some point, no later than the conclusion of the research. As Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) conclude, all that is required of researchers is that they take due note of the ethical aspects of their work and

make the best judgement they can in the circumstances. They contend that deception or covert collection of data should only take place where it is essential to achieve the research results required, where the research objective has strong scientific merit and where there is an appropriate risk management and harm alleviation strategy. Thus, participants should be given opportunities to access the outcomes of research in which they have participated and debriefed if appropriate after they have provided data. Angrosino (2005) concurs and suggests that the researchers need to use their experience as well as plain common sense, as well as apply their intuition to know that some actions are inherently disproportionate, even if we do not have personal experience for their being so.

### Falsified Data

One of the most serious ethical breaches a researcher can commit is publishing falsified data. A research is only sound and reliable to the degree that the researcher is honest. Verdugo (1998) asserts that falsifying data not only compromises the researcher's professional status; it may also reduce the public's trust in research and jeopardize future study in the area of interest. If falsification is discovered, the researcher must take steps to correct the error through a correction, retraction, or other acceptable means. If a researcher knowingly publishes a project using falsified data, they might be permanently banished from the academic community (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007) by institutions or organisations to which they belong.

### Faking results

Total faking of results is rare but exists. Faking can take the forms like putting a spin on results or other deception such as not conducting controls in case they produce wrong result or creating new cases to achieve statistical significance (Cohen *et al.*, 2007). This is particularly common in cases where a researcher intends to test hypothesis and manipulates figures, for example, in quantitative research to get specific results. This happens because at times a researcher thinks that if a hypothesis is not confirmed then the study is rendered useless which is not case. Purposely distorting literature quotes, excerpts, and data to support your conclusions or designing data gathering in away that produces biased results are also considered unethical and should be discouraged.

### Plagiarism

This refers to presenting ideas, results or written material as one's own when they are not. It also includes downloading material from the web and presenting them as personal views – which is not ethical. Thus, when conducting research, it is mandatory that all the sources be acknowledged within the work and included in the list of references.

### Payment

Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) raise the argument on whether researchers ought to make payment of some sort of reward to their participating individuals or institutions, since researchers are benefiting in one way or the other. It should,

however, be noted that no amount of inducement to participate should be offered prior to seeking consent, either in the form of payments or of gifts. All the same, reasonable recompense for inconvenience and time contributed to the research and reimbursement of travelling expenses can be offered. Nevertheless, we note that it is possible for data gathering process such as interviewing, at times, to take place in restaurants or hotels - in which case the researcher may pay for the participants' drinks or meals. However, caution should be taken so that it does not appear like a bribe.

### Access and acceptance

On implications for future research, Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) observe that research which is subsequently found objectionable by people studied and /or by gatekeepers may have the effect that these and other people refuse access in the future. If this were to happen on a large scale, social research would become virtually impossible. They advise that there are dangers in treating particular procedures as if they were intrinsically ethical and desirable, whether this is ensuring fully informed consent, giving people control over data relating to them, feeding back information about the research findings to them, or publishing information on the basis of 'the public's right to know'. What is appropriate and inappropriate depends on the context, to a large extent, and sometimes actions that are motivated by ethical ideals may cause severe problems, not just for researchers but for the people they are studying as well. Thus, ethical issues are not matters on which simple and consensual decisions can always be made. We suggest that the most effective strategies for pursuing research should be adopted unless there is clear evidence that these are ethically unacceptable.

### Openness and integrity

Researchers should be open and honest about the purpose and content of their research and behave in a professional manner at all times (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). Where an essential element of the research design would be compromised by full disclosure to participants, the withholding of information should be specified in the project protocol and explicit procedures stated to obviate any potential harm arising from such withholding. This requires means that researchers should be open and honest about the purpose and content of their research and behave in a professional manner at all times.

### Vulnerable groups

Where research involves vulnerable groups, an appropriate level of disclosure should be obtained from relevant body. In the case of children (individuals under 16 years of age), no research should be conducted without a specified means of gaining informed consent from their parents or guardians, or persons acting *in loco parentis* (Oates, 2006). In boarding schools this should be done through the boarding teachers who are in charge of the learners' social well-being within the school, or any other appropriate authority. A common issue is the avoidance of risks associated with interviewing children, young people or other vulnerable individuals. Carrying out such research in the participant's home, or in an unsupervised

setting lays both parties open to risks of actual inappropriate behaviour or allegations of such behaviour. This can be avoided by collecting the data in the presence of a third party of in a relatively safe environment. Children are always considered vulnerable because there is an almost inevitability of perceived or real power imbalance between the child and the researcher (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007; Oates 2006). Thus, the child may feel they have to comply with what they think the researcher wants which may be both distressing to the child or may as well provide biased results - more so, in the Kenyan where, culturally, children are expected to be compliant to what the adults require. The same may apply in schools where pupils and students may feel that they are offending the teachers or the principals who granted the initial access to the researcher thus the feeling of obligation to cooperate. Equally, children's abilities to comprehend research and the reasons why it is done may be very different from those of the adults. It is, therefore, not enough to give an explanation in terms that it is thought the child will understand. It is necessary to check that indeed they have understood. Other vulnerable groups such as patients and those with disability should equally be treated with utmost care and respect and all ethical requirements as well as protocols observed.

## Conclusion and Recommendation

### Ethical research proposals

In the light of the discussion above, we recommend that educational research proposals should make clear how the researchers address the following ethical requirements:

- An outline of the principal investigator's summary of potential ethical issues and how they will be addressed.
- An explanation of the benefits of the project to research participants or third parties.
- An outline of the possible risks to participants or third parties as well as risks to researchers themselves.
- An explanation of the procedures for informed consent – information provided and methods of documenting initial and continuing consent.
- A list of expected outcomes, impacts and benefits of research.
- An explanation of how dissemination (and feedback to participants where appropriate) will be undertaken.
- Make clear the measures taken to ensure confidentiality, privacy and data protection.

### Ethical approval

We also propose the need for the establishment of Ethics Research Committees that provide research approval for all researches in educational institutions such as universities. The main reason for ethical approval in research is to protect researchers, participants, host institutions and sometimes funding bodies. Thus, careful preparation of an application for ethical approval can reveal potential risks that might not otherwise have been considered. The ethical committees would also come up with protocols which all have to comply with when conducting research.

Consequently, all social science research dealing with human participants conducted by a university employee or any other research institution and their agents and assignees would need to comply with an explicit protocol defining how informed consent to participate is sought, gained and recorded, how data is collected, stored and accessed, and how participants are informed of their rights within the study. The only exception to this requirement would be where any reasonable judgement would suggest that no harm could possibly arise to any person in connection with the proposed research. This implies that formal approval of the protocol should be gained from the organisation's Ethics Committee before data collection commences. Protocol here refers to a filed document which specifies the procedures for recruiting participants and gathering and managing data, with which all research staff agree to comply. It is "unambiguous description of how data are to be handled through the sequence of stages from the recruitment of participants from whom data will be gathered, through the process of data gathering, analysis and write-up to the publication of findings and final contacts with the participants" (Oates, 2006, p. 211).

### Professional codes of practice and ethics

Where the subject of a research project falls within the domain of a professional body with a published code of practice and ethical guidelines, researchers should explicitly state their intention to comply with the code and guidelines in the project protocol. In conclusion, we stress that researchers have to take decisions about how to carry out research that makes the process as ethical as possible within the frameworks of the project, including budgets of time and finance which they have available to them.

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