



GUIDELINES PERTAINING TO RESEARCH ETHICS

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar University Delhi (AUD) is a premier university in the field of social sciences and humanities, that is guided by Dr. Ambedkar's vision of bridging equality and social justice with academic excellence through research and teaching. The university is strongly committed to the highest standards of ethical research and practice. The ethical framework laid out in these guidelines emerge from an understanding that truth generation and interpretation, which are central to humanities and social science research, are fraught with dilemmas. This is particularly due to the fact that such research often involves working with human beings and communities, including marginalised communities.

Research ethics are not merely about 'doing the right thing' at the individual, community and institutional levels. These guidelines are therefore oriented to something more fundamental than moral prescriptions or 'do's' and 'don'ts'. They seek to enable the creation of an ethos and culture of respect for various ethical practices without compromising on academic freedom and research autonomy. Additionally, these guidelines aim at

- helping researchers become cognisant of their ethical views and attitudes;
- raising researchers' awareness to conflicting standards, considerations and interests;
- protecting and regulating relationships with individuals and groups directly affected by the research;
- promoting sound research practice at the institutional level, associated with the quest for truth and independence;
- enhancing the ability of researchers to make well-founded decisions in such contexts; and
- striking a balance between academic freedom and social responsibility.

These guidelines are based on foundational principles such as dignity, respect, equality, privacy, consent, confidentiality, integrity and responsibility to participants and the research community. Each of these principles and their import in the context of humanities and social science research is given in some detail below.

Integrity in the Research Process

The primary purpose of research at AUD is to generate knowledge within an atmosphere that nurtures the freedom to ask relevant questions within a set of norms that promote integrity. The idea of knowledge has been identified with the pursuit of truth. However, it is apparent that both within the sciences and more emphatically within



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Humanities and the Social sciences the idea of truth remains a contested one. An ethical framework is vital to the social scientific practice of research precisely because it is impossible for a social scientist to practice outside some vision of the human condition. Some of the ethical requirements of research include the freedom to pursue research questions, originality, accuracy, relevance, integrity, accountability and impartiality.

Academic Freedom

The idea of research has several different connotations depending on the context. Within the space of Universities, however, research is often guided by the quest for greater understanding that may or may not seem immediately applicable, relevant or driven by the most popular paradigms and ideological orientations of the time. AUD will be committed to maintaining academic freedom of researchers. This will include the freedom to ask debatable questions and to adopt diverse theoretical approaches to their area of enquiry.

However, researchers will be required to give due consideration to the framework within which this freedom ought to be exercised. This framework will require researchers to be responsible to

1. Participants (see the section below on conducting the research)
2. Perspective of the Supervisor, RAC and Programme Team in the case of supervised research work of research scholars
3. Members of a collaborative team.

Originality

Originality is a primary requirement of all research and is of paramount importance. However, the notion of originality differs amongst disciplines. This may include asking new research questions, taking a new theoretical position towards a problem, approaching a new set of participants, new texts or new sites or contexts or using new methods to ask old research questions. Since AUD is committed to interdisciplinarity and engaged research, the articulation of their personal location in relation to the question asked may be thought of as a valued aspect of originality.

Research at AUD is committed to accuracy and correct reporting of the data sources. The ethical requirement of accuracy will imply retaining the original character of the data even while the interpretations may be at variance with the voice or text received. Impartiality in social science will be reflected in the reflectivity with regards to the researcher's theoretical location while determining the research question, interpreting the data and writing.

Relevance

There has been an increased emphasis on the criteria of relevance in recent writing in social sciences. While asking questions that may help locate answers to social



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problems are to be valued, this must not result in jeopardising the theoretical potential. The ethical framework of research at AUD will value academic freedom to pursue research questions that are debatable within a framework of due diligence towards **participants' interests**.

Fairness

Fairness involves honesty in the research process. This includes integrity in reporting data mentioned above, freedom from plagiarism, making accurate references to past work on the subject and establishing norms about data sharing and ownership.

Equality

Research work will often be in a context of unequal power relations such as those between supervisor and research student or senior and junior colleagues or researcher and participant. AUD remains committed to the principle of equality. There are many guidelines already stipulated in AUD that pertain to matters of equality such as those related to gender, caste, race etc. These will apply to research related relationships as well.

Research ethics includes encouragement of dissemination of findings. In research work involving supervision or collaboration, clarity must be established early in the research process about ownership of data and the right to publish.

Conducting Research

The following principles are the cornerstone of high-quality research at AUD. While each principle is essential, together they enable the scholars to engage in exemplary practices and create a strong culture for ethical research. It is essential for researchers to use these principles as guidelines as they attempt to negotiate through research dilemmas to decide ethical courses of action.

Individuals in research

Research in all disciplines of humanities and social sciences, must be grounded in fundamental respect for human dignity. This means recognising individual rights, safeguarding participants from physical and harm and unreasonable strain, and respecting their privacy. It is necessary to consider these issues at all stages of the research process including choosing a research topic, developing a research design, collecting data, synthesising information to develop reports and during dissemination of findings through presentations or publications.

Informed Consent and Obligation to Notify

Researchers need to share adequate information about the research including, the purpose of the study, the nature of engagement required from the participant, the duration of the study, the source of funding, intended use of results, the risks associated



21/05/2020



with participation and the long-term consequences of participation. As far as possible, researchers must have written approval from participants, prior to engaging in data collection. However, oral consent may be recorded where participants are unable to provide it in a written form. Information must be shared in easy to understand language considering language, culture and literacy levels of the participants.

In addition to obtaining it is necessary to respect the privacy and autonomy of participants throughout the research process. Participants must be allowed to withdraw from a study at any time. In general, the data from participants ought to be used only for the purpose that the participant consents to.

Confidentiality

Researchers have an obligation to protect the personal identifying information of participants, especially vulnerable individuals, communities and groups, to minimise risks of harm, except where the participant has consented to sharing of personal details, for example testimonials. Personal information must be de-identified and stored safely, separately from other data to prevent unauthorised use. Instead reference numbers may be used to connect information. When disseminating information through presentations or publications, it is necessary to anonymise the data. When gathering or storing information, it is important to consider long term use of the data, including placement of data in archives, or use of data by other researchers.

Safeguarding from Harm

Researchers should take reasonable steps to ensure that participants are not exposed to physical pain or mental harm, as a result of their involvement in a study. Participants may feel discomfort, go through re-traumatisation, or experience serious mental strain. Researchers have a responsibility to be sensitive to such issues and make efforts to minimise such risks. Risk is considered to be minimal when the anticipated discomfort is similar to what the individual ordinarily experiences in daily life or routine tests. Risk reduction strategy could involve providing the participant with an emergency phone number or a support person/group in the community where the participant lives. It is the researcher's duty to adopt such measures to minimise the possibility of harm to the participant arising from the research. When unintended harm is caused, researchers need to inform the AUD Ethics Review Board and take actions to minimise the risks.

Protection of Children and Other Vulnerable Population

Researchers need to make special efforts to protect children and other vulnerable populations from harm. The issue of consent is more complex for research on children than with adults. Children may not be aware that their participation is voluntary and may feel the need to respect authority. They may also not be aware of the long-term consequences of participating in a study. It is necessary to seek permission or assent from parents or legal guardians when the participants are below the age of 18 years. Moreover, children must be informed that their participation is voluntary and they may



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choose to withdraw from the study. Researchers must know enough about children to be able to adapt methods for data collection, when necessary.

Some individuals may have difficulty understanding the scope of the study and giving informed consent due to mental illness, intellectual disability, persons affected by dementia and other conditions. Researchers have a special responsibility to protect the integrity of such persons. Permission or assent must be obtained from legal guardians of the participants of the vulnerable groups. However, as with children, researchers need to consider and respect the perspective of the individuals.

Conflict of Interest

Researchers need to avoid getting into situations which may result in conflict of interest or disclose such issues to the ethics committee to address such issues at the earliest. Such situations arise when the researcher's personal, professional and financial gains deter them from engaging in the research process in an unbiased manner.

Research Ethics Review Board: Nature and Functions

A simple structure has been envisaged for research ethics clearance at the level of programmes, schools and centres. Research at these units will be governed by the existing rules of AUD related to research, the AUD Research Ethics Regulations and the AUD Ethics Review Board constituted by the Vice Chancellor.

Faculty and research staff proposals for research will be expected to comply with the Research Ethics Regulations in drafting their proposals. Before final submission to the Dean Research and Consultancy (R&C), all such proposals must be scrutinised by the Deans and Directors of respective Schools and Centres for a review of ethics before being forwarded to Dean R&C.

Deans of Schools and Directors of Centres may utilise existing programme committee members of AUD with expertise in the subject area of the research proposal and also invite other members of AUD or outside AUD with such expertise, for the scrutiny of the research proposal including for ethical review. Due care must be taken to not unduly delay the process of forwarding of proposals.

The AUD Ethics Review Board will be constituted by the Vice Chancellor of AUD. The Board will (1) examine the project and proposals forwarded to them by Dean R&C vis-à-vis ethics, (2) examine projects and proposals which are not covered by the terms of the AUD research ethics framework, and (3) advice Dean R&C on ethics related issues. The Board will meet at least twice during a year.

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