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FEATURE

Researcher's Social Responsibility: Challenges and Solutions

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Abstract. *Research plays an important role in any major development, and higher education institutions are expected to produce research to contribute to development. Research production and dissemination through scholarly avenues are expected from faculty in higher education institutions around the world. Scholars may have different reasons why they conduct, produce, and disseminate the outputs of research. Among them, one common and less discussed aspect they all share is their social responsibility. This topic is not commonly discussed in scholarly circles, although it is incidentally scattered across the fields. Based on a careful analysis of the existing literature, this paper is meant to bring this discussion to light by synthesizing seven major social responsibility problems and proposing some practical paths that researchers can take while conducting, disseminating, and implementing the outcome of their research studies. The seven major social responsibility problems were gleaned from a thematic analysis of the existing literature. The proposed guidelines are meant to guide researchers to address their social responsibility while they generate more discussion to make this issue of researchers' social responsibility more visible in scholarly circles.*

Keywords: research, social responsibility, higher education, scholarly publication, research production, research dissemination, conference presentation

Introduction

Social responsibility (SR) is a concept quite well known in both academic and professional fields, especially in the business world. It refers to people's duty of protecting and caring for other people and the environment. Society at large, including researchers, is responsible for protecting those who are unable to protect

themselves (Allen, 2009). This responsibility is both a moral and ethical obligation for everyone. In research, this obligation is expected from scholars whether their research participants or respondents are aware of their rights or not.

It can be quite disturbing when scholars obsess with carrying out research just for the sake of research, for career advancement, or for personal gain. Educational research is expected to and should always be about improving human life and making the world a better place to live in (Creswell, 2012; Wa-Mbaleka, 2016). All other aspects of educational research are secondary. Yet, the expected primary focus of educational research is sometimes given a secondary role is forgotten or simply ignored. This loss of focus raises questions about the morality of educational research practice

Discussing researchers' SR is a complex task because SR is linked to both ethical and moral conditions, two complex issues. Ethical standards are interpreted and applied differently in different settings. Additionally, when it comes to ethics review boards (ERB) policies and guidelines, clear-cut SR requirements may sometimes be incomplete or absent. This paper is not the solution to all the researchers' SR problems. It is simply an attempt to start the discussion by providing a general understanding of researchers' SR and how to practically ensure SR in research. The paper is based mainly on literature from different fields and different parts of the world, as will be seen in the selection of the cited literature.

The purpose of this manuscript, therefore, is twofold. First, it synthesizes the literature on common SR problems. It then proposes some practical solutions and best practices to deal with those problems. As a result, the paper is expected to generate constructive discussion on SR in educational research in general.

Defining Social Responsibility

In this manuscript, SR is understood as the researcher's moral and ethical obligation to uphold the highest research ethical practices and to "attend to the foreseeable societal impacts of their work, particularly as these impacts affect the safety, health or welfare of the society. In part that responsibility flows from privileged status" (Bird, 2014, SR section, para. 2). The researcher is in a position of privilege, having access to participant information, avenues for research, and, very likely, an audience for research findings. Indeed, research must be carried out ethically and morally (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Ward & Delamont, 2020). Additionally, before undertaking any study, researchers must think about the impact it will have on the involved people and research setting. Failing to think intentionally about these may be a source of possible SR negligence or carelessness in research.

The reality is that "the issues of scientific freedom and responsibility are inseparable" (Edsall, 1975, p. 5). We cannot push for true scientific freedom without promoting researchers' SR. Regularly, "scientific results greatly influence society because policymakers and voters rely on science when making decisions" (Corley, Kim, & Scheufele, 2016, p. 113). Carrying on research carelessly can have a significantly negative impact on lives and major policy decisions that may affect thousands, millions, and sometimes billions of people. It is therefore the obligation of all the researchers to conduct research effectively so that it can contribute positively to society (Committee on Science, 2009). The primary focus should always be on improving human and animal life, as well as the environment where they live or work.

Identifying the Seven Common Social Responsibility Problems

To explore what was available in the literature about researchers' SR, we consulted EBSCOhost, Academic Search Premier, and Google Scholar and also used Google search. We used content analysis and thematic analysis to tabulate the problems and relevant solutions of researchers' SR. Data saturation, as understood in qualitative research (Creswell & Poth, 2016), was achieved within the first 27 articles of the 45 articles that were found through the search. Data saturation is reached when themes from the data start repeating themselves in the data. As a result of this analysis, the following seven major SR challenges emerged: (a) issues with ethical requirements, (b) issues with moral responsibilities, (c) unregulated ethical issues, (d) lack of true partnership, (e) lack of clear definition of SR in research, (f) the complexity of SR in multi-national research, (g) and limited discussion of SR in educational research. Manuscripts were included in this analysis if they discussed social responsibilities either from the problem or the solution perspective. Only studies published until 2018 were included. Table 1 synthesizes the different issues about these seven problems.

Table 1
Major Social Responsibility Problems and Related Issues

Major Problems		Related Issues	
1.	**Issues with ethical requirements**	a.	Research involving some unethical practices (Altavilla, 2011; Anderson & Proto, 2016; Dumas, Serfass, Brown, & Sherman, 2014; Finder & Korenman, 2014; Gbadegesin & Wendler, 2006; Hansen, 2006; Johnson, 1991)
		b.	Participants' input not considered in data analysis (Anderson & Proto, 2016; Boutron & Ravaud, 2018)
		c.	Misrepresentation of participants in reports (Anderson & Proto, 2016; Boutron & Ravaud, 2018)
		d.	Lack of total control of confidentiality in digitized data (Anderson & Proto, 2016; Corley et al., 2016; Dumas et al., 2014)
		e.	Communities, research participants, and lab workers exposed to scientific research hazards (Balas, Arruebo, Urrutia, & Santamaria, 2010; Bird, 2014; Borsen, Antia, & Glessmer, 2013; Bulger, 2009; Corley et al., 2016; Dumas et al., 2014; Gbadegesin & Wendler, 2006)
		f.	Research malpractice: fabrication, falsification, plagiarism, sexual misconduct/harassment, misuse/abuse of research findings (Gbadegesin & Wendler, 2006; Hansen, 2006; Jamshidi et al., 2014)
		g.	Bias in research design/methods selection → participants not accurately represented (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Boutron & Ravaud, 2018)
2.	**Issues with moral responsibility**	a.	Dilemma of whether or not to report oppressive practices (Allen, 2009; Finder & Korenman, 2014; Hansen, 2006)
		b.	Taking advantage of developing countries (Dumas et al., 2014; Hastings Center, 2004; Hyder, Pratt, Ali, Kass, & Sewankambo, 2014; Jamshidi et al., 2014; Landes, 2005)
		c.	Exploitation → research practices held at a lower standard in developing countries (Altavilla, 2011; Delandshere, 2004; Dumas et al., 2014; Gbadegesin &

		Wendler, 2006; Hastings Center, 2004; Hyder et al., 2014) d. Research participants not benefiting from the outcome of the research (Altavilla, 2011; Delandshere, 2004; Dumas et al., 2014; Gbadegesin & Wendler, 2006; Hastings Center, 2004; Hyder et al., 2014) e. ERB rules continuously silencing the marginalized ((Anderson & Proto, 2016; Bulger, 2009; Dauda & Dierickx, 2012; Dumas et al., 2014; Hansen, 2006; Hastings Center, 2004) f. Dilemma between ERB requirements and human expectations (Anderson & Proto, 2016; Bulger, 2009; Hansen, 2006; Hastings Center, 2004)
3.	**Unregulated ethical issues**	No regulation on ethical issues of the digital world (Anderson & Proto, 2016; Bulger, 2009; Corley et al., 2016)
4.	**Lack of real partnership**	a. Lack of true partnership between researcher and participants → power imbalance (Dauda & Dierickx, 2012; Hastings Center, 2004; Hyder et al., 2014) b. Lack of equal partnership between developed and developing countries (London, 2002; Syed et al., 2012)
5.	**Lack of a clear definition of SR in research**	a. Differing definitions of SR (Anderson & Proto, 2016; Bird, 2014; Borsen et al., 2013; Bulger, 2009; Dauda & Dierickx, 2012; Dumas et al., 2014) b. No concise definition for SR in research (Finder & Korenman, 2014; Gbadegesin & Wendler, 2006; Hansen, 2006; Hyder et al., 2014)
6.	**Complexity of SR in multi-national research**	What works in one country may not necessarily work in another country (Delandshere, 2004; Dumas et al., 2014; Finder & Korenman, 2014; Hansen, 2006; Hyder et al., 2014)
7.	**Limited discussion of SR in educational research**	Most SR literature is on research in health and technology and not much in other fields (Bird, 2014)

Table 1 has summarized the issues that commonly showed up in the reviewed literature. These are quite significant problems that cannot go on without being addressed if the focus of research is truly meant to improve people's lives. Intentional steps need to be taken to prevent and address them. The next section analyzes the ramifications of each of the seven major challenges and proposes some relevant solutions and best practices. The following section discusses each one of these problems and proposes adequate solutions.

Addressing the Seven Common Social Responsibility Problems

While the previous section summarized the major challenges and issues about SR in research, this one describes each of the seven with more details. It also provides some solutions, given that synthesizing the problems alone is only half of the solution.

Issues Dealing with Ethical Requirements

As indicated above, research is expected to be done ethically. Unfortunately, much research is affected by many ethical issues. This section reports on seven common unethical practices found in research today, as presented in the existing literature.

Research done unethically. For this issue, several practical solutions can be followed. Each institution with a research component must enforce general ethical standards such as those involving privacy, confidentiality, voluntary participation, the greater good, no or limited risk, no harm to the researcher or participants. All institutions with the research component must have and run effective ERBs. Researchers must protect vulnerable groups and provide equal opportunity for anyone interested who meets the selection criteria to have an equal chance to participate. Being honest in the whole research study and being a good steward of research resources are expected of all the researchers. These are some of the fundamental ethical principles found in most ethical standards and expectations.

Participants' input not considered in data analysis. The researcher alone has the power to analyze and interpret the collected data in many cases (Anderson & Proto, 2016). This problem is much more common in quantitative research than in qualitative research since member check is expected in qualitative research (Lichtman, 2013), but not in quantitative research. Member check gives at least a chance to the research participants to check whether the researcher interpreted the data correctly. Some additional practices that researchers can use to address this issue are about including data analysis in the informed consent and stating that the

participants have the right to be part of the data analysis. In the case of qualitative studies, the researcher can state that participants can voluntarily participate in the verification mechanism of data, known as member check.

Misrepresentation of participants in reports. All researchers are expected to be truthful (Wa-Mbaleka, 2016), but, unfortunately, misrepresentation of research participants has been reported in the literature (Anderson & Proto, 2016; Boutron & Ravaud, 2018). It is recommended to permit research participants to check the accuracy of the analysis and interpretation of the data. Furthermore, it may also be important to include secondary data analysis in the informed consent form so that the participants know that their published data may be interpreted by a third party. Failure to do so might actually and unfortunately lead to more likelihood of being misinterpreted. Additionally, it is ideal for the researchers themselves to analyze and interpret their data rather than asking someone else to do it, someone who may not have a good handle on the topic or data.

Lack of total control of confidentiality in digitized data. Confidentiality in research is quite important, but control over confidentiality is more challenging in this digital era (Corley et al., 2016; Delandshere, 2004). For the sake of SR, researchers are encouraged to plan for the responsible and ethical use of digital devices and social media. Additionally, they should avoid sharing data over the internet whenever possible. As much as possible, all the data should be password-protected. Furthermore, the researchers should have a clear plan of storing and eventually destroying collected data.

Communities, research participants, and lab workers exposed to scientific research hazards. This issue pertains more specifically to technological, health, and highly scientific research (Dumas et al., 2014; Gbadegesin & Wendler, 2006) than educational and social research in general. To address this issue, researchers need to have specific measures to protect all who might be directly or indirectly affected by scientific research. Researchers should also add training and enforcement of safety and protection measures before people start taking part in hazardous research experimentation.

Research malpractice: Fabrication, falsification, plagiarism, sexual misconduct/harassment, misuse/abuse of research findings. One would think that scholars would not be involved in research malpractice, but, unfortunately, they continue to be reported in research (Hansen, 2006; Jamshidi et al., 2014). Some solutions can be proposed for this issue. There is a need for better research monitoring mechanisms. Students need to be trained better in the best ethical practices when taking research classes. It has been reported that "a number of research papers have identified a host of factors such as gender, socialisation,

efficiency gain, motivation for study, methodological uncertainties or easy access to electronic information via the Internet and new technologies, as reasons driving plagiarism" (Jereb et al., 2018, p. 1). This problem is a real issue. Researchers need to synthesize and disseminate research findings truthfully, effectively, and efficiently. Researchers need to understand that they are ethically and even legally held accountable for whatever happens during their whole research process. Therefore, an intentional training on best practices in truthful and ethical research conduct and reporting is required.

Bias in research design/methods selection: Participants not accurately represented. Although qualitative researchers acknowledge their bias and some go to the extent of embracing it, they are required to state it, to state their reflexivity or positioning; that is, their bias, beliefs system, philosophical stand, background knowledge, or experience that may have some bearing on data collection, analysis, and interpretation (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Wa-Mbaleka, 2017). In quantitative research, bias is expected to be removed to the best ability of the researchers (Creswell, 2012). The promotion of more qualitative research can also help state the researchers' bias by stating their positioning.

Issues of Moral Responsibility

Researchers are expected to live, act, and speak morally. Some of what is expected in research may require a researcher to take a moral stand that is not stated in the informed consent. This section discusses some of the common moral challenges and dilemmas that researchers face. It also proposes what to do in such challenging situations. These recommendations are in no way exhaustive, as this issue is quite complex in different fields, settings, people, and circumstances.

Dilemma of whether or not to report oppressive practices. This dilemma is a serious one because, on the one hand, a moral researcher would not want to see someone continue suffering unjustly. On the other hand, reporting oppressive behaviors may be a breach of confidentiality (Allen, 2009; Hansen, 2006) although it may also put research participants at risk. Researchers are expected to some degree to be whistleblowers; however, they need to do it tactfully and within the boundaries of ethical practices so as to not put research participants at risk. Again, the rule of "greater good" here must prevail. Some people believe that if it is not a matter of life or death, then the researcher should not report the incident (Surmiak, 2019).

Taking advantage of developing countries. Anyone involved in research internationally is most likely aware of the double standard used in developed and developing countries. Research in developed countries seems to be held at a much higher ethical standard than in developing countries (Dal-Ré, Rid, Emanuel, &

Wendler, 2016). Researchers are expected to empower the communities where they conduct their research (Dumas et al., 2014; Hastings Center, 2004). They should give easier access to the benefits of the research findings. They should provide capability-building activities where needed. Most importantly, they should professionally and ethically treat all the research participants wherever they conduct their research study without any type of discrimination.

Exploitation: Research practices held at a lower standard in developing countries. Using lower standards for research practices in developing countries can lead some researchers to take advantage of research participants and collaborators in those countries (Hastings Center, 2004; Jamshidi et al., 2014; Johnson, 1991). To address this issue, several practices and policies can be developed, enforced, and implemented. Research departments and organizations should institute and enforce equally high standards for social science and clinical research. They should enforce existing ethical and SR rules and policies. They must promote transparency and accountability. They should have national and local regulations and an effective monitoring process. They should have an independent ethics committee. It is also important to assist victims of the research whenever risk and danger are involved in a research project.

Research participants not benefiting from the outcome of the research. Research participants should be the first beneficiaries of the research in which they took part (Durham, Brolan, & Mukandi, 2014; Gbadegesin & Wendler, 2006; Hastings Center, 2004; Jamshidi et al., 2014). The following solutions can help address this issue more effectively. Researchers can intentionally make participants primary beneficiaries of the research. They can state in the informed consent how the research study will benefit the participants. They can explain to the participants how the research project will benefit them. They can educate the public and policymakers about research findings. They can use simple language for the general public in need of understanding and applying the outcome of the research. They can provide clear, practical application of the research findings to the participants, and they can give participants a fair level of benefits.

Ethics Review Board rules continuously silencing the marginalized. There are some research practices, including ERB guidelines, that continue to silence the marginalized participants (Anderson & Proto, 2016; Bulger, 2009; Dauda & Dierickx, 2012). For instance, for a research setting that needs public awareness for positive change to happen, researchers may still feel the need to keep the location confidential due to the privacy of the marginalized groups. Two solutions are proposed here. First, the researchers need to disclose the identity of participants who prefer their identity to be revealed in the research report, even though, by default, participants' identity is expected to be concealed. Additionally, it is important to

intentionally include more marginalized groups in research if that helps improve their situation.

Dilemma between Ethics Review Board requirements and human expectations. Sometimes, there may be some conflict between ERB guidelines and expectations and what participants expect from the researchers (Anderson & Proto, 2016; Bulger, 2009; Hansen, 2006; Hastings Center, 2004). For instance, a researcher may conduct a study in a significantly poor community, but because he or she is only allowed to give tokens of minimum value from ERB, he or she may not want to help more financially in that community. Again, the principle of greater good must apply in a moral dilemma like this. Additionally, researchers must have full disclosure of the risk involved in participating in the research study. Participating with full awareness can help prevent some unnecessary ethical and moral dilemmas.

Unregulated Ethical Issues

One of the complaints found in research ethics is that there is no common regulation on ethical issues of the digital world (Corley et al., 2016; Dumas et al., 2014). With the fast technological advance, there is a need for the update of existing ethical guidelines and standards (Spinello, 2006). Additionally, both ethical and social responsibilities need to be included in the planning and execution of the research. New ethical issues that come with the digitization of the world must be addressed with the relevant experts. Lastly, ethical standards need to be established for new and emerging research methods and designs. This need is especially important for qualitative research because it continues to generate new designs and methods. Additionally, many ethical standards were established decades ago when the research was predominantly quantitative. They need to be continuously updated as more and more qualitative research is produced.

Lack of Real Partnership

The research partnership is important. It includes a partnership between researchers and participants and researchers working together on a multi-national research project. A real partnership needs to be established to enhance ethical and moral standards in the conduct of research. All these are part of the researchers' SR.

Lack of true partnership between researcher and participants: Power imbalance. While research participants were known as and considered "subjects" decades ago, they need to be considered as respondents, participants, and co-researchers. They are not "subjects" who have to submit to the researchers who are supposed to be powerful and to know it all. Researchers go to the research participants to learn. Researchers must promote and enforce a real partnership with

their research participants (Dauda & Dierickx, 2012; Hastings Center, 2004; Hyder et al., 2014). Researchers need to conduct participative community-based research and promote mutual trust and respect. Not only does such practice help collect more valid and reliable or trustworthy data, but it also helps humanize the research participants.

Lack of equal partnership between developed and developing countries. It is true that when there is a research partnership between researchers from developed and developing countries, there is some tendency to have some power imbalance in favor of the researchers from developing countries (London, 2002). Researchers in a partnership must have equal rights and responsibilities. Some should no longer enjoy better privileges than others. The terms of the memorandum of agreement between the two parties must be developed together and must emphasize the need for equal partnership. A third party may need to be brought in who understands the backgrounds of the two parties to be able to prepare a balanced partnership.

Lack of a Clear Definition of Social Responsibility in Research

This problem of lack of a clear definition of SR in research may be the source of many issues found in upholding SR in research. There are different definitions of SR in different fields. There does not seem to be a concise and agreed-upon definition for SR in research. Below are some solutions that can be used to address this issue.

Differing definitions of social responsibility. There are differing definitions of SR (Anderson & Proto, 2016; Bird, 2014; Borsen et al., 2013; Bulger, 2009; Dauda & Dierickx, 2012; Dumas et al., 2014). Trying to outline and implement SR guidelines in research with different definitions can only lead to more confusion. Therefore, experts on this issue need to come up with a new, more practical, and more inclusive definition of SR in general. A definition that can cut across fields would be ideal.

No concise definition for social responsibility in research. With no concise definition of SR in research (Finder & Korenman, 2014; Gbadegesin & Wendler, 2006; Hansen, 2006; Hyder et al., 2014), it makes sense why SR is not frequently discussed in the research. For this issue, SR experts need to provide a philosophical and practical definition of SR as pertaining to research. Researchers need to focus on both their own and participants' welfare, social justice, and improvement. Last, all researchers need to match planned ethical practices, as seen in research proposals, with actual action, when carrying on their research. Sometimes, the research proposals have most of what is needed to conduct an ethical research study, but the actual research study does not follow what was planned in the proposal.

Complexity of Social Responsibility in Multi-National Research

What works in one country may not necessarily work in another country (Finder & Korenman, 2014; Gbadegesin & Wendler, 2006; Hansen, 2006; Hyder et al., 2014). When conducting a multi-national research study, researchers need to learn more about SR in research in the involved countries. Additionally, researchers must learn about the culture of the participants and their research setting. They must follow the culture of the research setting and be culturally sensitive during the research study.

Limited Discussion of Social Responsibility in Educational Research

Most SR literature is on research in health and technology (Bird, 2014). To deal with this issue, there is a need for more training on SR in educational research and research courses. Educational researchers need to produce more literature on SR in educational research. Additionally, academic institutions may consider using SR in research as a theme for academic or research conferences, seminars, symposia, and colloquia.

Conclusion

Social responsibility does exist in research and it is important, although not much discussed in academic settings and meetings. It requires increased attention and intentionality. SR in research is more than current ERB ethical standards in many institutions. ERBs need to do more by clearly including SR guidelines and expectations. ERBs must redefine ethical standards to be more inclusive of the current social and environmental reality. Ethical guidelines provided by ERBs need to be updated regularly to reflect more both new ethical issues but also specifically address social responsibilities of the researchers as discussed in this paper. More intentional training is needed in SR to strengthen research practice.

Researchers should critically consider Dauda and Dierickx's (2012) position that research "should not stop at only generating new knowledge (as research is mostly thought to be) but also. . . [it] should be translated into tangible benefits to the society" at large (p. 142). Research should not be conducted just for the sake of research. It should be conducted responsibly to improve life. It should contribute to making this world a better place to live.

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