

Research Ethics: A Perspective of South Asian Context

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Research ethics is concerned with ethical issues that can arise while conducting research. Social science research entails a combination of three equal entities: process, context and human agency. In each study, these entities demand rich interaction with each other. Generally, research ethics questions the interrelation between the research context and the human involvement established within that context. The research context and interaction between researcher and research participants lead to variations in the construction of knowledge, while research ethics plays a major role throughout all undertakings. In this narrative review paper, I have critically reflected my arguments on behalf of research ethics as a context-specific issue. I argued that the one-size-fits-all approach of research ethics is not viable by presenting ethical practices from the South Asian perspective. The paper is organized in three specific sections – ethical theories, research ethics and its contextual practices. Research ethics is very much a private affair and directly linked to the personal outlook of the researcher towards others. The ethical issue in research is not generic, but specific to the research context, i.e. the context of the research determines what form of behaviour is ethical and what is not. I explore the idea that the South Asian context may have its own system to conduct research ethically, as in euro-western and indigenous systems.

KEYWORDS: Nepal, research, research ethics, South Asian context.

Introduction

Born and brought up in a Hindu family in a rural part of Nepal, I spent my childhood with my family till I completed my school education. While growing up, each and every socio-cultural practice that I adhered to was rooted in the teachings of Vedic philosophy. I remember, my father and mother always taught me to be ‘good’ in every aspect while conducting myself and interacting with others (and even now they suggest the same).

Now, I can reflect and understand that my father and mother’s school of thought was governed by the ethical values of eastern Vedic philosophy based on the principles of *Dharma* and *Karma*. Usually, being ‘good’ in others’ company translates to being ethical towards others. In this regard, Cranston, Ehrich and Kimber (2006) state that how we ought to live and behave shows how ethical we are. I firmly believe that philosophical influences govern our day-to-day activities and behaviours to a great extent and my own personal experiences of having been brought up in a family with strong Vedic influences verify this notion. Therefore,

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it is not so difficult for me to speculate that if I had been brought up in a family other than a Vedic one, then my father and mother might have taught me differently and my values would contrast glaringly with the ones that I now possess. This insight begs me to question the very essentiality of ethical behaviours and how they are a context-based issue governed by immediate circumstances.

Ethics stimulate the process of human activities and behaviours. Ethics exist to help understand the ways of meaningful and moral life. Ethics can be categorized as: meta-ethics, normative ethics and applied ethics (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004). The meta-ethics refer to the broad philosophical analysis of moral concepts such as rights, obligations and virtues (Snyder, 2012). Here, rights refer to honesty towards interpersonal action and respect for others' existence. The obligations refer to humankind on certain parameters – for example, each person has certain social roles and responsibilities that she/he needs to perform within her/his real world. Similarly, the virtues refer to context-specific characters and attitudes of human agency. These are contextual and philosophical concepts, which shape human lives from a moral perspective.

Normative ethics focuses on the moral norms that dictate situational morality. Additionally, Israel and Hay (2006) argue that normative ethics are based on criteria or variables, which are contradictory in some cases and contexts. It is a framework that judges our moral behaviour as right or wrong, good or bad, acceptable or unacceptable as per specific context. However, human behaviours are very practical and dynamic as per their existence. Each of these concepts should have an applied form. Thus, applied ethics “refers to how normative ethical perspectives are applied to specific issues in particular situations and circumstances” (Snyder, 2012, p.37). Allying with the arguments of different scholars, I have defined research ethics in this paper as a specific form of applied ethics. Further, the broader context of normative ethics provides additional insights to establish my conceptual foundation.

Regarding ethics in research, Guillemin and Gillam (2004) distinguish two major dimensions which they have termed as procedural ethics and ethics in practice. The first one focuses on approval from the relevant ethical committee to conduct research and the second one refers to the everyday ethical issues that arise contextually while conducting research activities. I have focused my discussion here on the everyday ethical issues that arise contextually during the course of research.

Perspectives vary regarding the conceptual foundation of research ethics among the world academia. Though there are no specific contradictions, the different worldviews may create confusion for the researchers. The academic world is dynamic and raises many issues regarding new research methodologies, ethical issues, quality of research, etc. Regarding the ethical issues or ethical practices in research, Kara (2018) has distinguished two continental practices – euro-western and indigenous. Both practices have independent contextual groundings.

The euro-western ethical practices are rooted in ethical theories of deontology, consequentialism, virtue ethics and value ethics (Kara, 2018), whereas the indigenous ethical practices are rooted in the indigenous values of respectism, connectivity or communality, and reciprocity (Chilisa, 2012). Besides these, South Asian contexts based on Vedic and Buddhist philosophies provide distinct lenses to review the ethical life of humans. Ethical values and faith systems rooted in eastern philosophies such as Vedic and Buddhist, are practiced by the people of South Asian countries such as Nepal, India, Bhutan, China and others (Butts and Rich, 2013; Soherwordi, 2011).

Social science research is not a one-way process – there must be participatory interaction. Research participants may expect the actions or behaviours of researchers to be easily acceptable in their personal, professional and social life. The personal, social and professional life of a person is directly embedded in the socio-cultural and ethical practices and beliefs of the place of their growth and residence. From this line of discussion, I have articulated my argument to clarify that research ethics is not a generic issue (Msoroka and Amundsen, 2017) that propounds one-size-fits-all situations. For that purpose, I have reviewed and explored ethical perceptions of eastern philosophies along with euro-western and indigenous ethics to comprehend their affiliation with research practices.

Methodology

This paper is based on critical reflections towards the practices of research ethics. Ethical theories and value systems from different locations shape human lives uniquely from one continent to another. While conceptualizing context-specific practices of research ethics by reviewing the literature, I reflected upon my experience as a researcher who adheres to eastern contextual practices. All the while, I consciously sought to come across discussions regarding the position of eastern ethical practices in relation to conducting research. Journal articles, dissertations and books relating to ‘research ethics in practice’ were critically reviewed. For that, the desk review research approach was deployed. Desk review research is a “process of accessing the published secondary data” (Jackson, 1994, p. 21). I accessed literature from journals published by Sage publications: *Research Ethics* and *Qualitative Inquiry*; dissertations: *Qualitative research ethics: An heuristic inquiry exploring the meaning and application of ethics in qualitative research* and *Identity paradoxes of Kirat migrants in urban context: An auto/ethnographic inquiry* written by Snyder (2012) and Rai (2018), respectively. I also reviewed books: *Essays on Indian philosophy*, *Indian philosophy: An introduction to Hindu and Buddhist thought*, *Southern theory: The global dynamics of knowledge in social science*, *Indigenous research methodologies* and *Research ethics in the real world* written by Saksena (1970), King (1999), Connell (2007), Chilisa (2012) and Kara (2018), respectively and relevant literature of Vedic Ethics and Buddhist Ethics. Along with this literature, I examined other related resources, especially the literature of Vedic and Buddhist philosophy available in online and offline schemes.

While articulating ideas and developing arguments, I critically reflected on my own experiences, shaped by the socio-cultural and ethical practices that comprehensively influenced my upbringing to add gravity to this review. The journal articles, dissertations and books that I reviewed provided the necessary insights to think critically about the different aspects of research ethics. This paper was based on two major methodological conceptions: desk review research and narrative review. I used the desk review research for the purpose of an in-depth review of the collected literature. Similarly, the narrative review was used to create my own position to reflect my experience of being a researcher in the South Asian context. The narrative review consists of arguments on the literature review after critically reflecting upon my own experiences regarding the issue (Bryman, 2012). The main aim was to generate plausible arguments to highlight the fact that research ethics is a context-specific issue and not a universal one. Thus, I have analysed the reviews thematically based on the significant issues that were discussed in the reviewed literature. This paper is formatted in three layers of discussion, namely an exploration of ethical

theories and value system, research ethics practices, and the contextually shifting paradigm of research ethics.

Ethical Theories and Value System

The human world has unity despite immeasurable diversities; it continues to exist because of ethics. Levinas (1989) argues that ethics is the first philosophy. Philosophically, human ethical practices have been divided into three – indigenous, euro-western (Harrison, 2019; Kara, 2018) and eastern philosophies (Cook and Houser, 2009; Saksena, 1970). There might be many more which are yet to be explored scientifically. Due to the varied form of practices, the ethical theories, values or human thoughts regarding ethics can be distinguished from one continent to another.

Ethics in the Euro-Western Context

Humans are dynamic in nature and enjoy immense mobility, not only in the physical world but even in consciousness and moral practices as well. In the context of euro-western socio-cultural and ethical practices, there exist different ethical theories that govern people's day-to-day activities and shed light on what is considered ethical. Among these, Kant's *deontology*, Mill's *consequentialism*, Aristotle's *virtue ethics* and *value ethics* are the ethical theories that primarily influence euro-western people's lives and outlook of one another.

The euro-western ethical theory of deontology is prominently based on the rules and laws of morality. Deontological perspectives expect that rules, laws and regulations must guide each human action. In the same regard, Holyoak and Powell (2016) argue that the deontological perspective binds the morality of euro-western culture within individualism. Consequentialism is another euro-western ethical theory, which is concerned more with human morality rather than rules and laws. It states that human actions are guided by moral values, which are created by a specific context and lesser importance is given to rules and laws (Hurley, 2018).

The perspective of virtue ethics, may lead people to believe that if a person is 'good' personally and professionally, then he/she is most likely to be a good researcher or a good social actor (Misselbrook, 2015). However, the reality could be totally different, as even personally and professionally 'good' people can do many 'bad' things. Virtue ethics is tied to individualism rather than collectivism. I personally believe that each qualitative research study is value laden and the research results vary as per the researcher's individual value system. Regarding value ethics, Kara (2018) argues that it does not appear as a distinct category in philosophical literature but it is regularly used in research practice (p.34). Value ethics refer to examining whether the research is value-laden or value-free. However, human value is led by human agencies and it may or may not appear in visible form. Thus, in my opinion, value-free research is challenging.

Ethics in the Indigenous Context

It is very difficult to define a particular theory that can provide just grounding to indigenous socio-cultural and ethical practices. Broadly, the 'southern theory' (Connell, 2007) and 'post-colonial theory' (Chilisa, 2012) discuss the range of theories, which can cover the

indigenous moral perspectives as well. However, these theories do not directly project the theoretical perceptions of indigenous ethics and the ethical practices of indigenous people.

Ethical practices among indigenous people are distinct from euro-western practices. Philosophically, the ontology and epistemology of indigenous ethics are seen as relational (Kara, 2018). Indigenous ethical practices are more rooted in indigenous faiths, beliefs and values towards others i.e. the *perspective of communality*. Therefore, indigenous research methodology and research ethics largely ensures justice to people, i.e. *social justice* (Tikly and Bond, 2013) rather than focusing on individual benefits.

Ethics is a branch of philosophy that is bound by the truisms of a particular philosophy. As such, *relationship* is the chief ingredient of indigenous ethical practices and it relies on three primary key ethical values: *respectism*, *connectivity* (or communality), and *reciprocity* (Chilisa, 2012; Wilson, 2008). Relationships form the fundamental basis to respect each other, respect the community, and respect non-human entities and so on. Further, in the context of research practices, respectism anticipates that each participant has the expertise to construct new knowledge. Therefore, respectful ethical practices make everyone accountable and responsible not only towards the research but also towards the community, environment and other aspects of life as well.

Connectivity is concerned with the relationship between people and socio-cultural practices, knowledge, skills, academia, politics, etc. (indigenous people's connectivity to their surroundings is also a crucial factor in this regard). Further, connectivity is mutually reciprocal in that the researcher goes into the community, searches and accounts for required information, analyses it and shares with others for the benefit of the community, its members and others (Barkema, Chen, George, Luo and Tsui, 2015).

From the perspective of reciprocity, the main intention of doing research is for the good of the community (i.e. the researched) rather than a focus only on the individual (i.e. the researcher). Additionally, Chilisa (2012) states that "indigenous ethics theory defines research as respectful when it benefits the participants" (p. 152). Indigenous ethics recognize that human diversity is a means to rethink the social phenomenon in order to transform people's lives and prosperities.

Ethics in the South Asian Context

South Asian socio-cultural and ethical practices are mostly dominated by Vedic and Buddhist philosophical assumptions. The two eastern philosophies, Vedic and Buddhist, continuously influence the day-to-day life of people, especially those living in South Asian countries (Lewin and Ergas, 2018). Vedic philosophy is a system of ancient ethics and it emphasizes the cosmic unity of human diversity. In Asia, ethics do not originate from particular theories but are connected to all types of performance in social life, which is called *dharma* (duty). Here, *dharma* means a symbol of eternity, which is broader than the term 'religion' in the Western sense (Awasthi, 2004). In the Vedic system of living, *dharma* is associated with duties that produce knowledge, service and non-violence. Regarding social transformation in Vedic tradition, Chatterjee (2009) argues seven pillars, including (a) *karma* (action), (b) *niskama karma* (action without desires), (c) *purna* (holistic development), (d) *dharshan* (integrated vision). These are cultivating higher values in an individual's actions and behaviours in a societal context. Besides the concept of *dharma* as duty, *karma* is a concept of action or deed that consists of various moral ideals and virtues, such as non-cheating, non-thieving, forgiveness, fidelity, austerity,

gratitude, affection, charity, truthfulness and *Ahimsa* – avoiding injury to all (Bilimoria, 1993). *Dharma*, *karma* and *responsible social action* are conceptually rooted from Vedic Scriptures – *Veda*, *Bhagavad Gita*, *Manusmriti* and *Nyāya Sūtras*. However, ethics in the Vedic tradition are non-deontological. One should cultivate one's own internal experience (Cook and Houser, 2009). Further, in Vedic philosophy or tradition, ethics covers duty and action in a societal context. Both duty and action are seen in responsible research as the researcher's performance. Thus, in each research study in the South Asian context, researchers have to consider *dharma* and *karma* as ethical insights. While designing the research, researchers have to be clear about their *dharma* and *karma* of being a researcher in the South Asian context.

Buddhist philosophy is the other influential philosophy and faith system among the people of South Asia. In Buddhist philosophy, ethics are specifically mentioned, but are closely related to the term *śīla* (moral virtue), which closely identified five moral precepts, or *pañca śīla*: not to kill, not to steal, not to lie, not to have inappropriate sex and not to use intoxicants. Further, Buddhist philosophical assumptions refer to the eightfold path or *āryāṣṭāṅgamārga* of Buddha's teachings: right view, right thinking, right mindfulness, right speech, right action, right diligence, right concentration and right livelihood. Besides the concepts of *pañca śīla* and *āryāṣṭāṅgamārga*, Buddhist ethics give insights to four immeasurable virtues: compassion, loving-kindness, sympathetic joy and equanimity (Butts and Rich, 2013). The *pañca śīla* and *āryāṣṭāṅgamārga* are conceptually rooted in Buddhist Scriptures – *Pali canon* or *Tripitaka* (i.e. three baskets) that consists of *Vinaya Pitaka* (basket of discipline and moral rules), *Sūtra Pitaka* (basket of moral teaching and ethical reflection) and *Abhidharma Pitaka* (basket of metaphysics and the psychology of morality). These three *Pitakas* are considered to be the basic tenets of Buddhist life. However, ethics in Buddhist philosophy is concerned with the societal context of human life, with certain principles and practices that support others' existence rather than harm. Further, it indicates the relationship between human thoughts and their real-world practices rather than just prescribing a list of ethical values (Carter, 2005). Researchers in South Asia have to give serious consideration to those ethical and moral principles and practices (i.e. *pañca śīla*, *āryāṣṭāṅgamārga*) that govern Buddhist philosophy.

Regarding the ethical values of eastern socio-cultural practices, Cook and Houser (2009) state that ethical values “emphasize an intuitive approach which is focused somewhat on tradition and discovering the ‘truth’ through experience and internal reactions” (p. 5). The ‘truth’ is contextual in that it depends upon your experience, beliefs, context and faith system. While discussing eastern or South Asian ethics, I explored the philosophical dimensions of eastern socio-cultural practices and beliefs offering unique ways of reviewing human affairs. Philosophically, *Abhidharma* (i.e. field of knowledge) and *Pramanas* (i.e. means of knowledge) are two basic conceptions that derived the ontology and epistemology of ethics in the South Asian context (King, 1999). However, the suggested philosophical assumptions, principles and practices of Vedic and Buddhist philosophy are very contextual and accordingly, a researcher can adopt them depending on the appropriateness in his/her research context, research issue, and research participants.

Research Ethics

Research is a continuous process that always aims to explore the ‘truth’ about the physical, social, and individual world. Research is a process and more than that, it is a human embedded activity. Diebel-Fischer (2018) states that research is to find the ‘truth’ and

finding the truth contributes to the construction of new knowledge. While discussing the construction of knowledge, due consideration should be given to the question: is it a process or a product?

Habermas (1972) argues that the process of constructing knowledge in the social world is varied. The construction of knowledge is a process, and the process is influenced by socio-cultural practices (Bruner, 1999; Vygotsky, 1978). The process is governed by the varied forms of socio-cultural practices and may result in provocative knowledge that might not be acceptable in every context. Conducting research to construct knowledge always gives rise to the issues of ethical dilemmas (Wiles, 2013). For a long time, all over the world, many researchers have been experiencing and facing a number of challenges during their research because of ethical issues.

As a researcher, my professional and academic journey has taught me that each study has its unique process and forms of human involvement, as is necessary especially in issues relating to social science. There might be some personal certainties (such as, based on one's cultural upbringing, belief system and life experiences) that may influence human subjectivity in the research process (Drapeau, 2002). The space of certainty governed by humans, tags human actions, such as right or wrong, good or bad, acceptable or unacceptable, and may be contextual as well. Such a context-specific aspect of ethics is called the applied form of normative ethics, which is also known as research ethics.

In other words, research ethics is defined as a set of the researcher's personal and professional values, norms and practices that always become an interdisciplinary issue in every individual study (Burgess, 2005). Research ethics generate meaning differently as one of the leading elements (Diebel-Fischer, 2018) to explain whether the conducted research is constructing trustworthy, applicable knowledge or not in a particular context. However, ethics in research is very contextual because it is a "set of personal principles for interpersonal action and interpersonal conduct" (Saldana, 2015, p. 80).

Going with the arguments of Burgess (2005), it is certain that research ethics is an interdisciplinary issue that is governed by the researcher's social experiences. I do agree that different paradigmatic practices exist, and new ones keep emerging around the world. In this regard, Chilisa (2012) and Kara (2018) have further explored the euro-western and indigenous practices of research ethics. While thinking through Plummer's (2001) standpoint, the euro-western practices of research ethics are more influenced by the perspective of absolutism, whereas the perspective of relativism influences the indigenous practices.

Euro-western research practices give more priority to human actions rather than to human relationships, as opposed to indigenous or southern research practices (Connell, 2007; Kara and Lucy, 2017). So clearly, researchers from different corners of the world have been practicing research ethics differently. However, as a researcher in the South Asian or eastern part of the world, my ontological outlook regarding research ethics adheres to the situational relativism governed by Vedic and Buddhist philosophies and I do believe that this is a context-specific issue and depends upon what process you follow. There are some specific principles of research ethics that are articulated and practiced separately, such as euro-western practices, indigenous practices and South Asian (eastern) practices.

The Principles of Research Ethics in Euro-Western Practices

For decades, the discourse on research ethics has continued among research scholars around the world. Due to the interdisciplinary nature of each individual study, scholars might

not be able to agree on a single principle of research ethics being the absolute one. Researchers from the euro-western continent have been practicing different principles of research ethics, such as informed consent, anonymity, confidentiality, risk and safety (Wiles, 2013; Vandlay, Baines, and Taylor, 2013). Further, to conduct a high quality study, safeguard participants and for the uniformity of academic research, the euro-western practices of research ethics are governed by a distinct set of rules, regulations, and laws (Kara, 2018). For that, most euro-western universities have formed research ethics committees and adopted clear-cut policies and guidelines. However, the principles of research ethics that researchers in euro-western contexts follow is based on four ethical theories: Kant's *deontology*, Mill's *consequentialism*, Aristotle's *virtue ethics* and *value ethics*.

The Principles of Research Ethics in Indigenous Practices

The indigenous principles of research ethics are based upon the intrinsic conventions of indigenous people, such as relational accountability, respectful representation, and reciprocal appropriation (Kara, 2018). Relational accountability believes that all parts of the research processes are interconnected, and the researcher must be accountable for all the relations (Olsen, 2016). There must be a good relationship between the researcher and the researched, not only while conducting the research, but also in every relational opportunity that comes up. Researchers must be respectful and are required to listen, pay attention and allow space for the voices and knowledge systems of the research participants and others (Chilisa, 2012). The onus lies on the researcher to establish a respectful environment during the process of research with his/her research participants and community. Respectfulness intends to appreciate each other's contribution in the course of knowledge construction. Further, researchers should ensure that the research benefits the research participants as well, and not just fulfil the researcher's requirements (Chilisa, 2012). The researcher is responsible and accountable to ensure that the research findings support a positive change for both the researched and the researcher. This could even mean that the research must benefit the research participants rather than the researcher. Thus, the principles and practices of research ethics in indigenous contexts are based on three primary key ethical values: *respectism*, *connectivity* (or communality), and *reciprocity*.

The Principles of Research Ethics in South Asian Practices

In each study, researchers need to have a good understanding of their research process, research contexts and participants. Due to the diverse socio-cultural practices in eastern communities, researchers have to consider the four basic concepts of *dharma*, *karma*, *pañca śīla* and *āryāṣṭāṅgamārga* as intuitions in order to understand the societal context and people's lives. The principles derived from the four basic concepts, such as duties to produce truth and knowledge; non-violence; non-cheating; non-thieving; fidelity; gratitude; truthfulness; avoiding injury to all; not to steal; not to lie; right view; right speech; right action; right concentration and right livelihood have to be considered as ethical principles in each study conducted in South Asian contexts. These are the insights of research ethics, and researchers can apply them as their research issues and contexts by contextualizing the notion of the insights. These insights directly and indirectly shape the day-to-day activities and belief systems of people who are born, brought up and live in the South Asian context. Thus, for each researcher of the

South Asian context, cultural sensitivity is an unavoidable ethical consideration throughout the study. Cultural sensitivity in research is defined as the study “which incorporates into its design and implementation the historical context, and cultural experiences, norms, values, beliefs, and behaviours” (Burnette, Sanders, Butcher and Rand, 2014, p. 2) that also takes a cultural accounting of each research participant throughout the study.

Though there has not been a wider practice of the ethical principles in research derived from Vedic and Buddhist philosophy, researchers have been practicing ‘hybrid principles’ by mixing the principles of all three contexts (i.e. euro-western, indigenous and South Asian/eastern) (e.g. Awasthi, 2004; Rai, 2018). However, avoidance of the ethical principles derived from the four basic concepts in research is devaluing the cultural and philosophical richness of the South Asian context. Further, over the long term, this may lead to injustice for the people who are living in South Asia, because research is the only way to explore and innovate new ideas of social transformation. Thus, principles and practices of research ethics in South Asian contexts should be based on the four primary key concepts or philosophical assumptions of *dharma*, *karma*, *pañca śīla* and *āryāṣṭāṅgamārga*.

Research Ethics: A Shifting Paradigm

In the initial phases of my research career, I principally considered the principles of research ethics derived from euro-western ethical theories, such as informed consent, anonymity, confidentiality, risk and safety (e.g. Dahal, 2016). I applied these during almost five years of my research career as a social science researcher in Nepal. During that period, I have conducted both qualitative and quantitative studies, but I now find that my concern is shifting from the euro-western ethical practices to indigenous and South Asian/eastern practices.

Currently, in one of my research projects, I am communicating with those researchers who have rich experiences of research in the South Asian context. Some of my participants’ experiences have inspired me to apply ethical principles derived from Vedic and Buddhist philosophy in my research. For an example, one of my foreign respondents commented: *in my case, cultural sensitivity was a major ethical issue while conducting research in the Asian context, especially in Nepal. It’s because initially I was not taking seriously the cultural practices and traditions of diverse societal contexts, and the resultant lifestyle and day to day practices of the rural village women. As a result, the research has not produced a satisfactory level of outcomes that will support the empowerment of those people/women who are aligned to the ‘community’ of my research participants.* This reflection provided insight that cultural sensitivity directly contributes to the reciprocity of the research.

To consider cultural sensitivity especially in the Asian context, researchers need to review everything relating to their research based on the concepts of *dharma*, *karma*, *pañca śīla* and *āryāṣṭāṅgamārga* and its derived principles. What is my *dharma* (duty) and *karma* (action), being a researcher of a particular issue and context? How do I maintain or follow *pañca śīla* and *āryāṣṭāṅgamārga* in my research? These are the questions each researcher needs to ask while planning the research to be conducted in the South Asian context. However, ethics in research is never perfectly resolved – it continuously makes the researcher self-critical and reflective towards their own practices.

Research ethics is a matter of continuous concern in social science research. Holm (1997) argues that ethical issues need to be considered as contextualized methods of reasoning, not abstract rules (as cited in Birch, Miller, Mauthner, and Jessop, 2002). Further, Wiles (2013)

argues that research ethics is the moral behaviour of the researchers in their research contexts. The moral behaviour of the researcher might differ from one context to another, thus a number of debates exist regarding research ethics and they continue to emerge around the world. There are two major perspectives regarding research ethics – relativist and absolutist. The relativists believe that ethical issues in research are contextual, whereas the absolutists believe that ethical issues of research are derived principles in each study (Plummer, 2001). Further, the research contexts matter because different contexts may demand different moral and ethical behaviour and practices from researchers.

As a loop of ethical practices in research, Guillemin and Gillam (2004) explored two major dimensions — procedural ethics and ethics in practice. Kara (2018) generated a meaningful discussion regarding the research ethics pertaining both to indigenous research methods (Chilisa, 2012) and euro-western research methods. She created a thoughtful discussion platform by focusing on the different paradigmatic practices of research ethics from the perspective of different ethical theories and values. When aligned with the philosophical and theoretical essence of research ethics, it is difficult to draw a line separating one from another. However, it is a matter of the particular research context.

As a research practitioner, I have understood that research ethics is a two-dimensional issue because it is generally concerned with the researchers and research participants throughout the research. Further, the context of research determines the researcher's ethical awareness and practices (Burgess, 2005). Therefore, the research context becomes the first component to specify the ethical principles or practices that befit a specific research context. However, ethics, in the case of research, is directly or indirectly concerned with the quality of the research itself. If someone asks me why ethics is necessary in research, then my answer would be to ensure quality research findings and then for academic integrity. Different aspects, such as research participants, researchers, readers, policies and many more, would affect the quality. Further, the applicability and trustworthiness of research findings are contextual phenomena. Due to cultural diversity, the knowledge constructed in one context or culture may not be applicable and equally trustworthy in another context or culture. Similarly, the defined principles of research ethics in one context may not appreciate the norms and values of diverse cultures in another context. In this regard, Msoroka and Amundsen (2017) further argue that the western principles of research ethics may not be applicable all over the world. Thus, as a researcher of diverse societal contexts, one needs to consider that the one-size-fits-all ethics approach is not applicable in such a culturally and philosophically diverse world.

Conclusion

Different parts of the world follow different ethical practices – euro-western, indigenous, and eastern/South Asian. From the sociological perspective, the world is formed by human diversity and each human is unique. Social science research is a human-centric project, so the personal influences of those involved in the research matter most. So, the researcher's personal and professional beliefs, values and perception towards others are high issues of concern in every study. In particular, the social science researcher must be aware of the different continental practices of research ethics from the relativist perspective rather than absolutist. However, a human belief system is formed by the particular socio-cultural practices of a region where one grows up and resides. Research ethics is a very personal issue of interpersonal action and it is directly connected to the intrinsic views of the researcher towards others. The ethical

issues in research cannot be universalized, as they are uniquely specific to each research context. The research context determines what is ethical and what is not (rather than pre-set prescribed rules and guidelines).

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