

# Objectivity and Ethics in Empirical Research

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**Abstract-** Objectivity (value-free) and ethics (rules of conduct) in empirical research are very essential for generating knowledge. However, intrusion of personal, participants and funders' values (i.e. bias, belief, presuppositions) in research is unavoidable during empirical research process. This article aims to determine the positions of values and ethics in empirical research to achieve reliability, validity and generalizability, and the possibilities to accommodate objectivity and ethical rationally in research. Through content analysis of available literature, this article presents that values of the stakeholders intrude in empirical research both consciously and unconsciously. It is also sometimes problematic to maintain research ethics. This study established that there are opportunities to promote objective research (value-free research) within the premise of value relevance to an expected level. This article claims that appropriate research planning, effective sample design, carefully data collection and interpretation can promote and enhance objectivity of empirical research and achieve research ethics.

**Index Terms-** Empirical research, ethics, objectivity, values.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Empirical research is based on observed phenomena and derives knowledge from actual experience rather than theoretical discussions for any type of discipline of research. This is directed to improve the knowledge and understanding the world through searching facts-answers to questions and solutions to problems through utilizing practical methods such as survey. It investigates to develop new insights, verification or testing new facts, analysis of interrelationships and casual explanations, and development of new tools through observations and practical experiences. The outcome of the research can help to change the way things are. However, merely systematic and organized enquiry of research is not sufficient to generate new and impactful knowledge. The researchers need to adopt 'value-free' (i.e. bias less) position rightly for choosing the most potential among the possible options due to welfare of the humanity as well as to develop new theory, concepts and tools. Moreover, 'ethics' (morals) are also worth in the research regardless research is related to humanities, social sciences or business. Whether empirical or theoretical research techniques, it requires improved approach that might create high impacts in different fields of research. This research focus on the position of values and ethics in empirical research.

Empirical research is mostly applied research to provide implications for policy practice, decision making relevant to various fields of social science and physical science research. The research outcome need to be reliable, validate and generalizable. However, can empirical research ever be 'value free'; or whether a 'value-free' empirical research is possible and desirable, or not? The claim about value-neutrality of research is quite common among researchers, but is challenged to attain. Over the years, researchers are moved by the challenge whether the research would be value-oriented or value-neutral. Empirical research is not free from this debate.

This article aims to clarify about the status of values and ethics in empirical research of any discipline, and to determine how to accommodate the value and ethical rationally in the research. Through content analysis of the available literature, this articles presents how 'values' and 'ethics' intrude in empirical research and what are the importance of value free (objective) empirical

research. This paper also presents how to promote objectivities in the empirical research and achieve research ethics.

## II. OBJECTIVITY (VALUE FREE) AND ETHICS (MORALS) IN RESEARCH

'Value' is belief, preference or position. Values are influenced by several factors such as society, culture, history of a person. Values vary within individuals, groups and societies. Society is characterized by 'value consensus' or agreement over social practices (May, 2001). An empirical researcher is not outside of the society. Therefore, there is possibility of intruding values in the research. He could judge the facts and evident in empirical research depending on his own predetermined views which could be biased by personal values. Ahmed (2010) developed an inventory of various influences (values) that might distort research, i.e. personal prejudices and bias, personal emotions, personal motives, customs and superstitions, self-interest, complexity of subject matters, lack of uniformity, misunderstanding due to lack of knowledge, moral values, ethnocentrism, external pressure, and ignorance.

'Objectivity' means the willingness and ability to examine evidence dispassionately. 'Objective research' is value-free research. It is a major condition of good research. Objective research is opposite to value judgment (subjectivity/ value relevance). According to May (2001) value judgment is to rate one thing against another that is a fundamental part of human. He also mentioned that value judgments are dependent on belief and experiences of everyday life that are expressed by approval or disapproval of some moral of social ideals. He also claims that the possibility of a value free empirical research in terms of 'apprising judgment' is a technical matter, not theoretical impossibility.

'Value neutrality' (value-free) is a term used by Weber to indicate necessity of objective research. Weber concerned against making value judgments which coincide with the orientation or motives of the researchers. Although, Weber believed that value neutrality is the aim of research, his view is that no science is fundamentally neutral, and dependent on the way individuals see a phenomena and the perception they hold from that (in Morrison, 1995). Scientific research is nature driven and development of the scientific knowledge is a kind of natural process dictated by nature itself, not by society. Therefore, it is easier to be objective. However, the research on the matter of humanity and society, the research process and outcome is subject to value-judgment as perception of a fact vary depending on the researcher's personal knowledge, idea or the group or society he belongs as well as the subjects (focus groups) who are studied.

'Ethics' refers to the norms and 'rules of conduct' in the research process that guide moral choices. Ethics and morality often go together and used interchangeably. Ethics are social and cultural constructs, and grounded in the values of time and place. The goal of ethics in research is to ensure that no one is harmed and suffer from adverse consequences from research activities. There is no absolute ethics, because "*Ethical standards are expressed as absolutes but must operate relatively*" (Becker and Bryman, 2004: 155). The accepted ethics on a specific period and location can change relatively to change of period and location.

'Research ethics' is the way to conduct a research with integrity and morally. Ethical research is the logical inquiry

that is conducted with honesty and integrity. Honesty related to avoiding anything taken from any other's work without acknowledgement. Integrity refers to resisting the research from temptation of any actual findings, or falsifying data to suit with predetermined positions or values. Research ethics involved gaining informed consent from the participants after informing them about the purposes, methods and uses, and any risks involved to the research. This might ensure the dignity, rights, safety and well-being of the research participants, clients (users) as well as of the researchers.

### III. DESIRABILITY OF OBJECTIVITY AND ETHICS IN RESEARCH

According to Berger (1991) the researchers have to be objective, to control his personal preferences and prejudices, to perceive clearly from the evidence rather than to judge normatively. It is desirable to interpret and present authentic and real facts of the observations of any research. Intrusion of values in research is inevitable rather the researcher's deliberation to avoid this. Objectivity need to be upheld in the research process. This means that once the research begins, researchers should not let their personal values influence the collection and analysis of data, and they should not hide or alter research findings for their own beliefs or expectations. At this point, the question is no longer confined to the issue of objectivity, but involves professionalism and academic morality as well. This will open the door for contributing by authentic knowledge in the specific field of research. It can be substantial successes of an academic work through inducing social change. The researcher needs to be aware about the value-neutrality of the research to represent the authentic knowledge that could be applicable to the society for betterment of life of the people as like scientific research.

The researcher's conduct of enquires need to be a fair and balanced in which personal and political values plays no part, in both the research method and in the publishing of the findings (McNeill, 1990). Authentic findings of an empirical research can provide implications for welfare of the society and nature through optimal utilization of resources. Value oriented and/or unethical empirical research finding can distort the policy planning and decision making. One major advantage of value freedom is that it enables a researcher to make better judgments (as much as possible) on the research field. It enables him/her to see from different standpoints to explore the reality which can produce high impact theoretical base for further research to generate new insights.

### IV. POSSIBILITY OF OBJECTIVITY AND ETHICS IN EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

Truth itself is a value. According to the view of Hammersley (1995), the primary goal of research should involve the attempts to realize the truth. The question 'whether empirical research can be value free' is raised mainly from the researcher's conceptualization stances and the methods adopted to administrate the research. The place of values in empirical research is mostly unavoidable. Empirical research might be influenced by social interest, economic and organizational forces. Therefore, the research becomes social, economical or organizational value dependent.

The researchers are implicated themselves by the society upon which they study. Therefore, total freedom from values would be impossible without the total removal of the researcher from society himself. Society changes quickly and thus social organizations, network changes. It is not possible for a researcher to be personally value-free, since values are eternal of human. However, methodologically, value-freedom could be possible if a researcher clearly states the assumptions under which he/she is interpreting their data. Bruun (1972) mentioned the concept of 'objectivity' that there is less possibility of rational choice among ultimate values, because in the modern world ultimate values are in conflict as they imply different ways of life.

Hammersley (1995) pointed out several ways through which value judgments have an impact on research. Firstly, research presupposes some goals that might be associated with values and it can not be value free or politically neutral. Secondly, research requires resources, and a value judgment is involved of the desirability of the suppliers of those resources such as donor, university. Thirdly, research is founded on some presuppositions which reflect the cultural value arising from the socio-historical locations of researchers including their gender and ethnicity. Fourthly, research has material effects.

Weber (1949) claims that the knowledge of cultural reality is always from particular points of view and there can be no absolute 'objective' scientific analysis of 'social phenomena'. Social research could not be value free, but it is argued that the deliberate dissemination of personal values can be avoided in lectures and publications (Parkin, 1986). Empirical research cannot deny the social phenomena while doing research. Social phenomena are mostly motivated by the social norms, values, culture, views of the specific society where it belongs. These societal values stimulate individual values of the researchers. Empirical research holds some commitments for creating convenience in practical life for human being such as equal right, provision of basic needs with which several socio-cultural value driven matters are associated. For example, low income housing provisions, transportation facilities for the physical disable people, gender equality in job market, supporting small entrepreneurs.

Political circumstances can conquest over value freedom of the researcher while conducting the research. The research results might be used for purposes for which the researcher has not anticipated which is called as 'unintended consequences of social actions' (May, 2001). Thus, the researcher face insurmountable problems in defending his position, even though he adhere to 'value neutrality' throughout the research process. Mills (1970) criticized the impact of functionalist and power elites in research, and suspected against generation of empirical and value-free information in the research. Research cannot be value-free that are in favor with the powers.

Peel (2009) argued for supporting the need for a more explicit articulation of values in the research (mainly focusing built environment research) as the efforts tend to be problem and policy-oriented; that is, mostly 'applied' in nature rather than 'pure'. He mentioned regarding methodological stance that as research cannot be completely value free as the research includes the views from diverse initiators of different believers who might have some values. For example, the team members in a research project might have different values. When a researcher accepts some assumptions or preconceptions (for doing a value free research), he might face debates stirred by various values of team members. Moreover, whenever a researcher attempts to admit the concepts, ideas or strategies of the earlier research, values of earlier researchers might intrude in the research consciously or unconsciously.

Empirical research often involves ethical dilemmas because of involvement of people. This research can be intrusive through getting the time of the participants, accessing to their home or work place to get data, asking them questions about their personal and family life, preference and so on. Ethical research involves having 'informed consent' that is impossible sometimes. For example, ethnographic observation method of a research requires observing the activities of people. In this method, informed consent of the target people might change their behavior and activities. Most research requires having written consent from the participants. However, it is problematic when the empirical research involves determination of any forms of informality, illegality (i.e. corruption, crime, food manipulation) or some matters on which people are reluctant to share (i.e. sexual behavior).

Research ethics is subject to voluntary participation of the participants and free from coercion. There is risk of contamination of the evidences provided by the participants while they are given money or gifts for participating. However, it is unusual to persuade a day laborer, construction worker or

rickshaw puller (for example) to give time for participating in a research (during the time they can earn money if they work).

## V. POSITION OF VALUES AND ETHICS IN EMPIRICAL RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The process of conducting an empirical research on a fundamental research problem, needs to design in order to provide policy makers pragmatic, action oriented implications for alleviating the problem (Majchrzak, 1984). Values could take a position into research in a number of ways during the stages while conducting research. Here is an attempt to clarify about the processes through which values can enter into different stages of empirical research.

### A. Values and ethics during selection of a subject-matter to research

Values enters into the empirical research at the outset, when it is decided what to study. The researcher has to make some kind of initial judgments about his/her preferred subject area. The process of selecting a research topic is influenced by researchers' personal backgrounds, interests, and experiences. Therefore, selection of research topic is influenced by personal values; the values of the community that constitute a 'worthwhile' project; the values of society that constitutes a 'social problem'; the values of the funding agencies. The researchers cannot be value free in selection of research problems, i.e. the preference for certain hypotheses or conceptual schemes and disapproving others. Multidisciplinary empirical research is insisted by the individual expertise of the researcher. So, it is evident that choice of research subject matter is motivated by individual values of the researchers, community or funder.

Contemporary research has moved away from 'research-led model' to 'customer-contracted model' where the research are conducted through projects commissioned by the funders. In the customer-contracted model the customer/ client/ funder reserve the right about what to be investigated that reduces the control of the researcher over choosing the research agenda. It means that sometimes, institutions with economic power have the control over the production of knowledge.

### B. Values and ethics while choosing research methods

During selection of research method, the researcher could face the challenge of selectivity. Nevertheless, this is not to say that researchers falsify their data and conclusions become selective. In the real world of research, grants and jobs of the researchers bring the pressure to follow particular ways of research, adopt particular methods and so forth, if they want their work published and applied. The customer-contracted model mostly reserves the right to select the methods based on their expertise and resources. Moreover, research methods can be faulty in which research objectivity become impeded that can also effect reliability of research.

### C. Values and Ethics during data collection

It is evident that authenticity of data collection is undeniable to get a valid and reliable result through research. Much empirical research select convenience and purposive (for example) sampling techniques for convenient and cost effective research. Lack of representativeness of the sample, sampling biasness, sampling error could generate faulty findings and eventually misguide conclusions. May (2001) expressed that whenever researchers wish to concentrate on one group of people rather than another, it reflects their own bias towards that group. Questionnaires surveys, interviews, focus group discussions and participant observation are some common methods employed to amass primary data in empirical research. The drawbacks of data collection through these earlier methods include the need to be very specific about the types of questions asked. People have personal bias, prejudices and can misinterpret the questions. People also tend to say what they think the interviewer wants them to say.

Observation requires a human observer where the issue of value neutrality comes to the fore.

### D. Values and ethics while interpretations about the collected data

Interpretation of the observed data consists of very important part of any research. It is not possible for researcher (as human beings) not to have some preconceived expectations about the collected empirical data. Therefore, the questions about how to interpret data, does not fit into the expectations already formulated. The difficulty also involves preconceived notions about what kind of data will or will not be significant. May (2001) pointed out that during data reduction and analysis the researchers face the problem of selectivity. While being selective, a number of interesting findings can be missing which could aid understanding and explanation of the research. Generalization of findings could be subjective (value relevant) due to personal bias on selectivity of data used and interpretation.

### E. Values and ethics while publication and using the research finding

Publication could involve value judgments. Objectivity in research publication is questioned whenever use of logical arguments and presentation of evidence is influenced by personal and/or social value judgments. When the research funder reserves the right over an empirical research, or the political power holds the control for decision making, the research findings might be value oriented through misinterpretation of the data to use for their own favor.

## VI. OPPORTUNITY TO PROMOTE OBJECTIVE AND ETHICAL EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

Research need to achieve the criteria of validity, reliability and generalizability. McNeill (1990) suggested the researcher needs to search for objective or value free knowledge. However, if values intrude into empirical research, it does not mean that the research outcome is completely biased. Berger (1991) mentioned the researcher needs to be concerned with the practical applicability and consequences of his/her findings, and moves out from realms of values and ideas that he shares with other researchers. Regardless social or natural, empirical research cannot avoid value relevance in the research. However, there is still opportunity to promote objectivity in research to an expected extent to achieve valid, reliable and generalizable findings.

Mixed methods can provide stronger evidence for a conclusion through convergence and corroboration of findings through triangulation. A great challenge of a researcher is to be moved by the conflict between faith and truth. Academic and professional knowledge is important for a researcher to trace multidisciplinary notion from theoretical and practical stance while doing research. Integrity and effective analytical ability to put the theoretical debates in practice of the researcher assists to reserve the place of objectivity, so that the research outcome could not be contaminated by individual biasness. Critical analysis of literature has the potentials to enhance value free research concepts. Researcher needs to be aware about the changing conditions of ideas, beliefs as well as the knowledge to define social problems.

McNeill (1990) asserted about the concept of 'value-relevance' that the choice of research topic may well be influenced by values of a personal context, but these 'value-commitments' should not leak into the methods of research. The researcher needs to be aware about selecting the research methods. Comprehensible and standardized concepts and definition development of the research problem can guide the research well to be focused to the research objectives. Secondary sources need to be used with care. It is important to be aware of where the information comes from and to remember that some sources are more valid than others. Ahmed (2010) pointed out that utilization of quantitative research approach (i.e. quantitative data management,

statistical analysis) have more potentials of becoming value free compared to qualitative though the methods need to be rationale to the data required for a research. He also mentioned, the researcher needs to be conscious about representativeness of the sample of the study. In the case of availability of resource (i.e. time, man power), random sampling is more reliable compared to non-probabilistic sampling methods (i.e. convenience, purposive methods) to produce value free responses. He suggested, patience, self-control and open mind of the researcher are important to minimize intrusion of personal values in research.

Assurance of confidentiality and anonymity of the participants in the research can persuade the participants to provide authentic information. For avoiding the risk of contamination of evidence provided by the participants, any gifts can be provided to them after participation (possibly without pre-announcement). While informed consent might distort the internal behavior, the information regarding the target groups can be obtained from the person who knows very well about the behavior of the target people. For example, a traffic police can be interviewed about pedestrian behavior. However, there is matter of ethical acceptance about collecting second hand evidence in this way. The researcher might clarify the significance of the type of approach.

The questions in the 'interview schedule' (the questionnaire/ the inventory of the questions to ask, or topics to discuss with the participants) for interviews, discussions need to be very carefully structured. Pilot testing of the interview schedule might increase the acceptability to all stakeholders (the researcher, participants and the funders) to extract the authentic information from the participants. Moreover, participant observation technique requires that the researcher live among the group under study. Sharing information among other researchers and the participants increases the possibility of value neutrality.

Interpretation from the analyzed data is the most critical stage, where values intrude in research. The research findings need to have validity that the findings/ outcome are presented truly. Providing explicit evidences for generating the findings can promote objectivity of research. It is needed to enhance reliability by clarifying the methods of the research in the publication, and consistency testing of the data based on which conclusion is generated. It is needed to attempt determining generalizability (wider claims about the general occurrence of the findings) by comparing the research with others. Finally, academic and professional ethics stir the opportunity of value free research. Finally, integrity, truthfulness, responsibility, commitment and comprehensive contextual knowledge of the researchers are important for value free research to generate high impact empirical knowledge.

## VII. CONCLUSIONS

It is evident that objectivity and ethics are very crucial in empirical research for improving knowledge and contributing to decision making related to society and nature. However, intrusion of personal, participants and funders' values (i.e. bias, belief, presupposition about the research findings) in research is unavoidable during all of the stages of empirical research process. This research theoretically explains whether logical value-relevance and/or disregarding ethics to some extent ruin the reliability, validity and generalizability of research for generating new empirical knowledge or not. This article presents that the values and beliefs of the stakeholders intrude in empirical research both consciously and unconsciously. It is also recognized that sometimes, research process prevents maintaining research ethics. During every stages of empirical research, there is possibility of intrusion of personal, participants and funders' values. However, it does not mean that value relevance and/or contravening ethics completely ruin the reliability, validity and generalizability of research.

There are possibilities to attain objectivity in research through mitigating the impacts of the values and maintaining the ethics.

The researcher needs to be conscious, honest about personal values and beliefs, and recognize the position of these values during research development, data collection and generating outcome. Appropriate research design, effective sample design, carefully data collection, and data interpretation might enhance objectivity of empirical research. And thus, knowledge obtained through objective and ethical empirical research can play important role for benefit of the society and nature. This article claims though absolute value free empirical research is not possible, relative value free empirical research is possible through effective tactics during all of the stages of research that can produce reliable, valid and generalizable knowledge.

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