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ETHICAL CREDIBILITY OF SCIENTISTS IN SOCIAL RESEARCH

Abstract: In the paper we open the question of the correlation of scientific researchers and the ethical credibility of this engagement. The purpose of this paper is to point out to the significance of the connection between the scientific, especially social researches and the ethical postulates which we use to regulate the way in which they operate. The author refers to cases from the research practice pointing out to the presence of antagonism between the scientific ambitions and the ethical principles as well as to the necessity of its overcoming through harmonization of the scientific interest with the interest of the individual and the community. In the paper we conclude that only the research, which is conducted in accordance with “the ethic of concern” and with the respect of the ethical regulation procedure, can preserve the academic integrity of the researcher and make possible reliable research results.

Key words: Science, social research, academic integrity, ethical standards.

1. Introduction

For scientists in the field of social sciences and humanities it was, until recently, redundant to deal with issues of the ethics of their scientific activities, because the starting viewpoint was that they exclude the possibility of violating basic ethical postulates. Unfortunately, this type of moral correctness was not always present, and a need for a constitution of research ethics became apparent. Its emergence was initiated by the discovery of horrendous medical experiments and genetic research in Nazi Germany, which was the reason for adopting the Nuremberg Code immediately after the end of the Second World War (1947), and subsequently the Declaration of Helsinki of the World Health Organization in 1964 and the Belmont Report in 1979, which formed the ethical foundation for biomedical and social research. Since then the development of ethical regulations is being confirmed through issued proclamations, codes, declarations and principles of ethical conduct in research involving humans. The basic dilemma in the relationship between science and ethics is – whether the codes of ethics are essential regulators of scientific activities? Do they hinder the freedom of scientists in research or is their role to keep the researcher within the framework of socially acceptable conduct and ensure the fulfilment of “socially desirable objectives” (Schrader - Frechette, 1994)? To what extent does ethics, with its task of regulating the moral correctness of scientists, gain a new meaning which emerges from the domain of its basic conceptual definition and discursive function to critically analyse and reflect moral phenomena and forms of moral practice?

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It is undoubtable that contemporary scientific knowledge, especially that which belongs to genetic sciences, opens up the possibility of major changes that could, through different experimentation on the human species, lead to genetic modifications with unforeseeable consequences (Petrovic, 2014, 118). This is why the establishment of ethical committees with experts from different fields has become fully justified in recent decades. But, are such ethical regulatory bodies needed in the humanities and in social research, especially if we know that the fundamental task of any research in this field is to contribute to the common human good? If the dominant interest and goal of social research is to find ways to create a better world, then it is only natural that this implies the ethics of researchers and their high awareness of the obligation to respect moral principles.

2. Ethical regulation of the moral conduct of scientific researchers

Due to the possibility of abuse and for protection from ethical transgressions in scientific research, a growing number of institutions are, with an aim to protect their own integrity, interested to introduce the ethical supervision of researchers, i.e. to adopt a procedure for a self-regulation of their moral conduct. This is all the more necessary, if a downtrend in moral credibility is taken into account, placing the legitimacy of anyone's individual or institutional authority into question. In such circumstances the purpose of ethical regulators would be to: ensure the preservation of ethical integrity of scientists and institutions; provide a greater degree of objectivity to research itself and to its results; provide a more protected status to respondents, through their informed consent, the confidentiality of provided information, safety, good faith, familiarity with research results and the well-being of the wider community (Peach, 1995).

To understand the regulatory status of ethics it is necessary to consider different approaches to this field. In its original, philosophical discourse, ethics meant the manner of understanding and questioning of the moral life. In the form of meta-ethics, it seeks to establish parameters on which it could base an objective assessment of right and wrong conduct through the ontological differentiation between good and evil. As a normative ethics it suggests the criteria which should guide us in certain situations, when we are making decisions or assessing behaviour. The teleological form of ethics has, at its core, the purpose which should ultimately be achieved, and which needs to be something good (Aristotle, 2013). In contrast to the approach which focuses on the result, which is all the better if it befits the set goal, deontological ethics is oriented towards action that should be based on and driven by duty as a measure of reason (Kant, 2003). In this sense, action should not be initiated by its consequence but by a moral obligation to do that which is in accordance with the law of the mind and human dignity. Similar to this approach is the principle-normative approach, which is based on respecting the established ethical principles. This view is not based on the application of principles defined in such a way that experience recognizes and implements them immediately. On the contrary, the arguments that it contains are too general to be used to reach solutions by their direct application, but they instead help in reviewing situations and formulating regulations which are applicable to a given case from everyday practice and to solving specific ethical dilemmas (Thacher, 2004, 274). However, a latent danger of relativisation is implied in normative ethics, which is why even the general moral principle of "do no harm" may have a different meaning in different societies if it is placed in a social context of interpretation. This does not mean that the categories of good and evil should be placed in the established concept of meaning, without the possibility of redefining them on the basis of critical observation and the discovery of deeper dimensions of their ontological

nature. Such knowledge does not call into question the universal ethical values, but the manner of their conception and implementation in delicate situations when it is necessary to make choices and decisions.

The main function of the code of research ethics adopted by ethical bodies in scientific institutions is to protect the integrity of scientists and institutions. However, the question is whether this is the best system of protection and whether the emphasis should be placed on regulation and its binding character or on the moral character of scientific researchers? If only that behaviour which arises as an expression of genuine thoughts in the heart (Democritus) represents the authentic good, or if the humane relationship towards man implies that a goal, and not a means (Kant), is always seen in his humanity, then “the most reliable protection of research participants should not be sought in institutional regulations but in a conscientious, compassionate and responsible researcher” (Beauchamp & Childress, 2001,28). In order to achieve this it is necessary that the education of scientists includes the cultivation of their moral potential. That would enrich research practice with virtue as a “bearing moral principle of the ethics of care”, which would allow for the preservation of balance between scientific and ethical reasons of research and which would not allow scientific interests to collide with social interests or personal interests to prevail over common ones. In this sense the ethics of virtue is the best internal regulator of research ethics, while a code of ethics is the best compensatory mechanism for the protection of ethical correctness.

Prior to adopting ethical regulations in biomedical research², it was common for the interaction between researchers and participants to be based on trust and not on being informed, because the starting point was that the researcher is, in all conditions, humanely oriented and that he will not harm the participant. Such a relationship is formalized by specific types of contracts only in certain professional organizations such as the American Psychological Association, 1938, which prepared the space for legal regulation of ethical practice (Adair, 2001).

One of the basic principles of research ethics is the *informed consent* which obliges the researcher to obtain consent from the participants, for participating in the research, based on familiarizing the participants with the nature of the research, its purpose, methods, requirements, risks, difficulties, results and distribution. The consent must not be based on deception, manipulation or coercion, but on autonomy and voluntariness (Israel & Hey, 2012, 96). In order for the consent to be a result of a free choice of potential respondents, they must possess a level of knowledge which can provide them with an understanding of the offered content of information provided by the researcher, on all aspects of the research. One of the important aspects are the stages of research. A scientist is obliged to familiarize respondents with all of the stages of the research before their consent. While doing so he has two options, to have the respondents declare their consent in stages or to have them give their consent for all stages in advance. Two situations which are limiting for the research or the respondent may occur in both of these cases. If the respondents declare consent partially, in stages, they can cease further cooperation for some reason and thus not allow the researcher to complete the initiated research. On the other hand, if they declare consent for

²The National Committee for Bioethics of the Commission for Cooperation with UNESCO of the Republic of Serbia, based in SANU, was founded on October 31, 2003. Its task is to promote the view on ethical and legal content emanating from research of the science of life, and to give impetus to the exchange of ideas and information, primarily through education in the field of basic sciences, particularly genetics and biomedicine.

the participation in the entire research at the very beginning, they might feel manipulated and cheated on if they were not presented, in a timely manner, with the differences between all stages of the research, as well as with the delicate demands that imply a higher risk and thus caution.

Depending on the circumstances, which can sometimes be more complex, it is necessary to periodically raise the issue of harmonizing the working conditions even during individual stages of the research, in order to further consolidate trust. It can also be preserved by specific provisions which can be listed in a written contract, in compliance with the laws on the protection of privacy and information, which oblige the researcher to protect confidential information and even destroy it after the completion of the project. This is a way for researchers to not only fulfil their obligations towards participants, but also to steer clear of potential pressures they may endure by government or judiciary authorities.

The most widely spread form of informed consent in research practice implies a questionnaire that begins with a written notice about the research topic, carrier, the purpose of information which is to be obtained and a notification that the questionnaire will be administered anonymously. Very often, a written consent with a detailed list of elements of all aspects of the research, particularly those related to a possible risk and to protection against it, is absent. Of course, not all social research carries the same level of risk. There are those that are completely safe, that exclude any danger or reduce it to a minimum, and that ultimately carry a great potential of benefits that could belong to the community, be it a family, school, sports, religious or some other community. These are studies that reveal and perceive disruptive factors that affect the functioning and development of socially important subjects or activities. In such studies, there is a mutual responsibility to finalize the research in order to use the results not only for scientific purposes, but also to improve the quality of life and work of the research participants themselves.

In contrast to these studies, scientists are also conducting those which are related to criminal behaviour, violence, murders; drugs, people and gun trafficking, environmental pollution, destruction of rare animal species. When they wish to obtain information from individuals or groups, direct participants in some activities, they must do so by taking the first step, by initiating cooperation with a guarantee of complete trust. Great ethical responsibility for any negative consequences that the research participant might endure lies in the hands of the researcher who initiated the mutual action and who was allowed to intrude on someone's privacy. One of the main conditions that the researcher must fulfil in relation to the person who is providing information is the protection of their identity which implies the concealment of all personal information. However, researchers are presented not only with the issue of their sincere determination to preserve the relationship of trust, but also with the manner in which they will protect the obtained information in all stages of the research, from its collection, through the processes of analysis, publication and archiving.

Bioethicists, Beauchamp and Childress consider that there are three arguments that can justify the maintaining of a relationship of trust which is based on consequences, rights and loyalty (2001). First, the researcher must take care of the fact that the degree of trust with which the participant agrees to provide sensitive information depends on expected results. If the informers are given more credible assurances about the anonymity of their statements, without any risk of exposing their personality, they will, in turn, be more open when providing information. Otherwise it may happen that, even though they agreed to an interaction, given

the fear that their personal information might be exposed and that thus they might bear certain consequences, they may become more restrained in providing information, which could decrease the validity of provided information. The right to privacy which is based on the principle of respecting personal autonomy is also an important reason for establishing and maintaining trust. An individual has the right to, in the interest of protecting their own integrity, decide whether they will reveal any knowledge or restrict access to it, and the researcher is obliged to respect this right. Trust may also be preserved through the loyalty of the researchers, i.e. through the fulfilment of promises that were given prior to the consent of participants. However, it should be noted that research subjects do not always insist on the necessity of discretion in terms of preserving their privacy or disclosing the provided information. On the contrary, sometimes they reveal information on their actions expecting appropriate recognition for them. On the other hand, researchers themselves should not always offer anonymity to respondents, particularly when it comes to people who are on such social positions that it would be neither correct nor acceptable not to name them, if necessary. Depending on what is being investigated, it is sometimes enough to offer an official letter to potential respondents, in addition to the test, with assurance that the information that they provide will be used for scientific purposes only and that they, as respondents, will remain anonymous.

Caution here implies the use of methodological and legal measures. The first are related to the elimination of all information that might refer to a specific person or community. In order for their identity to remain unknown the naming of people who are participating in the research is avoided; personal, social, educational, religious, and geographical and other information, which could be used as an identifier, is not provided (Hancock, 2001). In quantitative research even the practice of removing information that contains individual specificities can be compromised by technological and methodological possibilities of crossing different data (Israel and Hay, 2006). Researchers are to show preparedness and foresight particularly in the stage of preparing manuscripts for publication when it is necessary for them to carry out additional checks in order to make sure that the identities of people who agreed to provide them with confidential information remain concealed.

In addition to methodological measures of protection, scientists can also count on legal protection, which they can provide through the legal framework and through the harmonization of confidentiality with the demands of the ethics committee of the institution which is the carrier of the research. This type of protection can be very important for researchers in such conditions when a court or government authority requests that they disclose information. Experience of researches shows that respondents in projects, who are in the roles of informers, expect a higher level of protection the more the topics on which they are providing information are sensitive. Also, their level of openness, i.e. the availability of information, is proportional to the level of expected confidentiality. In the end, it is the responsibility of scientists to decide whether and to what extent they will harmonize their legal and moral duties in terms of protecting the interests of participants in the project. Those who guarantee absolute confidentiality, when it represents a prerequisite for the establishment of cooperation with respondents and for obtaining relevant information, are obliged to respect such guarantees. Court practice is familiar with even such cases when scientists were convicted to prison sentences for not wanting to break the promise of protection even under the threat of losing their freedom.

Scientists and institutions are in danger when a court process on certain forms of criminal actions, that are known to have been the subject of scientific research, is initiated. In such situations, if the agreed protection exceeds the legal framework, a researcher could break the relationship of confidentiality and gain appropriate legal protection while doing so, if the published information is of public interest. However, such an attitude of scientists raises an ethical question of whether it is morally more acceptable for the scientists to never, under any circumstances, disclose information or for them to do so if this would mean that a third party or community will be protected from harm. Should information on child abuse, assisted murders, drug use, environmental pollution and other forms of criminal activity be kept a secret? Perhaps the answer to this question might provide a mode of protection which implies a limited protection of confidentiality with which the potential participant in the research would be familiarized with. But, limited guarantees also limit the reliability of research and hence the relevance of results. If confidentiality is the basic condition for the acceptance of cooperation and provision of important information, which are socially valuable, then the benefit of their disclosure would definitely be less than the damage caused by refusal of cooperation. Scientists, who are aware that scientific and social interests can sometimes become conflicted, usually offer limited confidentiality, considering that information, whose concealment could jeopardize the safety of people or institutions, should be disclosed (Annas, J. 2005).

The method of research conducted by scientists should be such that it reduces the risk of harm and increases the possibility of achieving well-being, and the goal of the research should not stop at discovering the scientific truth, but it should also aim towards its use in purposes which are beneficial for the community. For example, researching violence and abuse in families, in addition to the fact that it implies the protection of information and research subjects, should, in its final outcome, contribute to providing emotional, social and economic protection to the victims, provide educational programs and make information accessible to institutions relevant for these issues, form a wide network of support, launch public debates and, if necessary, make changes in legislation and thus, through overall engagement, contribute to the solution of this problem.

When we discuss the harmfulness and usefulness of research, the moral obligation of researchers is to protect not only the research participants from harm, but also other researchers. In this context, they should demonstrate intellectual integrity and integrity of values and beware of the various forms of academic abuses such as disrespect for the intellectual property of others, its appropriation and alienation, inventing and planting false information and results, manipulating with research materials and the like. In the Law on Scientific Research of the Republic of Serbia (Art. 5) the ethics of scientific research is one of the basic principles of scientific research "which should be conducted in accordance with the principles of good scientific practice and the accountability of the scientists for the consequences of their work. Its essential feature is the freedom of creativity reflected in the freedom of scientific action, freedom of choice when it comes to approved scientific research methods, freedom of publication and presentation of scientific results as well as in the freedom of choice when it comes to methods of interpretation of scientific research achievements. Scientific activity is free and not subject to any restrictions except those resulting from compliance with the standards of science and ethics in scientific research."³ In this regard, the jurisdiction of the National Committee on Ethics, which can sanction

³The Law on Scientific Research of the Republic of Serbia ("Official Gazette of RS", 112-2015)

researchers who have broken the code of ethics of scientific research, not only by public condemnation, but also by revoking academic titles, was expanded.

In terms of research results, there are researchers who conduct research in order to use the obtained results, which are made available only to the institution which is the carrier or the funder of services, for the purpose of improving economic factors, making business operations more efficient and achieving higher profits. Another form of utilizing the results is using them for scientific purposes, which is reduced to publishing them in prestigious scientific journals, making them available to the wider scientific community and thus potentially affecting the continuity of a comprehensive scientific development of certain ideas and projects, but at the same time the absence of placing and connecting the results with social structures, leaves their realization and potential usefulness outside of practical reach. There are also examples of egotistical attitudes of scientists when they publish the research results in reference publications, while thinking solely about their personal interest and what they can achieve in their professional careers, which is contrary to research ethics.

3. Conclusion

Research ethics originated from the need of researchers to solve ethical dilemmas which they face, primarily in addressing bioethical issues, in a morally justified and ethically founded manner. Traditional ethical knowledge proved to be a good theoretical basis for the differentiation of main axiological principles, but it was also not enough to solve some specific issues in a manner that will not, by the affirmation of one moral principle, hinder others. Of course, social research is not burdened by these types of issues which preclude the possibility of unambiguous answers and solutions, which is why the introduction of ethical regulations in the corpus of bioethical research raised the question of the justification of its application in social research as well. It turned out that, in some studies for which they gave their consent, that the participants were harmed mainly because of their insufficient familiarity with the course, procedure, duration and manner of utilizing research results. Experience has shown that, in certain studies, a correct relationship between the subjects and the researcher was also lacking, or that the confidentiality was violated. Therefore, there is a growing number of scientific institutions that aim to protect their academic credibility from being compromised by harmonizing their research with ethical regulations issued by the ethical committees of institutions that carry out research projects, and that are founded on the standards and codes of adopted Declarations and Reports on human rights issued by national and international organizations.

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