Ethical guidelines in social science research – A Small Step
A report
by Tejal Barai

The need for ethics in social science research has been felt for years, and it has become stronger with the passing years. This however does not imply that the social science research done hitherto was unethical. It simply means that the issues that are being researched today, are not only more complex, but also more invasive. With the new developments and changes taking place in the Indian society, the areas of sociological research have increased to meet these needs and the problems arising therein. From studies of peasant movements, agrarian social structure, industrial sociology, urban sociology in the 1970's to issues such as medical sociology in the 1980's (Rao, 1982), and studies on sexuality and reproductive health in the 1990's, sociological research, in India, has come a long way.

Methodologies used too have undergone a change. From simple interviews to case histories and focus group discussions. Thus adaptations and modifications were made to suit the issues researched, and using the best possible methodology. In due course of time complications arose. Dilemmas that have no simple solutions needed to be handled. How does one report details about a sexual behaviour survey, without offending either the masses, the participants of the research themselves, and yet be able to report the findings of research? Or how can one get relevant data on issues such as abortion in a rural community when the response of the women participants of research are very obviously affected by the presence of a relative during the interview? Moreover how can this data be made genralisable, when its validity could itself be doubtful? Moreover, dilemmas have also been raised in case of research with AIDS and HIV positive patients. There are also issues related to the exploitation of research work of students and juniors.

The need for ethics is also strongly felt, and will increase in the future, as a result of the increased demand for accountability and transparency from all those associated with research. Signs for ethical accountability and transparency have already emerged and consolidated itself in some countries. For instance the Blacks in the United States refused participate in research on the grounds that the interviewers were black and that the black interviewers were "stooges" of the white. (Barnes 1977), or the hostile reaction that the Springdale (Vidich and Bensman, 1960[1]) study received. The Springdale study, I consider, is a good example the importance of anonymity as a right of the participants in research. It does not mean simply using pseudonyms. (Barai, 2000). This particular study had made use of pseudonyms throughout. However, specific characteristics and attributes made informants and participants identifiable, resulting in a lot of information becoming public. The result was an outrage against the study with participants organising a parade on the 4th of July as a sign of protest. (Useem and Marx, 1983).

What is important or us, and our Indian community of researchers, is the fact that we too have come across not only questions from participants, such as why they were selected for the study (Visaria, 1995), but also a demand for their rights or a protest against their violations. All this not only has an impact on those who are researched but can, in the long run, affect the credibility of social science research.

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[1] *Useem, M. and Marx, G.*, Ethical Dilemmas and Political Consideration. An Introduction to Social Research, Volume I, of Handbook of Social Science Methods, Edt. Robert Smith, 1983.

Thus social science research can give rise to dilemmas and issues at all stages. From the choice of study, to ensuring autonomy and rights of the participants to complexities arising out of publication, especially that of sensitive material, to the increased need for ensuring accountability and transparency. Can these issues have been handled better had they been anticipated? Where does one look for possible solutions?

The National Ethics Meeting to discuss "The Draft Code of Ethics for Research in Social Sciences and Social Science Research", was held on the 29th and the 30th of May 2000, in Mumbai was an attempt to address some of these issues collectively. It was attended by more than 50 researchers from all over the country.

The process of evolution of the draft guidelines involved the formation of a committee[2]. The Research Secretariat was based at The Centre for Enquiry into Health and Allied Themes (CEHAT), Mumbai[3]. Codes of ethics were scanned form various countries. Needs, problems and complexities associated with research in India needed to be kept in mind while drawing up guidelines. Thus a review of studies from India was also undertaken. Over a period of one year, the committee met twice and discussed and debated draft guidelines drawn up by the research secretariat. The result of the effort was the evolution of the "The Draft Code of Ethics for Research in Social Sciences and Social Science Research".

The guidelines were disseminated widely prior to the meeting. They were also sent to the participants of the meeting much earlier. They were published (EPW, 2000), presentations were undertaken by the research secretariat, at various colleges and institutes and feedback and suggestions were sought at these presentations, as well as through other written and oral means of communication and discussions. Feedback was also received from the participants of the meeting. A volume that consisted of the documented feedback, six background papers that were commissioned and some codes of ethics originally referred to. The background papers covered issues from ethics in qualitative research, ethics is publication to some basic concepts. The volume was sent as background for the meeting.

The main body of "The Draft Code of Ethics for Research in Social Sciences and Social Science Research" consisted of four sections, The Preamble (Section I), The Principles (Section II), Ethical Guidelines (Section IV) and the Institutional Mechanism for Ethics (Section IV). The preamble deals with the need and the purpose for the guidelines. It laid down the need to have a consensus from for the need to observe ethics in research and collectively evolve guidelines. It is required for the education and empowerment of researchers. Eventually a network of institutions can be formed to share experiences in solving dilemmas and implementation of guidelines. The principles include the Principle of Essentiality, Accountability and transparency, Totality of Responsibility among others. They were drawn up taking into consideration the broader principles of Non-maleficence, Beneficence, Autonomy, Confidentiality and Justice.

The guidelines are drawn from these principles. An attempt has been made to operationalise them in the form of guidelines. For instance elaborate guidelines have been drawn up for the principle of Privacy, Anonymity and Confidentiality. The Principle of Non-Exploitation can

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[2] Ghanshyam Shah, Lakshmi Lingam, V R Muraleedharan, Padma Prakash, Thelma Narayan, Ashok Dayalchand, Manisha Gupte, Sarojini Thakur, Geetanjali Misra, Radhika Chandiramani.
[3] The Research Secretariat comprised of Amar Jesani and Tejal Barai

be seen operationalised throughout the guidelines. It appears in the form of ethical guidelines dealing with rights of researchers themselves and protection of their autonomy, as well as participants or subjects of the study and rights of juniours and students. The guidelines themselves address a very wide variety of ethical issues, such as the integrity of researchers, informed consent, ethical issues associated in relations with juniors and students, authorship credit among many others. Thus in effect, an attempt has been made to try and evolve ethical guidelines for all stages of research, from conception to publication of research.

An important feature of the guidelines, is that they are broad and general. The advantage is that it can be then applied to a wide variety of research issues and stages. Institutions, organisations and individual researchers can evolve specific guidelines to suit their research needs, keeping intact the spirit of the draft.

The Plenary address was given by Dr. Ghanshyam Shah and touched[4] various issues that are prevalent in social sciences research today. Applied research is confined to microspecific situations. This leaves very little scope for the understanding of the complexities of the society. Policy research, today, implies that it is "tailor made" to serve the priorities and the policies of the government.

Accountability and commitment to the growth of knowledge and to the needs of the participants is fast declining. Scarcity of resources compels researchers to take up sponsored projects. The objectives and methodology are laid down by the funding agencies, often to fulfil their short term needs. Moreover, funding agencies often restrict dissemination of findings.

Dr. Shah acknowledged that no guidelines can cope with the social dynamics related to space to time and may not be able to capture all complexities. It could even carry with it the possibility of hampering research to a certain extent. However, the alternative is thus to accept violations of autonomy and freedom of a large population, including the researcher, the participants and those that might eventually get affected by the study. Where the credibility of social sciences is at stake, a code of ethics is thus not only desirable, but also very essential.

The participants of the meeting were divided into three groups each group discussion all the sections. A number of discussions were held and suggestions and recommendations given. For instance accountability should be seen in terms of professional, social as well as financial. Researchers should have a right to opt out of an unethical research. Further, relevance of research should be laid down firmly and be based on prioritization rather than exclusion.

It was felt that though ensuring privacy at the time of data collection though a difficult in our country, was very essential and cannot be excluded from any ethical guidelines. Researchers should get all possible help required by the participants revealed during research. Where it is found that any lacunae are revealed, for instance problems with access to health care, such information should also be given to policy makers. This should all be covered under the purview of "right to get help" of the draft guidelines.

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[4] Dr. Ghanshyam Shah had given the plenary address at the National Meeting. This part of the section on "The Meeting" paper is drawn from that address.

Some of the participants of the meeting strongly felt that the needs and ethical issues associated in research involving the mentally ill needs to addresses separately. Moreover, proxy consent was found unacceptable.

Consent from parents should not be required for children above the age of 14 years. Children below the age of 14 years should have the right to veto the consent given by parents.

Results of research should be shared with the participants of the study. Authorship credit should also take into consideration the contribution made in terms of ideas and solving of problems and actual research.

The Section IV, Institutional Mechanism of ethics should be made participatory within organisations in terms of designing policies, scope, role and composition. It could also be made independent of the guidelines.

The guidelines, it was felt, were broad enough to be applied and adopted to various situations.

Conclusion
One of its main objectives of the meeting was to gain a consensus among a wide community of researchers from across the country for the need for observance of ethics in research and to collectively evolve guidelines for research, drawing from the draft that was presented. The meeting was successful in doing so.

The committee and the research secretariat would meet and finalize the guidelines, incorporating the suggestions received at the National Meeting. They are to be disseminated widely. The entire effort together with background papers is to be brought out as a volume. Efforts need to be made to get them accepted by funding agencies and other institutions and organisations.

The meeting can thus be seen as the beginning of an effort of researchers from across the country to forward the issue and practice of ethics in research. It also filled a lacuna, something to guide research and something to fall back on, where nothing existed, (Shah, 2000), specific to our needs, evolved by our own researchers.

(The Committee and the Research secretariat met and have finalised the guidelines. For a copy of the document, write to Tejal Barai at cehat@vsnl.com)

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