

# REAPPRAISING CRITICAL REFLECTION ATTITUDE IN PROMOTING ETHICS OF RESEARCH

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## **Abstract**

In doing research the ways and manner in which the rights and welfare of research participants are preserved is important. Preventing behaviour constricts and reducing a number of problems that could be faced by the researcher are also necessary while carrying out research. While ethical principles are required to guide the actions of researchers, other variables may also be required in promoting such ethics. This paper explains ethics, research and ethics of research. It states the components of an ethically valid informed consent for research. It explains the role of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) which addresses the needs of institutions or organizations on relevant ethical issues in formulating research plans. It looks into the codes of ethical practice, reflection as an exercise and how reflection can promote ethics of research. It concludes that the welfare of research participants must be kept in mind while their dignity, privacy and interests must be respected. It recommended that a critical reflection over every situation or stage of every research work is important to ensure the success of any research investigation.

## **Introduction**

Dimensions or ways in which a researcher should ensure the rights and welfare of person or communities that are subjects of scientific studies are important whenever any research is being conducted. Obtaining the consent and co-operation of subject or participants in investigations and of significant others in the institutions or organizations which would make available all the facilities for the research is also required. That is, not considering the nature of their work of searching for knowledge and truth, researchers need to consider the effects of the research on

participants and seek to keep in its original stage their dignity as human beings. Yet, to ensure the success of the investigation he or she is making, the need to place sense of rationality and the attitude of critical reflection on every stage or situation of the research cannot be underestimated.

## **What is Ethics?**

Ethics suffers from lack of univocal definition. One can define ethics as an enquiry into theories of what is good or evil, right or wrong (Oke, and Esikot, 1999); or moral principles that control or influence a person's behaviour (Hornby, 2001); or a matter of principled sensitivity to the rights of others (Cavan, 1977). Cavan explained in length that:

Being ethical limits the choices we can make in the pursuit of truth. Ethics say that while truth is good, respect for human dignity is better even if, in the extreme case, the respect of human nature leaves one ignorant of human nature.

Ethics, in a systematic way, studies human moral conduct and the rules and regulation that ought to govern it. Ethics embodies 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 or impersonal or concrete and personal" [Cohen, et al, (2000) quoting Zimbardo, (1984)]. Ethics can be dichotomized as 'absolute' and 'relative'. When behaviour is guided by absolute ethical standards, a higher-order moral principle can be postulated which is invariant with its

condition of applicability—across time, situations, persons and expediency. Such principled ethics, Cohen, et al, (2000) observed, allow no degree of freedom for any positive consequence.

Human moral conduct as it deals with the issue of rightness or wrongness explains the basis of ethics. Ethical issues arise from the kind of problems researchers investigate and the methods used to obtain valid and reliable data (Ojo, 2005).

Ethical concerns encountered in educational research in particular “can be extremely complex and subtle and can frequently place researchers in moral predicaments which may appear quite irresolvable” (Cohen, et al, 2000). However, to undertake any research, there is the need to be aware of the general agreements shared by researchers as to what should be considered proper or improper in the conduct of their research. How then do we define research?

### **What is Research?**

Like ethics, we cannot pin down the definition of research to one generally acceptable statement. However, various scholars have attempted in their own ways to put down a chain of words to explain “research”. Research is “a systematic manner or procedure through which we try to arrive at a reality or a fact” (Ojo, 2005). It is intensive investigation geared towards a more complete knowledge of the subject studied (Ojo, 2005). It is the process of arriving at dependable solutions to problems through the planned and systematic collection, analysis and interpretation of data (Osuala, 1987). The researcher goes back to what has been searched before. The focus of any research therefore is on a problem that is in existence, a problem requiring an investigation for a new discovery of facts or information on the investigated by a person or some persons; or a problem calling attention for a solution which is all encompassed with an exercise. It is that which aims at discovering the relationship existing between different phenomena of the world in which human beings live in. It is an attempt to

examine or to find out a piece of information, a into situation or situations surrounding a person, an event an issue or a thing by looking and re-looking carefully.

Researches need to strike a balance considering the demands placed on them as professional scientists in pursuit of truth, and their subjects’ rights and values potentially threatened by the research. How do we interpret the rights and values associated with research?

### **Ethics of Research**

Going through the scholarly presentations on ‘ethics’ and ‘research’, one can deduce that ethics of research deal with ways or manners in which the rights and welfare of persons and communities who are subjects of scientific studies are preserved. Such rights and welfare basically form ethical issues that must be considered when designing research. Callahan and Hobbs (2008) identified several ethical issues that must be considered when designing research that will utilize participants who are human beings as follow:

- (i) The primary concern of the investigator should be the safety of the research participants...
- (ii) The scientific investigator must obtain informed consent from each research participant.. 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...
- (iii) The investigator must enumerate how privacy and confidentiality concerns will be approached. Researches must be sensitive to not only how information is protected from unauthorized conservation, but also if and how participants are to be notified of any

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unforeseen findings that they may or may not want to know.

- (iv) The investigator must consider how adverse events will be handled; who will provide and who will pay for that care are important considerations.
- (v) Before enrolling participants in an experimental trial, the investigator must ensure that a true null hypothesis should exist at the onset regarding the outcome of the trial.

Callahan and Hobbs stated further that the three main ethical principles governing research with human subjects are autonomy, beneficence and justice are:

- (i) **Autonomy:** This 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 researcher ensures that the subject has received a full disclosure of the nature of the study, the risks, benefits and alternatives, and is given room to ask necessary questions.
- (ii) **Beneficence:** This is the obligation on the part of the researcher to try to maximize benefits for the individual participant and/or society, while reducing risk of harm to the individual.
- (iii) **Justice:** This explains the idea of fairness and reasonableness in the selection of participants that is, guiding against participant populations that may be unfairly coerced into participating such as prisoners and institutionalized children.

The above ethical issues and principles are guided by an ethically –valid informed consent.

#### **Components of an Ethically Valid Informed Consent for Research**

In order to ensure that an informed consent is ethically valid, the following

components must be present (Callahan and Hobbs, 2008); and Halasa (2008):

- i. **Disclosure:** The potential participant must be informed as fully as possible among other things of the nature and purpose of the research, the procedures, expected benefits to the participant and/or society, foreseeable risks, stresses and discomforts etc.
- ii. **Understanding:** Other than understanding what has been explained, the participant must be given the opportunity to ask questions and have them answered by one of the investigators.
- iii. **Voluntaries:** 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.
- iv. **Competence:** The participant must be competent to give consent mentally, healthily etc. and in certain emergency, cases, consent may be waived due to lack of a competent participant and a surrogate.
- v. **Consent:** The potential human subject must authorize his or her taking part in the research study, preferably in writing, although at times an oral consent or assent may be more appropriate.

Getting the participants to know why they need to participate in the research is a necessary exercise. In view of this, the research participants have a good explanation beforehand of the benefits rights, risks, and dangers involved as a consequence of their participation in the research project” (Frankfort-Nachmias and Nachmias, 1992). Much social research therefore requires obtaining the consent and willingness or working-togetherness of subjects who would assist in investigations and of significant others in the institutions or organization that

would make available the facilities for the research.

The principle of informed consent arises from the subject's right to freedom and self-determination and being free in a condition in which someone lives in a democracy and when he or she is restricted or he or she is not free in some extent, there is need to justify this (Cohen, et al, 2000: 51). Once the consent of the participant is sought, his or her right of self-determination seems to be protected and respected which places some of the responsibility on the participant if anything should go wrong in the research. However, on the right to self-determination, "the subject has the right to refuse to take part, or to withdraw once the research has started" which could make informed consent to translate into informed refusal.

Frankfort-Nachmias and Nachmias also noted that where there is no danger or risk however, the principle of informed consent should not be taken as absolutely necessary to studies. When the risk to research is more serious, then the obligation to obtain informed consent should be greater.

Not minding the principle of informed consent, contemporary social and medical research establishment have also created some key phrases to protect the rights of the research participants (Trochim, 2006). The key phrases that describe the systems of ethical protections as stated by Trochim include:

- i. **Voluntary Participation:** This principle requires the people should not be coerced into participating in research (Trochim, 2006).
- ii. **Informed Consent:** This means that prospective research participants must be fully informed about the procedures and risks involved in research and must give their consent to participate. Ethical standards also require that researchers should not put participants in a situation where they might be at risk of harm as a result of their participation (Trochim, 2006).

iii. **Confidentiality:** This explains that participants are assured that identifying information will not be made available to anyone who is not directly involved in the study (Trochim, 2006). The researcher should ensure that the boundaries surrounding the shared secret will be protected (Cohen et al, 2000).

iv. **Anonymity:** This means that the participant will remain anonymous throughout the study... even to the researchers themselves (Trochim, 2006). The essence of anonymity is that information provided by participants should in no way reveal their identity (Cohen, et al, 2000). A participant or subject could be considered as anonymous when the researcher or another person cannot identify the participant or subject from the information provided. Where the situation holds, a participant's privacy is ensured no matter how the information supplied is personal or sensitive.

Cohen et al (2000 Citing Pring, 1984) noted that for the most part, individual 'right to privacy' is usually contrasted with public right to know' and that all information relating to a person's physical and mental condition, personal circumstance and social relationships which is not open to the public is the person's privacy. Privacy would enable the individual or a group concerned have the freedom to decide for themselves "where, when, and in what circumstance and to what extent their personal attitudes, opinions, habits, eccentricities, doubts, fears are to be communicated to or withheld from others" (Cohen, et al, 2000, quoting from Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, 1981).

What researchers consider to be ethical is largely an issue relating to agreement

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between them; protection from physical or psychological harm is an issue to be considered on participants; careful evaluation of ethical acceptability; minimal risk issue; respect for individual freedom; holding of data collected in confidence, and guide against deception of the participants (Fraenke and Wallen, 1990).

Occasions where data disclosed in confidence are revealed publicly in such a way as to cause embarrassment, anxiety, or perhaps suffering to the subject or participant disclosing the information should be prevented. All manners or attitudes involving the researcher concealing the true purpose positively misinforming the subjects, or exposes them to unduly painful, stressful and embarrassing experiences, without the subjects having the knowledge of what is going on, also need to be avoided. To prevent actions that may lead researchers to causing embarrassment or anxiety or rather expose the subjects to unduly painful or stressful experience there is a Board which puts in place all ethical implications and guide both the researcher and research participants.

### **Institutional Review Board (IRB)**

This is a Board formulated to address needs of institutions or organizations on relevant ethical issues in formulating research plans. The panel of persons reviews grant proposals with respect to ethical implications and decides whether additional actions need to be taken to assure the safety and right of participants (Trochim 2006) IRB also assists in protecting both the organization and the researcher against potential legal implications of neglecting to address important ethical issues of participants (Trochim, 2006). However, where this body is absent, the actions of the researcher need to be guided by some ethical principles.

### **Ethical Principles for the Guidance of Actions of Researchers**

As a precondition for preventing behaviour constricts and reducing a number of problems that could be faced by the researcher, the following principles which Cohen, et al, (2000 as adapted from Bell, 1991) enlisted as negotiation access checklist could be employed:

- i. Clear official channels by formally requesting to carry out your investigation as soon as you have an agreed project outline. This would be as required in the researcher(s)' area.
- ii. Speak to the people who will be asked to cooperate. That is, people who will be interviewed or complete questionnaires.
- iii. Submit the project outline to the head, if you are carrying out a study in your or another educational institution. This should be done by listing people to be interviewed or to be sent questionnaires, stating conditions under which the study will be conducted.
- iv. Define what you mean by anonymity and confidentiality.
- v. Decide whether participants will receive a copy of the report and/or see drafts or interview transcripts. There are costs and time implications. Think carefully before you make promises.
- vi. Inform participants what is to be done with the information they provide. Your eyes and those of the participants only.
- vii. Prepare an outline of intentions and conditions under which the study will be carried out to hand to the participants. Even if you explain the purpose of the study the conditions and the guarantees, participants may forget.
- viii. Be honest about the purpose of the study and about the conditions of the research. If you say an interview will last ten minutes, you will break faith if it lasts an

- hour. If you are conducting the investigation as part of a degree or diploma course, say so.
- ix. Remember that people who agree to help you are doing a favour. Make sure you return papers and books in good order and on time. Letter of thanks should be sent, no matter how busy you are.
  - x. Never assume 'it will be all right'. Negotiating access is an important stage in the researcher's investigation. If you are an inside researcher, you will have to live with your mistakes, so take care.

Running from problems that may arise in the course of research depends on how the researcher is ethically sensible but the need to consider the above factors would assist the researcher in no little dimension in successfully carrying out the research.

In a similar way, Cohen, et al (2000) adapting Kemmis and Mc Taggart (1981) quoted in Hopkins (1985) summarily brings out the ethical principles for the guidance of researchers' action as:

- (i) **Observe Protocol:** Take care to ensure that the relevant persons, committees, and authorities have been consulted, informed and that the necessary permission and approval have been obtained.
- (ii) **Involve Participants:** Encourage others who have a stake in the improvement you envisage to shape and form the work.
- (iii) **Negotiate with those Affected:** Not everyone will want to be directly involved; your work should take account of the responsibilities and wishes of others.
- (iv) **Report Progress:** Keep the work visible and remain open to suggestions so that unforeseen and unseen ramifications can be taken account of; colleagues must have the opportunity to lodge a protest to you.
- (v) **Obtain Explicit Authorizations:** This applies where you wish to observe your

professional colleagues; and where you wish to examine documentation.

- (vi) **Negotiate Descriptions of People's Work:** Always those described to challenge your accounts on the ground of fairness, relevance and accuracy.
- (vii) **Negotiate Accounts of Others' Points of view. (e.g. in Accounts of Communication):** Always allow those involved in interviews, meetings and written exchanges to require amendments which enhance fairness, relevance and accuracy.
- (viii) **Obtain Explicit Authorization Before Using Quotation:** Verbatim transcripts, attributed observations excerpts of audio video recordings, judgments, conclusions or recommendations in reports (written or to meetings).
- (ix) **Negotiate Report for Various Levels of Release:** Remember that different audiences require different kinds of reports.
- (x) **Accept Responsibility for Maintaining Confidentiality**
- (xi) **Retain the Right to Report Your Work**
- (xii) **Make Your Principles of Procedure Binding and Known:** All of the people involved in your action research project must agree to the principles before the work begins; others must be aware of their rights in the process. However, where these principles are absent, ethical code could be employed.

#### **Ethical Code**

Ethical code alerts the senses of researchers to their obligations and to problem areas where there is agreement about proper ethical practice (Ojo, 2005). It takes care of problems and dilemmas confronting the researcher, including matters of privacy, anonymity, confidentiality, betrayal and

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deception, among others. It is regulations affecting research. Ethical issues may stem from the kinds of problems investigated and the methods the researcher use to obtain valid and reliable data.

When ethical dilemmas arise, the researcher may need to consult other researchers or teachers. A summary or an outline of the ethical code is as illustrated by Cohen, et al (2000) as follows:

- (i) It is important for the researcher to reveal fully his or her identity and background.
- (ii) The purpose and procedures of the research should be fully explained to the subjects at the outset.
- (iii) The research and its ethical consequences should be seen from the subject's and institutions point of view.
- (iv) Ascertain whether the research benefits the subjects in any way (beneficence).
- (v) Where necessary, ensure the research does not harm the subjects in any way (non-maleficence).
- (vi) Possible controversial findings need to be anticipated and where they ensure, handled with great sensitivity.
- (vii) The research should be as objective as possible. This will require careful thought being given to the design conduct and reporting of research.
- (viii) Informed consent should be sought from all participants. All agreements reached at this stage should be honoured.
- (ix) Sometimes it is desirable to obtain informed consent in writing.
- (x) Subjects should have the option to refuse to take part and know this; and the right to terminate their involvement at any time and know this also.
- (xi) Arrangements should be made during initial contacts to provide feedback for those requesting it. It may be the form of a written résumé of findings.
- (xii) The dignity, privacy and interests of the participants should be respected. Subsequent privacy of the subjects after the research is

completed should be guaranteed (non-traceability).

- (xiii) Deceit should only be used when absolutely necessary.

In a similar vein, Ojo (2005) enlisted ten codes of ethics:

- (i) There should be no bias in the design, conduct or reporting of the research—it should be as objective as possible.
- (ii) Informed consent should be used in obtaining participants for all research; investigators should honour all commitments associated with such agreements.
- (iii) Purposes, procedures, and risk of research should be explained to the participants in such a way that they can understand.
- (iv) The identity of those conducting the research should be fully revealed to the potentially participants in such a way that they can understand.
- (v) The dignity, privacy and interests of the participants should be respected and protected.
- (vi) Deception may be utilized if it is absolutely necessary. If deceit is involved in a research procedure, additional precautions should be taken to protect the rights and welfare of the participants.
- (vii) Research data should be confidential and all participants should remain anonymous, unless they have given permission for release of their identity.
- (viii) A fair return should be offered for all services of participants.
- (ix) Investigators should be familiar with, and respect, the host cultures in which studies are conducted.
- (x) Full and complete interpretations should be provided for all data and attempts

made to prevent misrepresentations in writing research reports.

### **Merits in Fashioning a Personal Code of Ethical Practice**

It could be said that the idea of ethical code may not anticipate or resolve all problems, yet “it attracts a personal code of ethical practice” (Cohen, et al, 2000) in the following ways:

1. Such a code establishes one as a member of the under scientific community having shared interest in its values and concerns.
2. A code of ethical practice makes researches aware of their obligations to their subjects and also to those problem areas where there is a general consensus about what is acceptable and what is not-in the sense that it has a clarificatory value.
3. When one’s professional behaviour is guided by a principled code of ethics, then it is possible to consider that there may be alternative ways of doing the same thing, ways that are more ethical or less unethical should one be confronted by a moral challenge.

### **Reflection**

Reflection is thinking about and making sense of experience and possibilities teaching English–key Learning processes in it inductes self –assessment, goal setting and planning. Connections are made between new understandings and existing knowledge <http://wwwfp.education.tas.gov.au/english/key.htm> when an effort is made to reflect on an issue or a thing. Reflective learners are mindful and purposeful learners.

### **Promoting Ethics of Research through Critical Reflection**

Reflection enables one to benefit from whatever we are rationally involved in. just like it is hard to be sure that there is any worth while learning without reflection (<http://>), it is hard to be sure that there is any worth write research without

a good reflection on the topic vis-à-vis principles that guide the actions of the researcher. A good reflection on the topic and code of conduct or ethical principles that guiden gtheactions of the researcher makes the researcher critical about what has been done, how it was done; what should be done, how it should be done; who to engage and how he/she/they should be engage; and the implication of all these processes, among others.

In order to reduce a number of problems that may arise during the research, the research needs to critically reflect therefore on the topic of the research or over every step he takes, even having observed considered all ethical issues that will utilize participants when designing the research (like those listed by Callahan and Hobbs, 2008 or having observed the code of conduct or ethical principles that usually guide him or her (like those stated by Chen, et al (2000: 57 adapted from Bell, 1991). Hence ethics of research could be promoted through critical reflection in the following ways:

**Ensuring Participants’ Safety:** Callahan and Hobbs (2008) opined that the primary concern of the investigator should be the safety of the research participants. A further implication of this is that the researcher should leave the situation of the participants as it was before carrying out his research, even after eliciting the information required. A critical reflection on the effect of the research after it must have been conducted would not only guide the participants against any harm, it would be to their benefits especially when the result of such research leads to granting the participants financial aide or state protection.



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**Gaining Consent of Participants:** No matter how good the researcher is or how researchable his research topic is, without some opportunities to reflect on how to carry on the research, trying among other things, to gain the full consent of the participants throughout the research period, the information that may be needed may not be full so, gaining the consent of research participants only may not be adequate.

**Privacy and Confidentiality:** ‘Privacy’ means the state of being above and not watched by other people or the state of being free from the attention of the public while ‘confidentiality’ refers to a situation in which information is expected to be kept secret (Hornby, 2001). Extending the language of privacy and confidentiality may not work since the investigator or researcher is not only part of the public but someone trying to elicit information which may be termed ‘secret’. Callahan and Hobbs (2008)’s explanation that the investigator must enumerate how privacy and confidentiality concerns would be approached may not be adequate enough. What would be adequate is the ability, too, of those to be investigated (or those to allow the researcher’s investigation to take place) to critically reflect over the enumeration done by the investigator whether this is adequate or not.

**Handling Adverse Events/Payments:** Callahan and Hobbs (2008)’s assertion that the investigation must consider how adverse events will be handled and that who would provide and pay for that care ‘are’ important considerations. A critical reflection on how adverse events and payment of cares should be handled should have been settled by the investigator before approaching the participants or those to investigate.

Hence, the investigator has little job to do here<sup>3</sup> since the question on adverse events or no provision or payment need not arise.

**Autonomy:** Callahan and Hobbs (2008) observed that it is an 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 hence he or she should disclose the nature of the study, the risks, benefits. Since reflection ensures learning from experience and making connections between their new understanding and their existing knowledge (<http://www.fp.education.tas.gov.au/english/key.htm>), the freedom of both the investigator and the investigated may be required and a good reflection on the exact roles to be played by these two parties may be necessary to ensure a successful investigation.

**Beneficence:** The researcher’s obligation to maximize benefit for the participants and reduce risks for the individual according to thinking is done. The possibility of maximizing benefit for the participants may be based on whether a critical reflection is done on the overall effect of such benefit. For example, if a benefit to the participants may, in the long run, lead to a great loss to the society in which the participants were, then such an obligation may not carry weight. A further critical reflection may lead one to limit the researcher’s obligation to reducing risks only, not only to the individual participant but all the participants.

**Justice:** Justice in research explains the idea of fairness and reasonableness in the selection of participants as elaborated by Callahan and Hobbs (2008). If reflection includes self-assessment, goal-setting, and planning (<http://www.fpeducation.tas.gov.au/english/key.htm>), reflective investigation and participants are not exceptional. Investigators should be conscious of those to be selected to participate in the investigation hence, he or

she needs to use the instrument of planning while setting a goal for the research which he should thoroughly assessed before revealing the result for the purpose of which it is meant. The summation of the above is that a critical reflection should be done on every step the researcher takes in his investigation which includes the selection of participants.

### **Conclusion**

At all times the welfare of the individuals who participate in the research should be kept in mind. The dignity, privacy and interests of the participants should be respected. Researchers should never lose sight of the obligations they owe to those who are assisting them, and should be continuously be on the alert for alternative techniques should the one they are employing at the time prove controversial. At all times, the researcher's sense of rationality must prevail in taking further decisions.

### **Recommendation**

To attract a rich ethical quality to researcher's work, researchers themselves in addition to obligation to sense of rightness and rationality, must hold in esteem critical reflection over every situation or stage of every research work.

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