Research Ethics: Reflections and Considerations at ETOUR/TUG

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Background

Conducting studies in the social sciences, including disciplines, such as tourism studies, economics, human geography etc., can prove challenging to the researcher from an ethical standpoint. It is not unusual, for instance, to review project proposals, reports or academic articles and other contributions, and note that researchers regularly demonstrate superficial awareness concerning various ethical guidelines they must abide by. Problems include, *inter alia*, lack of evidence that informed consent was addressed when the research was conducted, avoidance of full disclosure on privacy, and how data must be safeguarded, and minimal recognition of the possible risks arising from the research and of the ways to handle these.

This document serves as a guideline for researchers within TUG/ETOUR. Specifically, it dictates the responsibilities (i.e., *code of conduct*) of everyone belonging to this environment who is engaged in any type of research endeavor. While it is by no means an exhaustive list of commandments for the researcher, it offers reflections and considerations relating to, among others: the role of the researcher as an ethical being; the principles of research ethics; and how research ethics are put into practice when conducting research. The aim is that any research produced by scholars in this environment *must* lead to *positive effects* in terms of science while also having beneficial consequences from a policy, societal or other practical implication point of view (see: Smith & Duffy, 2003; McCannel, 2012; Frechtling, 2017). Meanwhile, the negative repercussions of the research, such as the causation of harm to subject participants, must be avoided at all costs.

Role of Ethics in Research

When it comes to scientific research, adopting a code of ethics is of paramount importance for several reasons (Smith, 2005). To begin with, ethical standards govern the research itself, to ensure that it is not based on false assumptions and misinterpretation of findings. Additionally, there are values governing the individuals working within the research environment (i.e. often performing team endeavors) relating to issues, such as treating each other fairly, with respect and within a context of total trust. This means also, from the outset, that guidelines on issues, such as authorship and work distribution, must be established and well-defined. One of the most important ethical consideration relates to the need to protect the subjects of the investigation. Overall, the research must be objective and precise, and has to convey social relevance. To be sure, within the social sciences the possibilities of inflicting major physical damage on the study participants are perhaps not as great as they may be in studies relating to, for example, biomedical science, but nevertheless, the study can harm the subjects (humans, animals) in other ways, such as psychologically, socially, economically or legally.

Core Concepts of Ethics in Social Science Research

Social science research ethics comprise researchers' reflectiveness on competing and complementary responsibilities towards their own research vis-à-vis the research community and, most importantly, the civil society. In particular, the latter should be seen as the major beneficiary and co-producer of social science research (Fisher & Anushko, 2008).

Following the previous section, a major aspect of ethics in social science research relates to the protection of individuals who constitute the study object of the investigation. This implies that humans as autonomous agents have to be treated with utmost respect and in no way should they experience bias in terms of traits, such as religion, political proclivities, sexual orientation, or ethnic background. Further, as an ethical imperative, persons with diminished responsibility (*vulnerable groups*), such as children, the aged, the mentally disabled, and individuals with certain chronic diseases as well as (e.g. illegal) immigrants, should not be treated unfairly and every effort must be made to protect their rights. This might mean that informed consent for some vulnerable groups is not something that protects these individuals' best interests. Rather, in such cases, other protections may have to be provided.

Research Ethics in Social Science and Tourism Research

Over the last decades, a series of ethical codes of research emerged, which rule ethical issues in social science. These include the *Belmont Report* (1979), the *Helsinki Declaration* (1964; 2013), but also *research ethics committees and associations*, such as the *Academy of Social Science's Council* (2015) and various *regulations and (national) laws*, such as the Swedish *Ethics Review Act* (January 2004). The ethical imperative behind all these measures is the focus on (Smith, 2005):

> a) Accurate social science research, with
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> b) Socially relevant purpose, while
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> c) Respecting human dignity and protecting individuals involved in research.

As highlighted earlier, individuals are expected to be respectfully treated as autonomous agents (*right of self-governance*) in a non-offensive way concerning their provenience, religious, political or sexual orientation. Meanwhile, people with diminished autonomy (*vulnerable groups*) are guaranteed full protection. In addition, a number of *universal ethical standards* have evolved to secure beneficence and justice when science is conducted. For instance, social scientists are expected to demonstrate sufficient effort to evaluate and assess the benefits from research activities and to ameliorate risks on certain social groups (Fisher & Anushko, 2008). Moreover, it is imperative that research is conducted in a pluralistic way, thus, comprising multiple views and values, implying in particular the application of multiple methods (i.e. *methodological pluralism*). Furthermore, the ethical principle of *integrity* highlights the *consistent, adequate and transparent* use of methods, while *independence of research* stresses conflicts of researchers' interests, thereby recommending that they should be made explicit where they cannot be avoided (Smith, 2005). A final major ethical maxim is the expectations that both independent and anonymous reviewers should be evaluating publications of research findings and applications for research grants.

Based on the aforementioned reflections relating to research ethics and the respective literature (see references), the ethical research principles below serve as guiding norms for researchers at the TUG/ETOUR research environment.

1. **Participants' consent**

   When conducting tourism research involving human subjects (e.g., through interviews or laboratory experiments), participants should provide their consent for participating in the study. More precisely, it is imperative that these participants are
   a. *Fully informed,* (i.e. the participant is in possession of and fully understands the information provided by the researcher as to the scope of the study).
   b. *Voluntary*, (i.e. the participant must assent to participating out of her own free will, and should, thus, not be involved through coercive [e.g. real or perceived] pressure.
   c. *Competent,* (i.e. by virtue of mental stability, the participant is able to make a free considered choice with full knowledge of benefits and risks[1] and consent to *participate*, and to permit *data to be published* and shared (Framework for Research Ethics, ESRC, 2015).[2]

2. **Responsibility towards the participants**

   When conducting studies involving human participants, the researchers should be aware of the need to:
   a. Cause minimal disturbance;
   b. Adopt special care if participants are vulnerable;
   c. Be transparent, (i.e. clarifying the extent participants are allowed to see transcripts of interviews and field-notes);
   d. Provide correct interpretation of evidence, findings and conclusions drawn from data (ESRC, 2015).

3. **Anonymity and confidentiality**

   While *anonymity* refers to the concealment of identities of participants in all documents and other materials resulting from research, *confidentiality* highlights the norm that participants must be informed and should provide their consent as to how data will be used. In particular, they should also know who has the right to access data provided by participants (here data comprise also case materials, photos, audio and video data).

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[1] According to ethical research standards (ESRC, 2015), researchers at TUG/ETOUR environment, involving humans have to inform participants about: 1) Purpose of research. 2) Expected duration and procedures. 3) Participants' rights to decline to participate and to withdraw from research once it has started, and the anticipated consequences of doing so. 4) Reasonably foreseeable factors that may influence willingness to participate, such as sensitive topics, potential risks, discomfort, adverse effects. 5) Any prospective research benefits. 6) Limits of confidentiality, such as data coding, disposal, sharing and archiving, and if confidentiality must be broken. 7) Incentives for participation. 8) Whom participants can contact with questions.

[2] A highly sensitive piece of information is the respondent's e-mail address. Therefore, these have to be stored separately from the responses to the survey as such. They are also stored in the most technically secure way possible (i.e. by a "key" to unlock actual e-mail addresses). This complies with the upcoming *Data Regulation Act 2018* (Dataskyddsreformen, 2017; Tegström, 2017) See also: Ethical norm '3. Anonymity and confidentiality' in this guideline

Confidentiality also encapsulates respect of privacy, such as the decision whether (or not) potentially sensitive information should be recorded. On principle, any record containing identities need to be securely stored, i.e. password protected or encrypted (Dataskyddsreformen, 2017).[3]

In cases involving **social media data**, a special emphasis is given to anonymity and confidentiality. The following *ethical principles in studying social media* are applied at TUG/ETOUR environment: As a general principle, only data from publically available social media platforms (i.e. also comprising groups, forums and blogs) are admitted for analysis, due to social media users' general understanding and expectations of being observed.[4] In studying social media, the following ethical norms are applied:

a. *Legality*: The legal use of data extracted from social media needs to be confirmed either from the terms and conditions of the social media platform or from those of funding guidelines (Evans et al. 2015);
b. *Privacy*: Privacy issues concerning social media deal with questions as to whether: i) social media users can reasonably expect to be observed; ii) participants can be considered as vulnerable; and iii) the subject matter is sensitive;
c. *Re-usability and publishability of social media data:* It is imperative that social media users are guaranteed full anonymity before social media data, such as user generated content (UGC), is published or shared (ibid, 2015).

4. Intellectual property

This ethical principle implies that researchers at the TUG/ETOUR environment take *credit for authorship* only for work they have actually performed or to which they have *substantially* contributed so that publication credit accurately reflects a researcher's relative contribution (ESRC, 2015). The latter is disclosed through *consensus* gained throughout the research cycle, in particular in the course of multi-authored publications.

5. Consciousness of multiple roles

Multiple roles and interests of researchers are considered to be ethical as long as they are: a) not expected to have adverse effects; b) would not impair professional performance; and c) do not exploit others. This ethical domain encapsulates, for instance, the recruitment of students from the researcher's own course to participate in an experiment; this violates the ethical principle of voluntariness (see above). Another example involves cases where the effectiveness of a company's product is examined when the researcher owns stocks in this company (ESRC, 2015).

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[3] To answer questions about study authenticity and to allow others to re-analyze study findings, researchers at TUG/ETOUR should archive primary data and accompanying records for at least *five year*s. Moreover, researchers may release data to others who want to verify conclusions, provided participants' confidentiality can be protected and as long as legal rights concerning proprietary data do not preclude their release (ESRC 2015).

[4] This implies that neither closed social media groups nor social media studies are admitted at ETOUR/TUG where the researcher is disguised as a participant (Evans et al., 2015).

If TUG/ETOUR researchers discover they are in situation where there are potential conflicts of interest, they are mandated to take the necessary steps to resolve such conflicts in a manner that does not compromise the ethics codes (Smith, 2005).

6. **Ethical aspects concerning tourism research**

   a. Researchers and lecturers at the TUG/ETOUR environment commit to behave ethically and professionally when providing *expertise*, either as members of expert panels (e.g. UNWTO), anonymous reviewers of scientific journals and funding institutions, conference committee members, etc.) (Correia & Kozak, 2017; Frechtling, 2017), as examination committee members (PhD, faculty recruitment) (Fennell & Malloy, 2007), or in their role as tourism lecturers in '*educating for ethical tourism action*' (Tribe, 2002).[5]

   b. Ontologies in tourism research and related research paradigms require an emphasis on specific research ethics (Ryan, 2005; Moscardo, 2010):

      • If the focus is on the (post-) positivist (quantitative) paradigm, social (tourism) 'facts' are considered to exist as *quantities* independently from the researcher. Thus, the subjective state of the individual is not reflected, for instance, in the case of Butler's destination life cycle model. Within such paradigms, *dimensions of research ethics* comprise the critical inspection of the research *model*, validity & reliability (e.g. secured by non-response option in Likert-type questionnaires), representativeness & generalizability, replicability, implications for people, communities, (profit and non-profit) organizations and the natural environment.

      • If the focus is on the phenomenological (qualitative) paradigm, social (e.g. tourism) phenomena are understood from the researcher's own frame of reference. Then, *dimensions of research ethics* comprise the critical inspection of the research *framework* specific to a given context and bounded by space and time, the participative process of fieldwork characterized by (long-term) relationships between the researcher and respondents, their creative involvement, the process of maturation, flow and understanding.[6]

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[5] As this mandate is relevant also from a multi-disciplinary perspective, in fall 2017 ETOUR/TUG researchers offered a faculty-wide PhD course titled "*When Research Goes Wrong*". The course prepares PhD students to become better researchers by understanding and challenging hidden ideologies and risks with current research practice. More precisely, students are qualified to critically reflect on mainstream practices inherent in contemporary research, including (i) the abuse of research findings for career advancement (*ethical* dimension), (ii) the positive findings bias (*methodological* bias), and (iii) the dominant power of mainstream disciplinary thinking (*ideological* bias).

[6] Indeed, asking a question is *no neutral* act as it determines the nature of the answer (i.e. the value-neutrality assumption themselves exhibits values about the nature of 'truth' and the relationship of the researcher to the 'discovered'). As put by MacCannell (2012, p. 185): "*A research domain without ethical reflexivity, that refuses to come to grips with itself and its subject matter in ethical terms, is doomed to failure*".

c. Neo-liberal audit cultures of contemporary Western universities demonstrate a tendency to move away from a culture based on knowledge creation through critical thinking (*content*) towards one based on meeting 'research standards' (*form*) of a '*system of excellence*', above all else (Fennell, 2013, p. 417).

- Indeed, academic cultures tend to position 'jumped-up' utilitarian reasoning above all other human qualities (ibid, 2013, p. 422).[7] However, unidimensional reasoning without ethics, memory, common sense, imagination and intuition turns into *mechanics,* and 'academic knowledge' will be owned by, bought and sold to a powerful technocratic and managerial elite. Too often, reward systems promote *extrinsic* motivation stimulating on the basis of external influence, such as popularity, standards, audits, power, money, admiration, and respect. Publication outlets (e.g. top-field journals), i.e., the *'Where'*, becomes more important than *what* is published (i.e. the content). Nevertheless, the highest ranked journals get the vast majority of their citations from a very small number of articles (e.g. generalist overview papers) (ibid, 2013, p. 420). Basing decisions on what is high-quality research on such a skewed distribution seems senseless. Moreover, as there is only small relevance of tourism research to scholars and disciplines outside tourism research, there is a particular need to develop theories that explain human nature in a way that neither evolutionary biology nor psychology has. As Fennell (2013, p. 424) contends: "*The only meaningful and* <u>intrinsically</u> *motivated pursuit of 'true' knowledge in advancing the way of thinking about tourism is by the use and enhancement of external theory and philosophy*". This imperative is achieved at ETOUR/TUG by describing the symbolic (semiotic) representation of destinations. The latter mediates the 'tourist-other encounter', the effects of (varying) symbols on the broad theme of 'urban vs. rural otherness' (i.e. as framework for human existence and human differences, such as normative and moral differences), 'organic'/'mechanic' social arrangements [*à la* Durkheim], the 'historical'/'anthropological' subject [*à la* Levi-Strauss], and signifiers of locality versus 'tourist bubbles' [*à la* Judd & Fainstein].

d. Tourism activities, such as '*sightseeing*', are *ethically* framed inherently (MacCannell, 2011; Lovelock & Lovelock, 2013). This means and implies that the formation of the humans' psyche, identity and character is a stake in the ethical framing of the symbolic representation of a destination for tourists (Smith & Duffy, 2003). By referring to the *'cosmopolitan hope of tourism'* (Swain, 2009), the notion of destinations as a *symbolic-moral-ethical construct* (MacCannell, 2012, p. 193), and the '*landscape* approach to understanding and *meaning'* (Knudsen et al., 2007), tourism contributes significantly to the 'general good' of civil societies by furthering human understanding (MacCannell. 2012, p. 191).

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[7] Also Heidegger (1966) referred to post-modern societies' pre-disposition towards calculative thinking and to favor efficiency as well as logic and linear processing over less functional (but more difficult) 'meditative' thinking and the creative ability to see beyond the only epistemological position: profit.

Conclusions

In order to maintain a humanist climate of trust in tourism research practice at the TUG/ETOUR environment, it is inevitable that *a practice and systems of ethical assurance* will be established.[8] Indeed, the trust of the public, professional colleagues, those who commission and fund research, as well as those individuals, communities or other entities being studied, requires an effective system of ethical review, clear lines of responsibility and a manageable degree of independent overview (Iphofen, 2011, p. 5).

This makes it imperative that tourism researchers at the TUG/ETOUR environment are familiar with *ethical principles, policies and procedures,* such as those highlighted in this '*research ethics guideline*', which is designed to ensure the dignity of research subjects and to prevent irresponsible research (Academy of Social Science Council, 2015; God Forskningssed, 2017). While ignorance of policies designed to protect research subjects is no viable excuse for ethically questionable research, one of the best ways researchers at TUG/ETOUR can avoid and resolve ethical dilemmas, is to know what their ethical obligations are and what resources are available to them.[9]

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[8] E.g. both, research staff and students at the TUG/ETOUR environment require ethical approval for research involving humans' or human data (e.g. collected experimentally, by questionnaire, interview, observationally, by computer, telephone, or over the Internet). Before research is conducted at Mid-Sweden University, this approval could, in the future be granted by a faculty-wide *Social Science Ethics committee* (Central Ethics Testing Board). Such an approval is not relevant, of course, if research includes publicly available data, like census data, population statistics, letters and diaries in public libraries, etc. (ESRC, 2015).

[9] For instance the '*Research ethics initial checklist*' provided by *ESRC Framework for Research Ethics* (ESRC, 2015).

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