



Research Article

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## Knowledge and Practice of Ethical Consideration for Quality of Research Skills among Graduate Students of Universities in Cross River State, Nigeria

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### Abstract

*This study is an assessment of knowledge and practice of ethical consideration for literacy in research among graduate students of the two Universities in Cross River State, Nigeria. The first was 214 graduate students' who had defended proposals, while the second was 120 post field Theses. The two samples were selected through accidental technique from a population of 713 graduate students of the University of Calabar and the Cross River University of Technology who have at least defended their Thesis proposals. Results of the study indicate that only 47.31% of the students knew what ethical consideration meant in research with 83.52% of them emphasising confidentiality in their instruments. Only 33.86% and 26.17% emphasised voluntary participation and anonymity respectively. The study recommends the inclusion of ethical issues in university course outlines for research methods in education.*

**Keywords:** Ethical, consideration, safety, voluntary, participation, confidentiality, anonymity

### 1. Introduction

Generally, research is an exercise that involves the test of conscience. People involved in research are supposed to be unbiased and ready to follow laid down principles to arrive at conclusions about the phenomena being investigated. Research involves systematic enquiry into phenomena to give genuine answers to propositions that could serve as theories over time. To do this requires due processes, one of which is ethical consideration. Ethics are the norms or standards for conduct that distinguish between right and wrong. Ethics help to determine the difference between acceptable and unacceptable behaviours.

Ethical consideration in research involves the giving of informed consent to intending subjects of a research by ensuring that participants (the subjects) are given the privilege of accepting willingly or rejecting to take part in the research. It also involves ensuring that beneficiaries won't harm the participants, and giving respect for confidentiality and privacy for participants. Little research has been carried out in this area despite its importance in research, with a significant amount of the scanty research being in clinical medicine.

Ajuwon and Kass (2008) in their study on "outcome of a research ethics training workshop

among clinicians and scientists in a Nigerian University” discovered that “on knowledge of guidelines or regulations on research ethics, 42% correctly indicated knowledge of the presence of such guidelines.” A follow-up study revealed that participants retained much of the knowledge acquired from the workshop after one month. The researchers concluded that “the training improved participants’ knowledge of principles of research ethics, international guidelines and regulations and operations.” The study thus discovered that this outcome has provided opportunity for research ethics capacity development among academic staff in developing countries.

Research ethics encompasses the principles, standards, norms and guidelines that regulate scientific inquiry. Jeffers (2002) identified that “the primary role of ethics in health research is to protect the rights of integrity and safety of research participants.”

Another important aspect of ethical consideration in research, which has generated concerns at various educational institutions, is plagiarism. Jerome, Christopher and Osinulu (2010), examined the awareness and perception of plagiarism among postgraduate students in selected universities in Ogun State, Nigeria. The study discovered that “there was average level of awareness of plagiarism among graduate students, and a significant relationship between awareness and perception of plagiarism, implying that as awareness increases, perception of plagiarism also improves.”

From the forgoing it could be said that plagiarism is encountered during research undertaking and anybody can be indicted if awareness of knowledge of its unethical nature is lacking. For example Powell (2012) describes plagiarism as academic malpractice and as a breach of academic integrity. In like vein, Orim, Borg and Awala-Ale (2013) stressed that “most plagiarism cases occurred as a result of lack of awareness and proper skills on what actually constitutes plagiarism. In all, whether intentional, unintentional or accidental non ethical behaviour in research is considered as poor practice.

Practice entails doing or involvement, it means carrying out activities or certain behaviours as a result of knowledge in the case of seeking consent or assent from respondents or participants in a study. It behoves on the researcher to seek and obtain either verbal or written consent. The researcher does this because of the knowledge he or she has about breaching the right of prospective participants in his or her study. According to National Health and Medical Research councils Guideline (NHMRG), any research which intrudes into the private space of the individual, without that persons consent breaches those people’s rights.

For research in an organization, consent obtained from the Personnel Administrator in an organization, the Principal of a school, as the case may be, covers the consent of each person participating in the research. Also, there are many situations in which the information that is being sought in a study is not private; this is because public actions can be publicly observed. According to Social Research Association (SRA, 2003), “scientific research is characterized by those principles that guide scientific morality with regard to conduct that is scientifically wrong or right.” The most fundamental ethical principle for any scientific study is to protect participants and those who may be affected by the research. Participants need to be protected, for example, from legal prosecution for past criminal activities or invasion of their privacy. Hence appropriate practice demands that a study gives due consideration to general research ethics. This implies that permission to conduct the research with the target population must be sought from and granted by authorities of the relevant institutions as well as individual participants.

Practically, obtaining consent involves informing the subject about his or her rights, the purpose of the study, the procedures to be undergone, the potential risks, benefits of participation and alternative treatment available, if any (Nijawan, Janodia, Mindakrishna, Bhat, Blary, Udupar and Musmader, 2013). Informed consent and confidentiality of the data are required, not only for clinical trials, but as essential prerequisite in research undertaking. Some methods for keeping data confidential include: using routine precautions such as substituting codes for participants identifiers, storing data in locked cabinets, error inoculation, data encryption and use of honest brokers to note in addition, is that the methods selected would depend on the nature of the information collected and potential risk to participants.

Being anonymous requires that researchers conceal identities of their respondents. This requires the use of pseudonyms, changing names of participants to obscure resemblance, use of historical pictures where those pictures are traceable to certain races, etc. It is however important to note that being anonymous means that participants would be denied the opportunity to be acknowledged directly of the help they rendered since fictitious names were given (Geoff, 2006)

Contrary view to ethical consideration practice given by Olsen, Verley, Santos and Sailas (2004) is that "there may be ethical objections to the pursuit of informed consent for a study. There are contexts in which the process of research is guided by other ethical considerations." For example public activities, the role of government, criminal activities and criticism in the public interest may cause reliance on the consent of research participants to be morally wrong in those instances.

This study is a ground breaking attempt in the area of educational research where the present researchers have noticed a gap. Many research instruments used by education students fail to make adequate provision for informed consent suggesting that subjects used for such studies are most often used against the wishes.

## 2. Research Questions

The following two research questions guided the study:

- i. What is the level of students' knowledge about ethical consideration in research?
- ii. To what extent did graduate students emphasise confidentiality, voluntary participation, and anonymity of participants in their instruments used for data collection?

## 3. Methodology

The research area was Calabar, the capital city of Cross River State in Nigeria. Graduate Students in the Faculties of Education of the University of Calabar (UNICAL), and the Calabar campus of the Cross River University of Technology (CRUTECH) formed the study population. As at the time of this research the population of this group of students stood at 713, records of which were made available to the researchers by the offices of the Chairmen of faculty graduate boards of the different Universities. There were 584 and 129 graduate students in UNICAL and CRUTECH respectively. Two sets of samples were selected for the study through accidental sampling technique. The first was made up of 214 students (30% of the population), while the second was made up of 120 defended Post-field Theses. The students were verbally asked to say whether or not they have heard of ethical consideration and if they know what it meant in research. Their responses were recorded by the researchers. Instruments used in defended Theses were probed by the researchers to distinguish between those whose instruments emphasised ethical consideration and those whose instruments did not.

## 4. Results

### 4.1 Research question one

What is the level of students' knowledge about ethical consideration in research?

To answer this question, data that emanated from the oral interview were used. Subjects who defined confidentiality, voluntary participation, and anonymity correctly were marked 'Yes', while those who could not were marked 'No'. Accordingly too, subjects who said they have heard of the concepts in the past were marked 'Yes', while their counterparts who said they have never heard of the concepts were marked 'No'. Data collected were analysed using simple percentages and presented in Table 1.

**Table 1:** Summary of simple percentages for students’ knowledge of ethical consideration in research

S/N	Items	Percentage		Remark
		Yes	No	
1	Have students ever heard of the following ethical considerations in research?			
	Confidentiality	69.27	30.73	Above Average
	Voluntary Participation	41.15	58.85	Below Average
	Anonymity	50.81	49.19	Above Average
	Total	53.74	46.26	Above Average
2	Do the students know the meaning of the following ethical considerations in research?			
	Confidentiality	65.11	34.89	Above Average
	Voluntary Participation	32.64	67.36	Below Average
	Anonymity	44.18	55.82	Below Average
	Total	47.31	52.69	Below Average

Results in Table 1 show that the percentage of graduate students who have heard about ethical consideration in research was 53.74%. At individual consideration, the results show that 69.27% of the students admit that they have heard of confidentiality in research, 41.15% admit they have heard of voluntary participation and 53.74% said they have heard of anonymity. The results show that, in total consideration, up to 46.26% of the students have never heard of one or more of the concepts of ethical consideration in research. The results show that only 47.31% of the students knew what ethical consideration in research meant, while up to 52.69% of them did not know what the concept meant. Based on these results it was concluded that the number of students who have heard the concept 'ethical consideration was above average, while the number that know the meaning of the concept was below average.

This finding replicates those Powell (2012) and Orim et al (2013) who described plagiarism, as an ethical issue in research, to be capable of being an indictment. Individually, the two studies admitted that most plagiarism cases occurred as a result of lack of awareness and proper skills, but Orim et al (2013) found that most Nigerian post graduate students are not aware of what actually constitutes plagiarism (unethical issues). The lack of awareness or knowledge of simple ethical practices like confidentiality, voluntary participation, and anonymity in 21<sup>st</sup> century research works is worrisome. It leaves experts in doubt that most research findings may be misleading and unacceptable. Graduate students who claim having not heard of ethical consideration in research sends no other signal to the world of academics than the fact that the concept wasn't introduced to them during course work.

#### 4.2 Research question two

To what extent did graduate students emphasise confidentiality, voluntary participation, and anonymity of participants in their instruments used for data collection?

To answer this research question, instruments found in defended Theses of the faculties of Education were used to tick the concept (s) of ethical consideration emphasised. Data collected were analysed using simple percentages. The results are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2:** Summary of simple percentages for emphasis of ethical consideration in research

S/N	Variable	Percentage Yes	Percentage No	Remark
1	Confidentiality	83.52	16.48	Above Average
2	Voluntary Participation	33.86	66.14	Below Average
3	Anonymity	26.17	73.83	Below Average
4	Total	47.85	52.15	Below Average

Results in Table 2 show that 83.52% of graduate students in the sample emphasised strict confidentiality in their instruments while 16.48 of them did not include the concept in their instruments. The results also show that 33.86% of the students sought voluntary participation of subjects, while 66.14% of them did not. As low as 26.17% of the subjects emphasised anonymity of respondents in their instruments, up to 73.83% of them asked for the identity of the respondents. Results on total ethical consideration showed that 47.85% of the Theses emphasised the concept, while 52.15% of them did not. Based on these results the study concludes that the number of graduate students in the study area who give ethical considerations in their research is below average.

These findings are in consonance with that of Social Research Association (SRC, 2003) that "scientific research is characterised by those principles that guide scientific morality with regards to conduct that is scientifically wrong or right one of which, is to protect participants and those who may be affected by the research." For any research to meet such standard, the researcher (s) must seek permission to conduct the research with the group from the relevant authority and the individual participants. In education, most researches are carried out on students and pupils who are minors that may not understand the implication of items of the instruments administered on them. It is the right of such members of a sample to get approval of their parents/guardians before participating in certain research. Studies have shown however that a good percentage of completed research works in Cross River State, and in other places reported in literature, never observed some very important ethical processes.

## 5. Conclusion and Implication for Quality Research Skills

Ethical consideration is the adherence to the norms or standards for conduct that distinguish between the right and wrong thing to do in research. The study considered three ethical issues, namely; confidentiality, voluntary participation, and anonymity of participants. The study concludes that even though higher than average number of the sample have heard about ethical factors in research, a very slim percentage of them know its meaning and actually include them in their data collection instruments. These results have very important implications for research in Nigeria in particular and Africa in general. The findings imply that, over the years, ethics in research have not been adequately practiced by graduate students. This may have resulted in retention of information by participants (Ajuwon & Kass, 2008). Participants who feel unprotected from legal prosecution for past criminal prosecution or for giving information that is classified may feel that the researcher is invading his/her privacy and thus withhold relevant information that would have made the research findings robust. The importance of this study to researchers, academic institutions and the public at large has warranted the following recommendations:

- i. Institutions should entrench ethical consideration in their course outlines for research methods in education.
- ii. Graduate students should be made to attend seminars, workshops and conference where topical issues such as the legal implications of violating ethical norms in research are discussed.
- iii. Graduate Theses that fail to include ethical considerations should be rejected by graduate schools.
- iv. Stringent academic penalties, other than rejection of Theses, should be meted on defaulters.

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