Ethical Issues and Concerns in Higher Education

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Professor Vaishna Narang retired as Professor of Linguistics from JNU after serving in different academic positions for nearly 45 years, as professor for 22 years. During this long tenure as an academic, apart from teaching MA, MPhil, PhD students, she supervised more than a hundred MPhil and PhD dissertations, conducted research projects sponsored by national and international organizations, and developed new courses in JNU in some of the current issues and themes in general and applied linguistics. Her main interests include general and applied linguistics, general and applied phonetics, learning and acquisition, language pedagogy, and language, mind, and brain studies, acoustic phonetics, application of phonetic studies in clinical studies of disorders of communication, forensic speech, and public domain of speech technology, ethics of research on human participants, and ethics of higher education.

These are the areas in which she has developed and taught new courses, has published extensively, supervised students research, and also conducted several research projects, promoted multidisciplinary, collaborative research in cognitive neuro linguistics and other related areas.

While in JNU she was instrumental in setting up Institutional Ethics Review Board (IERB) for research on human participants and was member secretary for more than 8 years before she retired in 2015. Similarly she also helped the university in setting up Linguistic Empowerment Cell which conducted courses and workshops in language for students from marginalized sections of the society within the university. She was the Chief Coordinator of LEC for more than 7 years before she retired in 2015. She can be contacted on <narang.vaishna@gmail.com>
During this long association with the university she contributed to academic administration as member of different bodies such as The University Court, Academic Council, as Dean of the School of Language, Literature and Culture studies, as Chairperson for the Centre for Linguistics and English, Centre for Linguistics, Special Centre for Sanskrit Studies. Currently she is a member and advisor in various ethics committees including Apollo Group of Hospitals at New Delhi, stem cell research ethics committee of the university of Delhi, EC for regular clinical/ biomedical research in the south campus of the university of Delhi.

Panjab University Alumni Association (PUAA): The Senate of Panjab University approved the formation of the Panjab University Alumni Association (PUAA) in the year 1969. However, the PUAA with the Vice-Chancellor as its President, and the Dean Alumni Relations as its Secretary, was formally inaugurated on 30th September 1972. The Department of Alumni Relations superintends the work of the PUAA and provides administrative support to it. Since its inception in 1882 at Lahore (now in Pakistan), Panjab University has a long tradition of pursuing excellence in teaching and research. After partition, the University continued in its present form under a fresh legislative enactment of October 1, 1947. In the finest global tradition of the reputed seats of learning, which cherish links with their former students for mutual pride and enrichment, Panjab University Senate decided to create a Department of Alumni Relations in March 1969. The major objectives of the Department are to: establish a link with the PU alumni and enroll them as members; establish liaison between Panjab University Alumni Association (PUAA) and similar other associations at the universities in the country and abroad; raise various endowment funds and award stipends out of it to the deserving students on need-cum-merit basis; institute and disburse scholarships, fellowships, medals, awards, etc. to the meritorious students of the university out of the corpus of the Association; impart identity to its members by issuing them with photo-identity cards; seek donations from alumni and potential donors for promoting various righteous activities of the Association; suggest ways and means for the participation of the Association in the working of the University; arrange get together of the alumni and social/cultural functions of the alumni; send birthday greeting cards to its members to impart personal touch and interaction with them; honour distinguished alumni of PU, who have brought national/global acclaim in their respective domains.
Research Promotion Cell aims at Promotion of quality research in Panjab University and Making Research a niche area in Panjab University. The Endeavour of Research Promotion Cell would be to Promote quality research in the all the disciplines; Disseminate information about research project grants; Organise training programme for capacity building of teachers for applying and conducting research projects; Facilitate sending of research proposals to research funding Organisations; Extend hassle free administrative support for completing the Research project and facilitate timely payment of fellowships to research scholars.
The lecture commenced with Prof. Singla, Dean(Research) thanking Prof. Vaishna Narang for gracing with her presence and Prof. Deepti Gupta, Dean (Alumni) for proving this fruitful opportunity to scholars. He reiterating the importance of unbiased and honest data computation and publication which can be achieved by being objective and upholding the integrity of research ethics.
Prof. Vaishna Narang stressed how the absence of any institutional mechanism for ethical research has hurt research regressively. She lamented how basic fundamentals like learning to read and write, to abstract and generalise, to arrive at conclusive principles and to enunciate them, to argue both sides of the same story, to express one’s arguments effectively and to respond to the counter argument have all allowed plagiarism to breed. One is devoid of the prowess to investigate, explore, experiment, to hypothesize, prudent selection of the experimental subject as well as learning how to choose the most ethical and effective approaches, methods. This further leads to abuse of Publication ethics and lack of cognitive empowerment. She stressed how this can be cured by indulging in creative writing which will only be possible if there is a thrust on Language studies, social sciences, arts and humanities.

She talked how overdependence on technology leads to students learning to find short cuts and ditching any assimilation of ideas. We have forgotten how to express ourselves correctly and effectively and hence in the name of literature review copy paste culture is rampant. i.e. copy from a book or from a fellow student, or just download from a website. Hence, overdependence on Google, for any kind of writing, from class assignment to term papers, or term examination, or writing your thesis or paper publication is highly deplorable. Thus, **Plagiarism is like plague, rampant at every level, from school to college to PhD.**

Education system, she asserted is in general failing to ensure linguistic and consequent cognitive empowerment. The techno-savvy generation of students is smarter in some ways i.e. short cuts in experimentation, quick in using apps and tools, statistical tools and large data files, numbers in general, automatization. But they are completely ignorant of how to treat their “subjects”.

Research is:

- collection of empirical facts
- data organization,
- analysis
- theories to explain the empirical facts.
- through models which are best suited for the kind of empirical facts you may have collected or
- for the theory/ies you may want to use to explain the data
- Choosing a topic
She further affirmed how Bioethics is more than a good/ moral/ ethical way of handling research. It takes into account good or bad, moral or immoral, ethical- unethical practices which depends on our instinctive / cultural perceptions. It is overly dependent on our culture specific values and norms and is heavily relies on Objectivity.

Through the example of the biosphere Prof. Vaishna Narang explained how it is a continuum of humans-animals-plants-environment- everything connected like a continuous chain of events, each one affecting the other. Ecosystems thrive on a delicate balance which must not be disturbed. One cannot remain to be oblivious to the use of plastics, non-bio-degradable materials, any emission causing pollution in Air-Water and other substances well as climate change due to the modern lifestyle. She cited the example of Mayapuri Incidence in many lives were lost because of the equipment having radioactive material being sold in the kabadi market as well as BT Bhindi, BT Brinjal and GM Rice and wheat controversy . She stressed how one should completely immerse oneself in ethical protocols before beginning a research, such as:
- Stringent bio-safety norms in case of research involving plants and animals.
- National Governance of Bio-safety norms in India [www.envfor.nic.in/divisions/.../biosafety](http://www.envfor.nic.in/divisions/.../biosafety)

Awareness of these bio-safety norms is imperative along with understanding that any such research should be done only and only when there is no other option. Similarly in case of animal subjects, one must glean through:

- Committee for the Purpose of Control and Supervision on Experiments on Animals (Cpcsea), Government of India [http://moef.nic.in/modules/divisions/cpcsea/](http://moef.nic.in/modules/divisions/cpcsea/)

Similarly where Medical and clinical research is concerned, advancement of technology and its applications in clinical research has led to stringent laws. One can’t ignore the Social/Psychological/Behavioural/Economic aspects. History of research on human subjects is morbidly fraudulent and hence Nazi-Nuremberg era, or Tuskegee experiments, or behavioral studies like those of Rene Spitz are deterrents which one must be vary of. Hence one cant remain oblivious to CIOMS, Nuffield Council, UNESCO, WHO, ICMR guidelines for India.

One cannot remain nonchalant to culture related diversity, plurality and subjectivity in our perceptions of ethics. Hence one must inculcate ‘acceptance/ tolerance’ for diversity and plurality, in order to be able to rise above culture specific perceptions of ethics is necessary

Dwelling on the historical perspective, the history of ethics is as old as the history of sickness and cure; ever since we’ve had healers. Since ancient times the practice of healers/ the practice of medicine has been associated with certain moral and religious behaviors, qualities and values, across cultures. As the medical science advanced into a proper profession (and became free from religious and theologian practices) the profession encountered different problems due to the changing relationship between doctors and their patients. This spilled into Philosophy which is the mother of all science. Discipline boundaries are all for pedagogic convenience only and hence can be crossed. Body and mind studies, are all equally invasive/ intrusive into another human space.
In 1954, (150 years after Percival’s first publication) Joseph Fletcher, for the first time a Professor of Moral Theology writes on “Morals and Medicine: the moral problems of the Patient’s Right to know the truth, Contraception, Artificial Insemination, Sterilization and Euthanasia” (Princeton Univ. Press). The title shows that the professor of Moral Theology addresses all these issues arising out of advancement of the science of Medicine in the middle of the 20th century. Through developments in Science and Technology and Medical Sciences we find new moral questions and new ethical challenges facing the science and society every day. e.g. Invention of Ventilators have led to the questions like moral obligations to sustain life by artificial means; and if one cannot should one remove ventilators. Similarly, the invention of dialysis machines led to the questions of who would get the facility if only a few, not all, could get it. The repercussions of Atomic bomb are still being regretted.

Humanity is ashamed of the World War –II experiments conducted on prisoners in Concentration Camps, Leading to Nuremberg Code 1947). Likewise the 1931 Tuskegee experiments leaving 400 black Americans untreated to find out the course of syphilis bacteria. The study was exposed only in 1968 and the National Commission for the protection of Human subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research (1974-78)- produced “Belmont Report”- codified ethical principals to protect human subjects of research with “Respect for Persons, Beneficence and Justice” recognized as the three fundamental principles to guide the researchers.

Policy formulation should involve lay persons and allowing public to become essential players in medical decision making, initiating discourses and debates, initiating a policy process as well as leading to legislation and regulatory mechanism. From 70’s onwards hundreds of IRB’s were formed and an internal, regulatory mechanism was evolved, guided by national and international norms in medical institutions across the world. In 1971, Georgetown University founded Kennedy Institute of Ethics, KIE, Founder Andre Hellegers defines bioethics as “the study of ethical dimensions of medicine and the biological sciences” National Commission for the Protection of Human subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, (1974-78) led to Belmont Report as statement of principles. Their main focus was on:

- Respect for persons entailing Informed Consent
- Beneficence in assessment of risk in relation to benefit
- Justice in equitable selection of subjects.
- The social implications of some of the major scientific developments, and technological innovations are immense such as the creation of atomic bomb by the physicists, or mapping of human genome by the geneticists, or invention of ventilators and dialysis machines as life saving technological devices. This necessitates the need for a number of international policy documents guiding the conduct of research on human subjects, Nuffield Council on Bioethics 1991, Helsinki Declaration of 2000 (clarifications in
2002, 2004), CIOMS 2002, and UNESCO document 2005, and specifically for India we have ICMR guidelines. Their essence remains same throughout, i.e. protecting the human subjects/ participants in research is the primary objective as stated in all of these policy documents. In order to do that, four principles are recognized as fundamental to Bioethics:

- **Beneficence,**
- **Non-maleficence,**
- **Autonomy,** and
- **Justice.**

Most imperative is the **Participant/ Subject autonomy** which is by far the most powerful principle in ethical decision making since it carries along the question of **human rights** as well as the question of **identity.** The **Identity and Individuality are varied such as:** Biological, social, psychological, cultural, moral/ instinctive, spiritual and must be duly respected. Law allows every individual to decide for her/ himself if he wants to become a participant in any research of trials. The individual has a **right to all information** relevant to her/ his decision. Fully informed consent is an ethical ideal which may never be seen in actual practice, be it research or medical practice. **Thus, Informed Consent is fundamental to Medical and Research Ethics.** It must be noted that consent is not an isolated event in time and space. It is a dynamic process that occurs throughout the relationship between the researchers and ‘their subjects’ (read ‘participants in their research’). Three types of consent are:

- Implied Consent
- Explicit Consent
- Informed Consent

The most basic premise of Ethical Research is **“Every human subject has the right to understand the nature, and the risk & benefits of the research, and agree or not agree to participate.”** This applies to every person, in every country, because it is an **“inherent right”** – a natural part of every person – it cannot be granted, or taken away; it can only be observed or not observed. It is the duty of physicians/ investigators to observe and uphold this right of our participants/ subjects. Thus Informed Consent:

… is not a piece of paper

… is not a signature

… is not just a formality
It is a **PROCESS** by which we…

- … **ENSURE** that our subject’s right to be informed, and right to consent to research, is protected.
- … **DOCUMENT** our efforts to protect the subject’s right to the satisfaction of independent observers.

The need of the hour is to devise a code of ethics which are universally applicable and accepted, shared responsibility of the researcher and the Institution where the Institution plays a Regulatory as well as an educative role. The range of permissions needed to research ought to be ethically inclined and Confidentiality of information given to you has to be adhered along with respect for individuality.

One must also take care that any Reporting is done without prejudice. Reporting the data correctly even if the results are not as per expectations/ hypotheses etc is the very pinnacle of research often preached but rarely practised. The reporting the data truthfully and precisely, unambiguously such that any other analysis of the data by any other team of researchers, leads to the same conclusion can only be achieved through integrity and honesty, both individual and institutional.

**PUBLICATION ETHICS** dictate that:

- True representation of results should be done.
- True representation of the Data must be achieved.
- Anonymisation of the data.
- Ethical considerations followed to be reported in methodology.
- Review of literature with absolutely correct references and appropriate citation.

Whereas **CODE OF ETHICS** dictate:

- Professional competence
- Integrity
- Professional and scientific responsibility
- Respect for people’s rights, dignity and diversity
- Social responsibility
- Guidelines/ code of publication ethics being followed; cited

Students must strive for

- Adherence to the highest possible **technical** standards as well as **ethical** standards
• Ensuring that you are competent in your research
• Linguistic and cognitive competence, both
• Correct representation of your own expertise.
• Correct representation of your goals and objectives
• Seeking informed consent- PIS and ICF
• No discrimination, exploitation or harassment
• Avoidance of conflicts of interest or their appearance
• Promise of confidentiality- anonymisation of the data
• Avoidance of plagiarism

It should be noted that Ethics of research doesn’t finish when the data collection is done. In fact, research involves both primary and secondary data, and a strict code of ethics must be followed when using both. In this context, one must seek to learn how not to plagiarise, to consciously seek to follow Copyright, Data sharing norms and practices as well as Patent issues, registration with appropriate bodies. In this regard COPE and other norms of publication ethics can provide the way forward.

The lecture ended on this note followed by an open house discussion where audience enthusiastically sought to clear their doubts and share their impressions.

This was followed by high tea after which one finally bid adieu to Professor Vaishna Narang as well the informative evening which had enthralled all.

Until next time…….