

## Ethics of Conducting Research in Social Sciences at the University Level in Pakistan

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### Abstract

*Ethical consideration has a fundamental importance in conducting any research. It plays an important role, especially in social science. This study is designed to examine the perceptions and practices of research students towards ethical concerns in conducting social sciences research. A survey design was adopted for this study. The population of the study comprised all the public sector universities of Pakistan. The sample of 26 public universities was selected from all administrative areas of Pakistan. Document review was further used to identify ethical concerns in social sciences research and a self-developed questionnaire was used for data collection. This study revealed that students were not completely aware of the ethical norms of their research in social sciences. Most of the research students do not obey the research norm during conducting their study in social sciences. This study also highlights the impact of research aptitude on the quality of research and it helps to improve the performance of students in the context of research.*

### Key Words:

Ethical  
practices,  
Research  
ethics, Quality

### Introduction

Ethical considerations are a fundamental part of any research. Ethics is the parameter of moral standards that are based on rights obligations honesty, equality, and benefits to mankind. The realization of the ethics in any field of life makes the

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person more responsible and honest in their deeds. Research Ethics is a set of principles that create interaction between the researcher and respondents. Social Sciences also require the best ethical practices in conducting research (Agwor & Osho 2017). Research standards are universal, while their codes of conduct are developed by the universities and research boards according to related policies and standards. Awareness of research ethics demands the researcher more responsible for obtaining information in the right way which is original and confidential.

Ethical considerations are the basic set of rules, principles, and regulations of research, which a researcher should follow during their whole research. In the current era, research practitioners have gained a reputation in academic literature and graduate programs. Researchers must understand the research rules and they also know how to implement the ethical protocol in their research work. This may make them able to make decisions and act ethically in various situations. Research standards rely on several aspects rather than focusing on plagiarism or citation. Unethical practices are those when one is not conforming to approved standards of social or professional behavior.

The research policy of every university is based on ethical considerations if students follow these research rules they will be able to meet the requirement of standard research. Researchers need to evaluate the ethical norms of research before time. Now, the different countries' institutions are concentrating to develop the strict principles, codes, rules, and regulations for implementing true ethical practices. Even print media or online research journals play vital rules to identify unethical practices. True ethical practices in social science make sure the good quality of research.

Tangen (2014) divided the research ethics into three areas, morals within the research community, protecting research participants, and the part and worth of educational research in civilization. The issues of research ethics are increasing in the context of social sciences whereas the trend of unethical practices also increasing in the current scenario of research. The importance of research consideration cannot be ignored. Higher Education Commission has mainly focused on the development of research at universities to promote publication among researchers. Many research misconduct cases were reported in the higher education commission.

The trend towards publications is increasing because these are necessary for promotions and financial benefits as brought about ethical challenges in research in our country identified the ethical challenges in all stages of research. Researchers need to improve critical and analytical skills regarding research in the field of social sciences. Anonymity, confidentiality, and informed consent are major concerns of any kind of study (Sanjari et al., 2014).

Moral values have also a positive role in the education system if the researchers are playing a responsible role in conducting any kind of research. Moral values have also a great influence on social science research. The system of

beliefs and practices that change from one generation to another generation is called culture. However, moral values are also part of the culture. Same as the culture, the moral values are also transferred from generation to generation. The ethics of social science research has proven to be a useful tool for developing standard quality research. Especially in this 21st century a lot of plagiarism cases has been reported in higher education at national and international level. Many studies have been conducting on plagiarism practices in social sciences but not on ethical practices of research. Idiegbeyan et al (2016) found that student's awareness and perception have a relationship. Students have an understanding of plagiarism practices but ethical practices of research in social sciences were less familiar among them. Many cases of plagiarism had been reported in higher education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Medium level knowledge of plagiarism practices, but they understand these concepts, but training needs to be improved.

Ramzan et al. (2011) highlighted the value of ethics in research at all ages. Ethics speaks of a system of behavior about the standards of right or wrong behavior. Students do not bother the research policies of their universities because these are just rules and regulations. It is too light to be effective in detecting and punishing those who violate university policy of research and unfair means. Agwor & Osho (2017) found that research students face many challenges during their researches because of poor time management and planning. As Mustafa (2017) explored the strong relationship between knowledge of students, management skills, and quality practice in the higher education of Pakistan. Mollet (2017) study highlighted the ethical issue in social sciences. So there is a need to adopt an ethical procedure of study universally. The internet becomes a major tool of getting information about research it developed the status of ethical examination in the research of social science in developing countries.

Sen & Nagwanshee (2016) discussed the importance of the role of the internet for conducting high-quality research. He also emphasized the ethical consideration in social sciences. Saeed (2016) investigated the attitude of the students towards research ethics. Her study revealed that self-reported knowledge about research ethics was good but students lacked correct attitude the results of her study emphasizes on the proper way of research ethics. The study conducted by Rehman & Waheed (2014) identified the unethical attitude of researchers towards research and also review the Student's Dishonest Acts. Students did not follow ethical protocol in their research work therefore their research required. Research ethics committees, However, cheating is not a serious problem by the faculty and administration of universities therefore rules should be followed.

Okonta and Rossouw (2014) recognized that Nigerian researchers perceived that illegal conduct of research is there in their institutions. The value of research ethics can be used as a strategy to reduce research irregularities. However, research institutes should play an essential role in promoting responsible ethics of research and discouraging misconduct. The results identified the fabrication and

falsification of the research caused the results of the analysis as severe forms of misconduct. They adopt unethical practices to complete their degrees in time. Sanjari et al (2014) identified the ethical challenges in all stages of research. Students have to face many ethical challenges in all stages of the research. The maintenance of the confidentiality of the respondent is a challenge. When the research is conducted on sensitive issues in the social sciences, researchers need to improve their critical and analytical skills regarding research in the field of social sciences. Anonymity, confidentiality, and informed consent are major concerns of any kind of study. The purpose of this study is to examine the current ethical practices of research among research students in social science.

### **Objectives**

- 1) To identify the role of ethical considerations in social sciences research
- 2) To measure the awareness level of research students about research ethics education and its need.
- 3) To examine the perception of research students regarding ethical practices of research
- 4) To find out the impact of ethical practices on the quality of research

### **Research Methodology**

A survey design was adopted for this study. The first step of this research was to review the selected research documents to identify ethical practices of research in social sciences. In the second phase, a self-developed questionnaire was utilized to measure the student's awareness level about ethical practices and to explore the perceptions regarding the role of ethical practices in their research. Self-developed Questionnaire was validated through experts' opinion further reliability of the questionnaire was also calculated and the Cronbach Alpha value was found to be 0.71. The level of awareness among research students was categorized into three levels of low, average & high.

### **Population**

The population of the study consisted of research students enrolled in social sciences programs being offered in 52 public sector universities in Pakistan. There were 52 universities were identified in the target population offering social sciences.

### **Sample of the Study**

Out of fifty-two target universities, twenty-six universities were randomly selected

from each province. Research students of masters and M.Phil levels were invited to participate in the research process. After taking consent, a sample of 902 research students was considered suitable for the sample with the following detail.

**Table 1. Distribution of Sample Region Wise**

Region	Universities	Male	Female	Total	%
Punjab	8	175	128	303	34
ICT	4	66	40	106	12
Sindh	3	44	67	111	12
KPK	7	135	113	248	27
Baluchistan	2	35	26	61	7
GB	1	21	14	35	4
AJK	1	22	16	38	4
Total	26	498	404	902	100

## Results

**Table 2. Gender wise Level of Awareness of Ethical Practices**

Degree	Awareness level	Male	Female	Total
MSC	Low	41	27	68(43%)
	Average	35	23	58(37%)
	High	24	8	32(20%)
M Phil 3 <sup>rd</sup>	Low	138	86	224(57%)
	Average	50	47	97(25%)
	High	44	25	69(18%)
M Phil 4 <sup>th</sup>	Low	89	102	191(54%)
	Average	39	54	93(26%)
	High	38	32	70 (20%)

Table 2 present the gender and degree-wise sample distribution based on their level of awareness. The study consisted of 55% male students and 45% of female students after data collection. This study has 18% of MSC students with research that was included while 82 % of students were selected from M Phil / MS level. MSC students having a 43% low level of awareness which is less than M Phil 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup>-semester students. Although 37% of MSC students have an average level of awareness, whereas 25% of M Phil students have an average understanding of ethical practices of research in social sciences. Male students have a higher level of awareness as compare to female students although they have the same level of

awareness in the average level group. Male students have a higher percentage in low level of awareness as compare to female students.

**Table 3. Role of Ethical Considerations in Research Among Students**

Ethical considerations	Responses					Mean	S. D
	SA	A	N	DA	SDA		
Honesty	246 (27%)	215 23%	156 17%	157 17%	128 14%	3.32	1.40
Objectivity	369 41%	232 26%	166 18%	61 7%	74 8%	3.84	1.25
Integrity	407 45%	251 28%	111 12%	79 9%	54 6%	3.97	1.21
Carefulness	319 35%	227 25%	143 16%	109 12%	104 12%	3.60	1.37
Openness	221 24%	246 27%	163 18%	128 14%	144 16%	3.30	1.39
Confidentiality	137 15	235 26	182 20	235 26	113 12	3.05	1.27

Table 3 represents the role of ethical considerations in research among students. Most respondents agree with ethical practices honesty, objectivity, integrity, carefulness, openness, and confidentiality of research in social sciences. The highest mean score is 3.84 for the integrity of any kind of research, which is the priority of standard research. However, the mean score for the confidentiality of research was 3.05. Table 3 demonstrates the frequency distribution of the variables regarding the Ethics of social scientific research and its impact on student's behavior. There are six indicators for the effects of social scientific research and its impact on students' behavior. It is concluded that integrity is a useful tool if it is utilized during the research process may be proved profitable for the research. The mean score is 3.97 and the standard deviation is 1.21. The positive criticism and the generation of new ideas increase the unbiasedness in the research. The mean score is 3.30 and the standard deviation is 1.39. Another useful and innovative ethics of social science research is the maintenance of confidentiality of the respondents as well as the researcher. The confidentiality smoothes the way for other researchers to get the knowledge of social issues as well as society.

**Table 4. Administrative Area wise Students with Published Articles**

Administrative area	Sampled students	Publications	Percentages
Punjab	303	64	21%
ICT	106	27	25%
Sindh	111	22	20%
KP	248	36	14%
Baluchistan	61	13	21%
GB	35	4	11%
AJK	38	5	13%

Table 4 represents the student’s attitude towards publication out of 902 respondents. Data is collected from Punjab, ICT, Sindh, KP, Baluchistan, GB, and AJK. Overall 19 % of respondents have publications. However, ICT has the highest percentage as compared to other provinces. Students are less concerned about their publications or maybe they do not have awareness about the important research publications. 19% of students have published their article, although the remaining 81% have no publication.

**Table 5: ANOVA table Showing Summary of Awareness Ethical Practices of Post-Graduate Students from all Administrative Area**

Variations	Sum of Squares	df.	Mean Square	F	p value
Between Groups	42.682	6	7.11	12.64*	.000
Within Groups	503.398	895	.562		
Total	546.080	901			

Table 5 represents the ANOVA of ethical practices of research among students of the different administrative areas of the public universities of Pakistan consider for this study. The findings revealed a significant difference at  $F=12.64^*$  and P-value is 0.00 which is  $<0.05(\alpha=5\%)$ . It demonstrates that what research students perceived as ethical concerns differ across all administrative area of Pakistan. There is a significant difference in perceptions of ethical practices by post-graduate students of public universities from all administrative area of Pakistan.

**Table 6. Association between Awareness of Ethical Practices and their level of Degree**

Variation		F	df.	$\chi^2$	p value
Level of Awareness	High	171	4	11.012*	0.026
	Average	248			
	Low	483			

Table 6 shows that there is an association between students' awareness and their degrees. It implies that students' awareness regarding the ethical concern of research was low but it is proved that knowledge regarding ethical standards of research has increased according to their level of degree.

**Table 7. Associations between the Ethical Practices of Research and Quality of Research**

	Value	df	P-value
Pearson Chi-Square	32.212*	16	0.009
Likelihood Ratio	34.189	16	0.005
Linear-by-Linear Association	6.993	1	0.008
N (Valid Cases)	902		

From table 7 is may be observed that there is a significant association between research aptitude of students and the quality of research. The findings revealed that the quality of research based on those ethical practices which university focused. If students take the value of these practices during their research, work the standard of research also improved. It implies that as students have a complete understanding of the role of ethical principles in specially social sciences, their performance in research also improved.

**Table 8. Impact of Student's Knowledge about Ethical Practices on their Research Work**

Variations	Frequency	df.	$\chi^2$	p-value
Always	98	6	56.783*	.000
Sometime	190	6		
Rarely	411	1		
Never	203			



Table 8 shows the impact of student's knowledge about ethical practices on their research work. Results represent that research students in public universities are not fully aware of ethical practices of research in social sciences at  $\chi$ practices. This also shows that students follow ethical practices according to the nature of the study. They care about ethical concerns sometimes and rarely before researching in the context of social sciences.

## **Findings**

- Standard research is based on these three ethical practices of anonymity, privacy, and confidentiality of data in social sciences. The plagiarism practices are considered a major ethical concern in research.
- The response rate was 55% male and 45% female students from MSC and M Phil level in this study. All researchers were aware of the concept of research ethics. However, 19% of students have a high level of knowledge regarding research ethics. The majority of the participants have a low level of understanding and their knowledge regarding ethical practice is insufficient and they need some more counseling on ethical considerations of research in social sciences. Only 37% of respondents have an average level of awareness regarding ethical practices.
- The majority of the respondents indicated a low level of understanding about ethical practices that may affect their research work. Students did not concern the value of publications that's why only 19% of students have published their articles. It is just because of the low level of understanding about the standards of research whereas in the current scenario it was also found that other students try to publish articles from their research work.
- The significant difference was found in the perceptions of students from all administrative areas. There is an association between awareness of ethical practices and their level of degree.
- The impact of the awareness level of students affects their attitude towards the adaptation of ethical practices in their research work. It implies that as awareness increases they become conscious to follow ethics in their research work.
- The findings show that the attitude of students towards ethical consideration of research affects their publication and quality of research also.

## **Results Discussion**

Ethical issues are observed in social science research. At present, the internet has become part of our education; therefore, research students should take value ethical guidelines to design any kind of research in social sciences. It also highlights the role of the University Grant Commission to implement the research standards,

research from the perspective of social sciences. The standards of research promote the aims of the research, such as knowledge, truth, and avoidance of error. The ethical responsibility of research is to do the work honestly and with integrity.

The study concludes that research students fail to observe the ethical concerns owing to the diverse difficulties they face. Research quality can be improved by observing standard ethical practices. The study adds to academic knowledge of ethical practices, and also provides a solid foundation for future research in the relevant area. Universities should organized awareness programs to create awareness amongst the research students regarding research ethics and focused on the formulation of research policies and guidelines to combat unethical practices in public sector universities of Pakistan.

The role of ethical practices in research cannot be ignored specially in the context of social sciences. If students did not take value to ethical practices in their research however they cannot meet the standards of research especially in the context of social sciences. The study concludes that Students face challenges during their research work that's why their purpose of the study is to complete their degree in time at any cost. Those students understand the value of ethical practices however they were trying to fulfill the requirement of research in their research work. The current scenario of research is not satisfactory because a low level of awareness, attitude towards publication also measured.

### **Recommendations**

- Awareness program on research ethics should be intensified by all public universities of Pakistan. These programs help promote the ethical practices of research.
- Create research aptitude in students. Motivational techniques should be used to promote research standards.
- There is a need to add contents of ethical considerations that should be included in the course of research methods. However, universities should be introduced as a compulsory course based on research ethics for all research degree programs.
- The research policy of the university should be provided to students before the conduction research.
- Seminars workshops and conferences on ethical considerations of research should be conducted in universities.
- It was found that students did not have competences to differentiate between ethical and unethical practices. It is recommended departments should conduct awareness programs regarding ethical practices of research.

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