


Ethics in Qualitative Research: A Response-able Intra-action

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Abstract

This study attempts to re/configure the regulation of qualitative research by ethics systems practiced in Pakistan by contextualizing it in international practices. Barad's ethico-onto-epistemological approach facilitates a nuanced understanding of issues through its affirmative engagement with the other. While acknowledging the Pakistani scientific community's awareness of the importance of ethics, a need for separate ethics boards for qualitative research is impressed upon. Some problematic terms like 'research involving humans' and practices like using ready-made restrictive templates have to be re/thought. The study also suggests drawing upon creative literature like novels, dramas, etc. in research proposals as it can help convince committees about the importance of researching lesser-studied topics, especially those which are related to a region's or society's contentious past and present. Finally, the response-able role of university faculty associations is emphasized.

Introduction and Background to the Study

This study investigates the issue of ethics in qualitative research in Pakistan. Institutional review boards (IRBs) and research ethics committees (RECs) have assumed undeniable importance, albeit in varying degrees, in regulating scientific inquiry involving humans worldwide, including in Pakistan. Lately, these regulatory bodies have come under scrutiny from researchers who study perspectives ranging from questioning their inevitability to offering ways of improving the procedures. Historically, IRBs and RECs were put into place to regulate biomedical research. There were frequent instances of biomedical research causing grave harm to its human subjects, and, therefore, had to be regulated (see, for example, Schrag, 2010; Iphofen and Tolich, 2018).

The first legal code of research ethics was Nuremberg Code set up in 1945 to investigate malpractices of Nazi doctors during the WWII. It was followed by the 1964 Declaration of Helsinki. A corresponding scheme of ethics was developed and revised in the USA in 1953, 1966, 1971, and 1974, culminating in the 1979 Belmont Report. The guidelines were further refined, and since 1990, 3 principles have broadly regulated "the research of human subjects". Paraphrasing the principles as laid down by the Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects, the first is beneficence. This relates to minimizing harm and maximizing benefit to the participants in specific and the humanity at large. The second is about seeking participants' informed consent and protecting their data. The third regards the costs and benefits of research, which must be fairly distributed amongst all participants.

A significant issue bedeviling the IRBs and RECs is regarding the constitution and practices of these committees, which do not change across different disciplines or modes of research reasoning (inductive vs deductive). Most biomedical research is modelled on physical sciences, epidemiology, and statistics and relies on techniques like formulation and testing of hypotheses, statistical analyses, and generalizations (Santos, 1999). The type is quantitative and uses deductive reasoning. Furthermore, biomedical research is underpinned by a concept of stable reality. Research conducted in social sciences, on the other hand, is mostly qualitative and employs inductive reasoning. Qualitative research gathers non-numerical data through "in-depth interviews", "focus group discussions", "observations", "life-histories or biographies", and explores "people's experiences in detail" (Hennink et al., 2010, p. 8-9). The reality is coconstructed by the researcher and their participants. Regardless of the above fundamental differences between the qualitative and quantitative methods, in many cases, a committee empowered to oversee biomedical research regulates social science research, too, resulting in problems for the qualitative research

practitioners. This is not to suggest that quantitative researchers do not face any problems, but it is not the purview of the present study to investigate them as it is solely focused on ethics regulation in qualitative studies.

It needs to be pointed out that the pull between qualitative research studies and review boards have to do less with the basic definition of ethics and more with its operationalization, as shall be argued later on in this paper. All research endeavors to be ethical. Across the qualitative and quantitative divide, notwithstanding how ethics operates in each inquiry, there is little disagreement amongst scientists when it comes to the broad definition of ethics. As mentioned above, the three ethical principles laid down in the Belmont Report are elaborated by Sánchez et al (2023) for biomedical research, by Zhang (2020, p. 300) and Islam (2018) for qualitative social sciences research, and by Edwards & Mauthner (2012) for postqualitative research. Sanchez et al. (p.195) zeroes in on “the improvement of the human condition and the progress of society, always safeguarding the dignity and autonomy of human beings”; Zhang (2020, p. 378) defines research ethics as an interplay amongst “informed consent, power relations, and confidentiality”. Islam (2018, p. 2) points towards safeguarding “the rights, well-being, and confidentiality of participants as well [promoting] honesty and transparency”. Edwards and Mauthner (2012, p. 14), working in new materialism (a post-qualitative inquiry), take ethics in the context of “morality of human conduct,” which focuses on “the moral deliberation, choice and accountability on the part of the researcher throughout the research process”. It is clear that the problem lies not in deciding which disciplinary methods are more ethically valid and can be applied across disciplines but in whether it is feasible to apply one standard regardless of the different disciplinary needs. Moreover, it would not be remiss to claim that “a ‘one size fits all’ approach to ethical review” (Dawson, 2006, p. 114) involving human subjects is unethical and an instance of epistemic injustice.

The above, coupled with ethics as practiced in different regions of the world with their unique demands, further complicates the process and requires a contextualized and nuanced perspective. The Pakistani scientific community, which aspires to be an active part of the international scientific culture, has set up research ethics committees (RECs) for regulating research that “involves the participation of human subjects or data involved with identifiable human subjects” (Rasheed, p.2, 2018). Most of these committees follow the Western notion of biomedical research-based ethics. For example, ethics followed by review boards at premier Pakistani educational institutions, Lahore University of Management Sciences (LUMS) and Pakistan Institute of Development Economics (PIEDS) do not differ much from the Western concept of ethics. While many Pakistani universities and institutions have one board regulating all disciplines, some universities, like the Agha Khan University (Ethics Review Committee for Social Sciences, Humanities and Arts, 2024) and anonymized (anonymized) do acknowledge that a separate committee regulates ethics in social sciences although the procedure either mirrors the quantitative research (Agha Khan) or it is not laid out in clear terms (anonymized). A recent study carried out by Asif et al. (2023, p. 1677) on research committees in Pakistan points out that review ethical boards “remain unregulated as they are currently not registered or accredited by a competent national-level authority”. It also notes that “most members of such committees are not formally trained to implement the mandate and internal and external pressures hinder the independent decision-making of such committees”.

While it is generally accepted that RECs need to reinvent themselves everywhere as far as qualitative research is concerned, in Pakistan, the matter assumes an urgency for research studies that attempt to investigate issues that may not be perceived as politically correct by all. Many topics are considered sensitive by Pakistani society and the corresponding local governmental authorities. For example, in most areas across the country, research on social issues related to females, general education, health, environmental degradation, etc. may be encouraged. However, if an exposure or criticism of any local power-holder is expected, the research may face hurdles in different ways, from getting approval from universities to funding, etc. On the other hand, if the research is on a topic that is related to, for example, India in any way, the study may face much stricter scrutiny than if it is about China. The country shares a rich and controversial past with India and Bangladesh. Pakistan, Bangladesh, and India, till 1947, formed a part of Imperial India. Pakistan came into being at the demand of Indian Muslims who wanted a separate homeland (Jalal, 1994). The partition was bloody as communal clashes broke out between Muslims on one side and Sikhs and Hindus on the other, resulting in the death of millions. Many millions were displaced and forced into “an involuntary immigration” (Bharadwaj, Khwaja, and Mian 2009, 6). Pakistan and India have fought two major wars since 1947, in addition to many minor border skirmishes. Relations between the two neighbors are far from ideal (Kuszevska, 2022; Shukla, 2020). As far as Bangladesh is concerned, it was a part of Pakistan till 1971, when it became a separate country as a result of a civil war (Hussain and Tinker 2021); many in Pakistan believe that the separation between the two halves of Pakistan came about as a result of Indian help. As mentioned above, academics doing qualitative research from all three countries walk a tightrope when they undertake projects related to partition studies (anonymized) as opinions expressed may be perceived as an attempt at portraying the “enemy’s” perspective. A case in point is Arundhati Roy, an Indian novelist par excellence, who is charged with “sedition” (Biswas, 2024) by the Indian government over her comments regarding Kashmir, which is which is claimed by both India and Pakistan, and they

have fought wars over it. According to Roy, she has done nothing wrong by reiterating that “Kashmir has never been an integral part of India. It is a historical fact. Even the Indian government has accepted this” (quoted in Biswas, 2024).

The fact that the Indian government has singlehandedly revoked recognition of Pakistani educational degrees and the general attitude behind this decision may have resulted in the following omission in some research works (Lern, 2022). In Indian pre-partition studies on medical discourse and the role of British India’s hill stations, there is hardly any mention of Murree, which is located in the current Pakistan (for example, Bhattacharya, 2012; 2013; Pradhan, 2007). Some old studies (for example, Burn, Cotton, and Meyer, 1908, 1909; Kipling, 1885) and new studies (for example, Gibson, 2023) outside India note the importance of Murree that remained the British summer capital for 3 years and, was a place where the sick British officers and their families spent time to recuperate. Indian studies focus mainly on Simla, Mussoorie, Landour, Darjeeling, Ootacamund, and others, which are located in India. Based on the examples above, I attempt to show in this paper that ethics regulating research in Pakistan is at a risk of stifling academic freedom, thereby resulting in epistemic injustice like censorship or a diluting of the stance to seek approval from ethics boards. (My study directly uses data from Pakistan, but as reality is so closely intertwined with India or Bangladesh, Afghanistan, Iran, for some research, that an indirect mention of our neighbors is made to explain a point.) Many times, academics avoid choosing topics that are deemed problematic as research ethics committees or panels, at their end, may reject or suggest significant changes in the arguments. This rejection may come from departmental committees, as seemingly controversial perspectives are discouraged. I agree with Landström (2024, p. 21), who asserts that “epistemically free [entails] being able to choose one’s epistemic endeavors oneself, having the means to pursue them, as well as being able to meaningfully partake in the shared endeavors of the epistemic communities that one belongs to”.

Literature Review: The Freedom to do Science

There is a clear intertwining of RECs with academic freedom and democracy as noted by several Western science practitioners (for example, Dingwall, 2006; Lewis, 2008; Dyer & Demeritt, 2009; Hunter, 2018; Kara, 2018; Hedgecoe, 2016; Masood, 2018; Marcus & Lerman, 2018). The freedom to do research empowers democracy, and democracy strengthens research procedures, especially ethics systems. The freedom given to academics is enshrined in the United Nations charter, which warns that “[w]ithout intellectual freedom and autonomy, the capacity of scientists and educators to pursue scientific truth and the credibility of their work in society are significantly undermined” (UNESCO, 2023). Ehsan Masood (2018) rightly points out that, p. 622) that “[i]t is a brave government that would prioritize study, thought and reflection in the making of policy”.

Intellectuals, jurists, university mottos, and teachers’ associations worldwide, including in Pakistan, emphasize academic freedom in research as it leads to unexpected benefits for humanity. In Pakistan, a senior jurist links academic freedom with democracy, as the importance of conducting research freely guarantees and strengthens “genuine democracy” (Justice Mansoor Ali Shah in Hadeed, 2022). On the other side of the spectrum, ethical research can be better carried out when there is a “political will” on the part of researchers and political authorities, as “research is an act of politics” (Kara, 2018, p. 109). Kara’s observation is helpful, as a study conducted by Asad and Ahmed (2022, p. 9) points out that at times, “extremists and special interest organizations present a hazard to free speech” in Pakistan and many institutions may discourage some areas to ward off “reputational risks” (Hedgecoe, 2016, p. 491).

The role of RECs as gatekeepers in different facets is pointed out by science practitioners like Hunter (2018), and Dyer & Demeritt (2009). Hunter (p. 289) is frustrated at RECs that apply biomedical research standards to social sciences research as it does not respect academic freedom and is “undemocratic”. Dingwall (2006, p. 51) has a somewhat similar opinion and advocates for a “reevaluation of ethical governance” as “bureaucratic interests” may be leading to censorship. Hunter (p. 296-7) claims that “some valuable social science research might be avoided because people don’t want to have to deal with a more complicated approval process”. Dyer & Demeritt (2009 p. 46) call RECs “a self-perpetuating and increasingly rulebound mechanism,” which may not be feasible for social science research. The plea developed in this research study is that Pakistan, which is already in the bottom 30% to 40% of the world’s academic freedom index (Kinzelbach et al., 2024), needs to develop effective ethics regulatory procedures, especially in the social sciences, which do not hamper academic freedom.

A recent study conducted by Afzaal et al. (2024, p. 460) notes that although academics have “a generally positive view of academic freedom and institutional autonomy”, there is a need to minimize “external influences” in matters of research. It must also be pointed out that there are not many studies conducted directly on research ethics boards in Pakistan. The ones done are mainly from the field of biomedicine and medical sociology. They do not link ethics with academic freedom, as such, as medical research does not seem to encounter the kind of hurdles that social research does as the latter challenges social structures. However, a perspective on medical research ethics is included for comparison’s sake. The broad consensus is that there is an awareness of conducting ethical research. For example, a study conducted by Asif et al. (2024) on suicides notes the importance of understanding the boards’ requirements to get the proposal approved. Jafarey et al. (2023) and Asif et al. (2023), working in biomedical sciences, note the lack

of accreditation for review research boards operating in universities and emphasize their need. Another study conducted in neurosciences by Qadri et al. (2024) calls for a more robust awareness of ethical practices on the part of researchers. An aspect especially helpful for qualitative social research is what Lewis (2008, p. 684), directs our attention to. He rightly claims that “General Research Ethics Boards (GREBs) can threaten lack a clear definition of ‘human subject’ research, fail to distinguish between empirical research using humans and scholarly engagement of important social/political issues within human contexts”. Likewise, Taquette & Borges da Matta Souza (2022, p.12) and Carpenter (2018, p. 35) highlight issues in qualitative research that cannot be understood by biomedical ethics-driven boards. Taquette & Borges da Matta (2022, p.12) claim that social sciences research is “conducted with human beings and not on human beings”. Moreover, “there is an influence from the context, often requiring from the researcher the adaptation of ethical rules and norms to the situation being experienced”. This adaptation may not be covered in REC directives. This, therefore, needs a major rethinking on the part of qualitative researchers and ethics regulators.

Methodology: A Diffractive Methodology

The method used to propose some ethical guidelines is drawn mainly from Barad’s agential realism. Barad’s ethico-onto-epistemological framework is chosen as doing ethical research in qualitative social sciences as plans are “fluid”. A “utilitarian analysis” based on biomedical research cannot work in an “absence of readily predictable outcomes”. The evolving “motives and dispositions” (Carpenter, 2018, p. 35) can be better evaluated by shedding the “rule-book mentality” (Allen & Israel, 2018, p. 276). An early declaration of entangled approach of ethics with epistemology and ontology can avoid situations where researchers force participant consent to meet RECs instructions (Gontcharov, 2018, p. 239). A qualitative researcher generally has much more knowledge of the ground realities than most regulators. They know that some participants’ opinions may be more than just opinions; they may be ideologies. Therefore, a nuanced research plan is needed, which may allow researchers to conduct research in nonabsolute terms, as is proposed in Barad’s ethico-onto-epistemological method. Barad does not advocate absolute and essential markings in the delineation of a phenomenon that is being researched. Rather, “phenomena are the ontological inseparability of agentially intra-acting components” (Barad, 2007, p. 33).

In the lines below, I introduce the terms of agential realism: apparatuses, phenomenon, intraaction, diffractions, human responsibility, and memories. Barad calls phenomena as the “basic units of reality (Barad, 2007, p. 33) lacking “independent determinate boundaries and properties”. They are not “individual entities but entangled material agencies” (p. 56). Barad uses intra-action as against interaction as the latter presumes the “prior existence” of relata (Barad, 2003, p. 815) and claims that “[d]ifferent intra-actions produce different phenomena” (2007, p. 58). Phenomena enacted through intra-actions come about as a result of specific “agential cuts”. It is these agential cuts (or intra-actions) that the “boundaries and properties” of phenomena become determinate and that particular embodied concepts become meaningful”. In agential realism, phenomena are produced through apparatuses, which are “material (re)configurings/discursive practices that produce material phenomena in their discursively differentiated becoming” (2003, p. 820).

My study does not focus only on words but acknowledges matter also, whether it is pre-partition buildings left in Pakistan by the departing Hindus, Sikhs, and Jains or social practices. Barad (2003, p. 812) challenges “humanity’s [.....] captivity within language” as “[l]anguage does not represent states of affairs” (p. 813). “Agential realism’s posthumanist account of discursive practices does not fix the boundary between human and nonhuman before the analysis ever gets off the ground”. It allows for “the possibility of a genealogical analysis of the material discursive emergence of the human. Human bodies and human subjects do not preexist as such; nor are they mere end products” (Barad, 2007, p. 150).

Diffraction is another concept used in Barad that is used in place of the usual reflection and reflexivity (Bozalek and Murris, 2021, p. 55). Diffraction “as an affirmative engagement” is an act of reading through different perspectives dealing with the “epistemologically damaging process of distancing, othering and putting another theoretical or philosophical position down”. A diffractive reading makes “new patterns of meaning” by attending to “matter and questions of ethics and politics” (Barad paraphrased in Bozalek & Murris, 2021, p. 55). Ethics in Barad’s agential realism are located not in the human agency but in specific material-discursive arrangements (Barad, paraphrased in Mauthner, 2018, p. 53). An ethically diffractive concept that Barad (2007, ix) presents is related to memory. Memory is a re/wording “larger than any individual”. It extends “the entanglements and responsibilities of which one is a part. The past is never finished”. “[W]e never leave it, and it never leaves us behind”. Barad’s notion of ethics is supplemented by Benett’s (2010, p. ix) who agrees with Barad’s ethical affirmative engagement in research by asserting that “[w]hat is more, ethical political action on the part of humans seems to require not only a vigilant critique of existing institutions but also positive, even utopian alternatives”. She goes on to point out that “the ethical responsibility of an individual human resides in one’s response to the assemblages in which one finds oneself participating” (p. 37). A researcher needs to act response-ably so as not to cause harm.

Discussion: Some Response-able Guidelines

Using Barad's (2007, p. 225) ethico-onto-epistemological philosophy that reality is a contingent re/configuring dependent on "particular exclusions, and exclusions" which "foreclose the possibility of determinism", and provides "the condition of an open future", some possible lines of action are presented to negotiate issues related to research ethical boards. An important point that I want to clarify is that these guidelines are not intended to be valid only for research studies that opt for Barad. Rather, I claim that qualitative research can broadly benefit from such an approach. I also believe that individual qualitative researchers can do only so much to rectify matters. University faculties, independent research boards, and sympathizers, whether from law, politics, the entertainment industry, etc., can help develop a conducive attitude towards the requirements of qualitative research.

1. The first guideline has to do with the constitution of separate ethical boards for qualitative research (Schrag, 2010). A specific regulatory body that has more researchers than non-researchers as its members, possessing a nuanced understanding and experience of issues, is crucial for ethical research. Qualitative research ethical boards would "be educative and not disciplinary" (Taquette & Borges da Matta Souza, 2022, p.12). In those cases, where a separate board is not possible, and qualitative and quantitative research is regulated by a common body or system, an advice given by McCormack D et al. (2012, p. 35) is useful who impresses upon the need for "a proportionate representation of qualitative researchers on research ethics boards"

2. If there are any directives given by boards, they should neither be "ambiguous" nor "ambivalent" (Hammersley, 2010, p. 123). The language should match the disciplinary expectations of social scientists and acknowledge that social scientists are "vocal about the politically and ideologically influenced production of knowledge that shapes how science is ethically conducted" (Marcus & Lerman, 2018, p. 275). Care should be taken in formulating broad and narrow guidelines, as both can lead to problems. Broad statements can be inferred in several ways, much to the peril of a researcher. Narrow statements can sometimes be too limiting.

3. Secondly, the preparation of a qualitative ethical statement must not be dictated by quantitative imperatives. Most of the time, there is one template that is used across disciplines. Without going into the nitty-gritty of a statement, qualitative researchers ought to be allowed to write comprehensive statements that can truthfully portray the expected procedures. An emphasis on honesty is important as it can help avoid unethical practices undertaken to get approval from ethics boards (Gontcharov, 2018).

4. Pakistani university researchers from the qualitative paradigm can form associations along the lines of the Western ones. For example, the Quebec Faculty Association has the following statement on its website: "The heart of genuine ethics review processes ... does not permit the imposition of standards of ethics and rigor that require compliance with a specific doctrine, ideology, or moral understanding" (Research Ethics and Academic Freedom, 2024, p. 3).

5. University faculty in Pakistan and elsewhere can take a cue from the University of Chicago, whose website preempts political pressure by declaring that "[it] is important that American universities resist political dictation" (Shweder, 2006, p. 511). The faculty here and elsewhere if decides to emphasize on clear, unambiguous statements can help educate the community at large about the importance of not letting politics interfere negatively and instead can elicit positive help.

6. Qualitative researchers can also refer to statements given by powerful people like politicians, jurists, etc., bemoaning the state of affairs to show the need for a specific research or point of view (Hadeed, 2022).

7. Qualitative researchers must look towards literature to help them negotiate difficult topics. Many a time, a topic that may sound sensitive in a scientific study has already been taken up by literature. Citing examples from literature should be acceptable in ethical statements. This is especially helpful in studies that have multiple realities.

8. There needs to be an explicit definition of humans in qualitative studies. A more comprehensive view is the need of the hour.

9. Finally, qualitative researchers can also rely on the use of slashes. Slashes point to the inseparability of one phenomenon from another. In conclusion, it must be reiterated that the regulation of qualitative research generally needs to be viewed separately from quantitative research. Even if numerical data is used, it should undergo qualitative rigor rather than quantitative. Qualitative research is unpredictable and, therefore, cannot be adequately argued via templates originally made for quantitative research. A qualitative researcher needs more room and resources for carrying out effective work. A response-able ethical regulation relies on "one-cut together apart" (Barad, 2003, p.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it must be reiterated that the regulation of qualitative research generally needs to be viewed separately from quantitative research. Even if numerical data is used, it should undergo qualitative rigor rather than quantitative. Qualitative research is unpredictable and, therefore, cannot be adequately argued via templates originally

made for quantitative research. A qualitative researcher needs more room and resources for carrying out effective work. A response-able ethical regulation relies on “one-cut together apart” (Barad, 2003, p. 176) to show the relational and intertwined nature of issues. Moreover, as these studies can encounter a series of ethics-related checks starting from the beginning to the end and, sometimes, even after the study is over, there is a need to facilitate them so that social issues may be adequately researched.

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