

Original Research Article

An Investigation into Researchers' Awareness and Consideration of Ethical Issues in Social Science Research: A Survey of Selected Research Centres of the Ministry of Scientific Research and Innovation, Yaounde, Cameroon

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates researchers' awareness and consideration of ethical issues in social research. The study focuses on a broad range of ethical issues that would normally be taken into consideration in the course of doing social research. The main focus in this study was to place emphasis on the notion that social researchers ought to be aware of the ethical issues that make up their practice, and be in a position to be able to apply or consider these principles in the course of their work. This study is a mixed method research design employing both quantitative survey with some open-ended questions. The population for the study was made up of all the 140 researchers in the two research structures or centres involved in this study. Fifty questionnaires were administered and 46 were completed and returned, representing a 92 percent return rate. The results of this study show that participants were generally aware of ethical issues in social research, albeit to varying degrees. In spite of this awareness, it would seem, in most cases, there was no strong indication that participants were likely to consider/ have considered same in their work. It was partly concluded that to enhance the awareness and consideration of ethical issues of the researchers in the centres involved in this study would require an attitudinal shift concerning the positive contributions and the benefits that research ethics could make to social science research –a shift which could bring a significant change in ethical practices in the centres; and lead to the possibility of developing in-house ethical statements or principles to guide researchers in their work.

Introduction

Cameroon is a sub-Saharan African nation of about 24.7 million inhabitants (United Nations Population Fund, 2018) located in the Central African region. Like most countries in the region, Cameroon has a vast research community, represented in research institutes and universities. These establishments undertake research in a diverse number of fields including medical sciences, agricultural sciences, social sciences, natural sciences and physical sciences (Nexus Partnership Ltd, 2019).

To ensure ethical probity, the various research activities going on in these establishments need to be regulated. The main structure responsible for this task in Cameroon is the Ministry of Scientific Research and Innovation (MINRESI). This ministry is charged with the coordination of all operational research through its Division for Research and Programme Policy. However, other structures, both private and public, support MINRESI in this role; for instance, the Ministry of Health - through its Division for Health Operational Research is charged with 'overseeing administrative clearance to conduct health research...' (Fomboh, 2017, p. 20, citing COHRED, 2008); while the Ministry of Higher Education coordinates academic research, ensuring that universities across the country are ethically engaged in their own research.

Aside from acting as the coordinating ministry for the operational research sector in Cameroon, MINRESI has research institutes and centres that carry out a wide range of scientific research in different fields, with some of them having units responsible for ethical issues. Some of the institutes or centres include: Institute of Agricultural Research for Development (IRAD); Institute of Geological and Mining Research (IRGM); Institute of Medical Research and Studies on Medicinal Plants (IMPM); National Centre for Education (CNE); the National Institute for Cartography (INC); and National Committee for Technological Development (CNDT) – all acronyms are in French.

For this study, four key concepts will be examined. These include: awareness, consideration, ethics and research ethics. According to the English Oxford Living Dictionaries, to be aware means to have ‘knowledge or perception of a situation or fact’; in other words, to be conscious, to recognise, be in realisation of, to have understanding, appreciation, and acknowledgement of an event, situation or fact. The term consideration, on the other hand, has been defined by the same dictionary as ‘a fact or motive taken into account in deciding something’ – in this case, in making decisions regarding ethical issues in research. Having understood what the terms awareness and consideration are, ethics and research ethics need to be defined.

As a system of moral principles, ethics enable individuals to ‘judge their actions as right or wrong, good or bad’ (Denscombe, 2010, p. 59), and give direction to research professionals ‘when confronting ethical dilemmas or confusing situations’ (Crossman, 2017, para 1) even when the laws of the state do not provide for that. Ethics equally refer to ‘... self-regulatory guidelines for making decisions...’ and ‘... as a method, procedure, or perspective for...analyzing complex problems and issues’ (Resnik, 2015, para 5). Research ethics, on the other hand, ‘... deals with the application of moral rules and professional codes of conduct in the collection, collation, analysis, reporting, and dissemination of information on research subjects (whether they are individuals or groups) as regards the right to privacy, confidentiality, and informed consent’ (Falusi, 2008, p. 29).

Available literature on research ethics seems to indicate that ‘ethics of biomedical research’ has enjoyed more attention from academics and researchers than ‘the ethics of social science research’ (Wassenaar and Mamotte, 2012, Abstract). Corroborating this claim, Vuban and Eta (2018) maintain that research conducted on ethical issues in developing countries has mostly been in clinical studies. This perhaps explains why there seem to be a dearth of studies in social science research dedicated to ethical issues in sub-Saharan Africa. And this might also likely to do with the relative newness of research ethics in the field of social sciences in Africa (Vuba and Eta, 2018); as well as the fact that ‘social scientists are generally inadequately trained in [the use of] research ethics’ (Wassenaar and Mamotte, 2012, Abstract).

In the same vein, writing much earlier, Rwomire and Nyamnjoh (2007) note that although research structures are expected to pay great attention to ethical issues as they carry out their day-to-day research activities, ‘the ethics of research has tended to be neglected’ in some of these organisations. Commenting specifically on the state of research ethics in Cameroon, Munung et al. (2011) note that ‘[t]raining in research ethics in Cameroon is mainly in the form of workshops; [and that] research ethics is not part of the curriculum of universities in Cameroon’ (p. 93). Corroborating Rwomire and Nyamnjoh (2007) and Munung et al. (2011) assertions, while referring specifically to the state of bioethics in Cameroon, Fomboh (2017) states that ‘very few academic institutions in Cameroon have embraced [bioethics] as a permanent subject on the curriculum and there are very few initiatives with an interest solely in bioethics’ (p. 22).

It can be argued that, if bioethics is not a permanent subject in the curriculum of universities in Cameroon considering the attention given to it as against ethics in social research, then the situation is not likely to be different regarding ethical training in social science research. Furthermore, Fomboh (2017; citing Tangwa, 2007) maintains that research ethics is not gaining grounds in Cameroon in spite of the ‘increasing research activity ...’ (p. 22) going on in the country. To buttress this claim, the author cites Cameroon Ministry of Health to have noted that “... many health research projects [some of which may have a social perspective] are still undertaken without any ethical and/or administrative clearance.”

This paper, therefore, sets out to investigate researchers’ awareness and consideration of ethical issues in research in two research structures or centres (the National Centre for Education and the National Committee for Technological Development) of the Ministry of Scientific Research and Innovation (MINRESI), Yaounde, Cameroon.

Awareness and consideration of ethical principles in research

To fully appreciate the interplay between awareness, consideration and social researchers' eventual use of ethical principles in their research work, inspiration is drawn from the field of marketing. According to the Snovio Inc. (2018), a potential customer for a product or service must pass through a 'marketing journey' made up of three main stages in order to buy the product or pay for the service. This includes: 1) the awareness stage, when the client discovers the existence of the 'product or service'; 2) the consideration stage, when the client 'takes interest in the product or service'; and 3) the decision-making stage – this is the final stage in which the client makes a decision on whether to buy the product or service.

The social researcher equally transits through the stages of awareness, consideration, and decision – making, in arriving at the decision on whether or not to apply ethical principles to their research studies. It should be noted, however, that being aware of ethical norms or principles does not automatically translate to applying them. Just as with the product or service, where a customer may decide not to buy or pay for, even after becoming aware of it, a researcher too may choose to not apply ethical principles even after knowing that these principles exist. In other words, it is not unlikely that some individuals could actually be aware of the existence of ethical guidelines, and yet fail to make use of them, or if they do, interpret them differently (Resnik, 2015), sometimes because of their ontological and epistemological positions (Powell, Fitzgerald, Taylor, and Graham, 2012, p. 8, citing Dew, 2007), as well as some axiological considerations (the values and beliefs that they hold) (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011).

It is scarcely contestable that for social science research to make a positive impact social scientists must be aware of the ethical codes and principles that underpin their practice, and be able to consider these principles in their day to day research activity, because researchers 'have no status or privilege that puts them above the moral and legal codes that operate for the rest of the society' (Denscombe, 2010, p. 60). This means that research must be undertaken and trusted as having been done according to certain standards including standards of ethics, because questions have often been asked 'whether researchers are obeying the norms of their profession and if their research is honest and reliable' (Parry, 2013, p. 36). More so, researchers who work in native communities 'have been widely criticized for their disregard to local ethics, adhering only to the conventions of scientific research' (Piquemal, 2001, p. 65).

In a study conducted by Munung et al. (2012) titled 'Are students kidding with health research ethics? The case of HIV/AIDS research in Cameroon', the authors found that '[o]f 174 theses/dissertations on HIV, ethics approval was documented in 17 (9.77%) and informed consent in 77 (47.83%).' They also found out that '[t]he right to discontinue participation in the study ... [was] scarcely ever mentioned (p. 1). The authors concluded that '... given the current state of the art of research ethics around the world, student-scientists in Cameroon would seem to be merely kidding with research ethics' (p. 1). Based on this conclusion, the authors suggested 'that training in health research ethics ... be incorporated in the curriculum of universities in Cameroon in order that the next generation of scientists may be better equipped with thorough knowledge and practice of HRE [health research ethics]' (p. 1). Although the study referred to above was carried out in the area of health research, the situation is not likely to be different regarding the conduct of research in the social sciences.

Since 'the desire to participate in a research study depends on the participant's willingness to share his or her experience (Orb et al., 2001, citing Ramos, 1989, p. 93), the methods used to collect data should not lead to coercion or pressure on participants to participate in the study (Adams et al., 2013) . It is, therefore, important for us as researchers in the pursuit of the acceptability of our studies, to aim to 'balance research principles' (Adams et al.), by giving consideration to issues of honesty and transparency - which involves avoiding all forms of plagiarism, data manipulation, fixing of results, among others (Wassenaar, 2006); not disregarding the well-being of participants, because '...without goodwill and trust of the public large parts of social research will become starved of information' (Denscombe, 2010, p. 60). This means that the success of social research depends on the 'goodwill and trust' of the study participants such that 'it is in social researchers' own self-interest to behave ethically' (Denscombe, p. 60); by striving 'for integrity: of ourselves, of the information we provide, and of the organisation for which we work (Carbo, 2003, Para. 8). This is more so because 'ethically sound techniques are perceived as adding to the value of research' (Powell et al., 2012, p. 3, citing Thomas & O'Kane, 1998).

Therefore, as people working in social research, 'our ability to do our jobs well will depend upon how well we understand what the ... [ethical rules regulating our practice are]; why we have these particular rules rather than others...' (Jones and Bartlett Learning, nd, Chapter 1, p. 3). Social scientists are, therefore, continually expected to '... introduce a moral

perspective to the way they design and conduct their investigations...' (Denscombe, 2010, p. 59). They should strive to 'understand and respect the moral norms relevant to the cultural locations and individuals they study' (Emmerich, 2013, p. 10, citing Macdonald); especially *those from vulnerable groups* (Adejumo, 2013) '*such as pregnant women, prisoners and children*' and *the methodology of the planned study should not affect participants' legal status* (Adam et al., 2013).

Elaborating further on the need for social researchers to bring a moral perspective to the conduct of research, Denscombe (2010) suggests that

When they think about what ought to be done and what ought not to be done, they need to do so not just in terms of what is likely to produce the best data but, distinct from this, they also need to consider what will be acceptable in the context of the values of the wider society in which the research is conducted (p. 59).

The above quotation suggests that social researchers have important ethical decisions to make throughout the course of their investigations.

Research ethical guidelines (framework)

An ethical framework has been defined as 'a set of codes that an individual uses to guide his or her behaviour' (reference.com, 2019). They are 'designed to encourage good conduct in research, assist researchers to meet legal and ethical requirements and help prevent research misconduct' (University of Suffolk, 2016, p. 1). Therefore research structures and other organisations do not only put in place frameworks that will help them 'maintain the integrity of (their) profession(s)', and 'define the expected conduct of members', these codes or rules also help 'protect the welfare of subjects and clients' (Crossman, 2014); and ensure that research studies are conducted in the most civil and acceptable ways – irrespective of who carries out the study.

In other words, the rules serve as checks and balances to the way studies are planned and implemented, including how data is collected and analysed; because 'social science research needs to be accurate, honest, safe, ethical and legal' (Emmerich, 2013, p. 45). More so, 'ethical considerations pervade the research process from beginning to end and cannot be avoided, whether one would wish to or not' (Harte, 2001, Conclusion, para. 2).

It should be noted, however, that ethical codes are not the panacea to most of the challenges social science research faces; many other issues remain even after ethical issues have been factored into our research; nonetheless they act as buffers in helping to mitigate the impact of some of these challenges, in some way (Adejumo, 2008). Without any form of ethical guidelines each researcher could be left to their own devices to decide on what is right or wrong when conducting research with humans or even animals. In the process the researcher could take actions that are against social research norms, and which could adversely affect the society.

In the social sciences, 'there is no shortage of guidance when it comes to ethics' (Denscombe, 2010, p. 60). As indicated above '...most professional associations of researchers have established and published formal codes of conduct describing what constitute acceptable and unacceptable professional behaviour of their member researchers' (Bhattacharjee, 2012, p. 140). Consequently, 'there are codes of ethics covering psychologists, sociologists, educationists, market researchers, health researchers' (Denscombe (2010, p. 60); Denscombe points out that although the 'codes vary a little' (p. 60) it is not difficult 'to discern common themes within them...' (p. 60) and most, if not all of them, do produce elaborate list of ethical issues for those conducting research studies within their areas of competence to be aware of. Having its own ethical codes that guide professional behaviour is, according to Jones (2014, p. 238) 'one of the hallmarks of a profession...' and this is done so as 'to support its chosen system of governance' (Jones and Bartlett Learning, p. 3), or to help these bodies 'to coordinate their actions or activities and to establish the public's trust of' what they do (Resnik, 2015).

Most ethical principles used in developing countries have their origins from foreign ethical frameworks. However, there is a 'disquiet about the appropriateness' of applying foreign ethical frameworks to local research in Africa (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004, p. 262, citing American Association of University Professors, 2000; Bouma & Diemer, 1996). In spite of this concern, it can be argued that subscribing to a foreign ethical framework is still better than to none at all. The reasons for the disquiet could be better understood from Marshall and Batten's (2004) statement regarding the drawback in the use of established ethical guidelines of some western professional organisations. According to Marshall and Batten,

Much western thinking is characterized by individual and universal characterizations and informs academic research norms, whereas the worldviews of many cultural and ethnic groups encompass collectivist and specific norms (citing McCormick, 1997; Thomason, 1999)

Looking through the same lens as Marshall and Batten (2004), one can easily appreciate their concern regarding the use of some foreign guidelines, especially as it relates to research in Africa. The issue is that in Africa, religious, spiritual, and traditional 'beliefs and practices add a new level of complexity to ethical deliberations, in terms of what ignoring them may mean for both distributive justice and respect for persons' (Nolan et al. 2011). Against this backdrop, Nolan et al. suggest that '...international ethical guidelines need to be created that are expansive enough to cover an array of social groups and circumstances.

They 'proposed that these guidelines (should) incorporate the religious, spiritual, and/or traditional principles that characterize a local population.' Perhaps this is the process Adebamowo et al. (2008) referred to as domesticating international research guidelines. Similarly, Alabi (2008, p. 43) argues that '... it is advisable to adapt ethical codes and standards to the need and practical realities of the different communities across the globe'; because carrying out the business of social sciences 'requires respecting and understanding how differences, including ones that express a population's religious, spiritual, or traditional belief systems, play into the complex deliberations and negotiations that must be undertaken if researchers are to adhere to ethical imperatives in research...' (Nolan et al., 2011).

Likewise, UNESCO (2010, p. 3) notes that 'worldviews, beliefs, institutions and history shape the way different people perceive and react to a phenomenon' or a situation, hence the need to domesticate ethical codes. For instance, researchers may pay differing levels of attention to issues regarding the ethical conduct of social research, due to their beliefs, the institutions they are affiliated to, or their notion of the world; further underlying the importance of a framework, since 'a successful code of ethics will translate into a positive reputation for the organisation...' (Reference.com, 2019), and have 'implications for the quality of research and evaluation' (Lili, 2010, p. 272). Overall, ethical frameworks should allow social researchers to apprise themselves with 'what is expected of them as acceptable behaviour.'

Resolving ethical challenges in social research

There are varied challenging situations or complex problems that can be encountered in the course of doing social science research (Emmerich, 2013); because social research is a vast area of enterprise in which researchers express different ontological and epistemological viewpoints – these viewpoints in turn shape the researcher-participant relationship. In the midst of these relationship and varying viewpoints is likely to emerge a range of ethical challenges.

However, one thing seems certain - in spite of these differences in viewpoints and the probable challenges that may arise, there are 'areas of common grounds and tacit agreements that exist' and 'some general principles of social research that are widely shared' (Denscombe, p. 2); which if taken into consideration in the conduct of research could contribute in helping resolve some of the ethical challenges that might emerge. As Denscombe further notes 'the use of "precise and valid data", [which] forms an essential ingredient of good research' (p. 2), is one example of an area of common grounds. And this is also one area that is likely to pose the greatest challenge to any 'vigorous and active' social researcher, as they carefully plan their studies to 'ensure that the research process ... [is] "trustworthy" and valid' (Madushani, 2016, citing Fred-Taylor, 1994). Perhaps knowing that a poorly designed data collection approach could cause 'emotional or physical harm to informants' (Nkwi, 2008, p. 54); and might lead to imprecise data – and findings that emanate from data that are not precise and valid might not be of much use to the society (Smith and Noble, 2014), as they would affect the 'usefulness and credibility of research results (LeCompte, 2000, p. 146).

One important area of challenge relates to the power relationship between researcher and participant – and this can have a debilitating impact on the research process which may affect its outcome. According to Marshall and Batten (2004, para. 4), 'power is a central aspect to consider in cross-cultural research relationships.' For example, poor people, some youth, marginalized groups appear to lack power in research environment; especially those that are scholarly or intellectual in nature. According to Sleat (2013, p. 15), this category of participants

often sit in a deeply unequal relationship of power to the researcher such that the latter's possession of greater knowledge and the former's often vulnerable status (as less knowledgeable... or dependent upon the researcher...) creates a context in which abuses could easily occur.

However, it is not in every situation that the researcher has the upper hand over the participant as 'researchers often sought to study politicians and other individuals who occupy positions of power far greater than academic researchers' (Emmerich, 2013, p. 30). In such a situation, the researcher-participant relationship takes an entirely different dynamic. According to Hunter (2013, p. 19), 'such subjects stand in a position of power in relation to the researcher in that they can decide whether to provide or withhold information [and] ... their lack of cooperation could torpedo the project.' However, Hunter maintains that in reality, 'power circulates through and around the two parties in several directions' (p. 19), and that it is within this context that ethical judgements need to be made. This calls for a stronger sense of mutual relationship between researcher and researched and their duties to each other' (Emmerich, 2013, p. 30).

According to Marshall and Batten (2004, para. 5), to ameliorate the effect of power on participants, as it were, 'researchers [ought to] join the community [hosting the study] rather than enter as experts and interlopers. Marshall and Batten further suggest that, 'creating a partnership with research participants as both individuals and as a group may reduce the risk of unethical or unintentionally insensitive action or treatment. According to the authors, 'concerns about power often centre on informed consent procedures and research design decisions such as research processes, methodology, data collection, and analysis' (para. 6); and that '... as a dimension of power, informed consent means that prospective participants in the research are informed about the research and that their formal consent to participate is obtained (citing Tuckman, 1999); it also means that 'the welfare of the informants should have the highest priority - their dignity, privacy and interests should be protected at all times' (UNESCO, 1994).

Still relating to resolving ethical challenges in research, 'all researchers should be familiar with, and respect, the host culture'; in this way they could help avert some unsavoury experiences in the field, because the concept of ethics would 'have different meanings in different contexts and cultures [as] ... what is ethical in a culture might be unethical in others' (Erinosho, 2008. p. 9). It can be argued that researchers who consider some of the issues discussed above could cushion the effect of some of the challenges that could emerge in the course of conducting their research studies.

Ethical violations and enforceability of research guidelines

Social 'science progresses through openness and honesty...' (Bhattacharjee, 2012, p. 139), so dishonesty has no place in social research. Commenting on the effect of dishonesty on the research enterprise, Exell (1998) stresses that a dishonest researcher

... can get only short-term gains by unethical means. In the end, misconduct damages the reputation of the researcher; and may also damage the credibility of the institution in which the researcher works. A dishonest researcher cannot enjoy the satisfaction of making valuable contributions to our knowledge as a respected member of the research community. Therefore, good researchers are careful to maintain the highest ethical standards in their work.

Ethical violations are frowned at by many research-based institutions, and across a number of disciplines. Consequently, there appears to be a consensus amongst researchers that ethical violations should not normally go unpunished, irrespective of where they are committed – whether abroad or locally, and this could be either through withdrawal of funding, or outright disciplinary measures (Adebamowo, Mafe, Yakubu, Adekeye & Jiya, 2008; Bhattacharjee, 2012; Falusi, 2008). For example, it has been suggested that '...misconduct and plagiarism should be discouraged through stiff and deterrent disciplinary measures whenever they occur' (Falusi, 2008, p. 32); such as '... dismissal from employment [in the case of serious transgressions], legal action [or]... sanctions from journals [for the not too serious transgressions including] not respecting the rights of research subjects, misrepresenting the originality of research projects, and using data published by others without acknowledgement...' (Bhattacharjee, 2012, p. 140, citing Association of Information Scientists). As damaging as these misconducts could be to the research enterprise, establishing effective ethical guidelines for the conduct of research is a challenge. Enforcing its applicability in the field is even a greater challenge.

According to Nwabueze (2016, p. 57) '...research scandals in Africa took place under a climate of low regulatory visibility...high rate of illiteracy and widespread poverty among research participants (citing Danny and Grady, 2007). Nwabueze further stresses that 'while a good number of African countries, including Cameroon, have national research guidelines, and others

simply apply one or more of the available international research guidelines, only very few countries in Africa operate legally enforceable guidelines.' This situation could open the research enterprise to ethical violations with very unpleasant consequences such as: 'criminal charges and/or fines; lawsuits; ruined careers; injured organization reputation; wasted time; low morale; recruiting difficulties; oppressive legislation; fraud and scandals' (Regents of the University of California, 2017).

Although it is not expected that establishing codes of conduct will completely eliminate unethical behaviours; they can help 'clarify the boundaries of ethical behaviour in the scientific community and reduce instances of ethical transgressions' (Bhattacharjee, 2012, p. 140), at least to some degree.

Statement of the Problem

The success of social research depends largely on the data 'freely' provided by research participants in the field, and on the professional behaviour of researchers – a behaviour which is central to the ethical decisions they might have to make in the course of their work. This suggests that those who conduct research in the field of social sciences need not only be aware of existing ethical principles, but they need to understand what the ethical rules regulating their practice are, and be able to apply or consider them in order to ensure the acceptability of their projects.

Against this backdrop, a majority of research-based organisations, including universities and professional organisations, require their 'members to improve the ethical standards of research and practice within their disciplines'. However, it would appear the level of awareness, understanding and consideration of ethical principles in the conduct of research varies among researchers and by location and institutions. Whereas some literature on research ethics claims that the 'vast majority of today's social scientists abide by their respective organisations' ethical principles' (Crossman, 2014); it is not known if the researchers at the National Centre for Education (CNE) and the National Committee for Technological Development (CNDT), who are at the centre of this study, are aware of the ethical expectations placed upon them; and if they are aware, whether they apply these principles to their work. It is not also known which ethical framework or ethical principles the researchers in these centres abide by, since it will appear the centres do not as yet have individual ethical frameworks or codes of their own.

I am not aware of any research conducted in Cameroon which is specifically directed towards investigating researchers' awareness and consideration of ethical issues in social research; if such research exists, it is likely not focused on the research structures of the MINRESI. It is against this backdrop that this study is designed to investigate researchers' awareness and consideration of ethical issues in research in the selected research structures.

It is hoped this will help advance knowledge within the field, a step further, by throwing more light into how social researchers in these structures have approached or are likely to approach ethical issues in their day to day research activities. It has been argued that 'when properly supported, standards for research practice [ethical codes] can encourage researchers to ... engage critically with the practical, ethical and intellectual challenges of conducting high quality research; consider the wider implications of their work; [and] perhaps most importantly, consider issues and problems in advance and how they might be resolved' (Parry, 2013, p. 41).

This study will benefit the CNE and the CNDT, from whom data has been collected, and the Ministry of Scientific Research and Innovation, to whom the selected structures belong. It will help them to create or to revise any existing research policies, based on the results. Researchers themselves will benefit from the study if results indicate a change is needed in their own ethical practices. Finally, the study will benefit the social science research community in Cameroon, in particular, and perhaps to a lesser extent, in sub-Saharan Africa, who could use the findings as a means of reflecting on their own ethical practices, and for further research.

Research Questions

- a. What is the level of awareness and consideration of ethical issues in social research among researchers in the selected research structures or centres? How and when did researchers come by that level of awareness/consideration?
- b. What ethical framework's principles do researchers in the selected research structures or centres abide by?
- c. What ethical challenges do/have researchers in the selected research structures or centres face/faced in the course of doing research, and how do/did they deal with the challenges?

- d. What is the nature of ethical violations in the social sciences landscape in Cameroon as perceived by researchers in the selected research structures or centres, and how have these been addressed?

Methodology

Population and Sample for the study

This study is a mixed method research design employing both quantitative survey with some open-ended questions. The population for the study was made up of all the 140 researchers in both the CNE and the CNDT - the two research structures or centres involved in this study. The CNE is dedicated to the practice of the social sciences and humanities, and has a research staff strength of about 102 in different disciplinary areas; while the CNDT, functions as a technology-watch structure and is charged with the coordination, reflection, and provision of information on matters relating to the transfer and development of technology in Cameroon. The structure has about 38 active researchers, including social scientists, on its payroll. A simple random sampling method was employed to draw 50 participants from this population.

Most of the researchers involved in the study were graduates (from Masters and above) who have put in not less than two years research working experience. It was hoped that after two years in a job the employee should be able to understand, at least to an extent, fundamental issues bothering on their field of specialisation, and on research as a whole.

The choice of the two research structures is informed by the fact that they share a number of disciplines between them – in other words you have social scientists as employees in both research structures; and more so, they are housed under the same roof so it was thought that data collection will be cheaper, especially considering the current economic and security situation of the country. More so, my initial investigation has revealed that there are as yet no social scientists employed at the IMPM which is located on the same premises as the CNE and CNDT – if these category of researchers were employed at the IMPM, the institute would have constituted a third research structure to be included in this study because of its proximity.

It is therefore hoped that participants drawn from the two research structures involved in this study would be in a position to provide the required information needed. In this regard, therefore, it could be stated that the use of these categories of participants was an objective way of assessing awareness and consideration or the applicability of ethical principles in social science research. The study was exempt from a full ethical review by MINRESI ethical committee, reference number: 033/82-86/MINRESI/M000. A written informed consent was obtained from 49 of the 50 individual participants who took part in the study informing them of the purpose of the study, and the fact that they are free to opt out of the study at any time. One participant opted to give a verbal consent, for reasons that were personal to them. All the remaining 49 participants duly signed and returned the informed consent forms.

Data Collection

The instrument for data collection was a Likert-type questionnaire, titled “Awareness and Consideration of Ethical Principles in Social Research Questionnaire (ACEPSRQ).” The instrument was developed by the researcher from a wide range of literature sources on research ethics – including statements on the ethical conduct of social research, and codes of ethics of some professional associations. It had an introductory section, which solicited the cooperation of research participants. This section sought general information (‘non-identifiable data’) from participants such as field of specialisation, year of recruitment, grade, number of publications, and highest qualification. The rest of the questionnaire was divided into three sections. Section A addressed the issue of the awareness of ethical principles in research. In this section a notation was provided showing the various ‘degrees of awareness’ (5-point response options) consisting of, 5 - Extremely Aware; 4 - Very Aware; 3 - Neither Aware nor Unaware; 2 - Very Unaware; 1 - Extremely Unaware. Participants were then required to circle the appropriate number on the given scale that corresponds to the extent to which they were aware of the principles or statements listed.

The second part of the questionnaire, Section B, dealt with the likelihood of participants considering or applying ethical principles in research (this was measured by the level or extent to which they accepted/did not accept the statements provided as things that they could do (or actually do) in the course of carrying out their research studies). As in Section A, participants were required to circle the appropriate number on a 5-point scale that indicates how acceptable or unacceptable it is to them to do/not to do the things suggested in the questionnaire in the conduct of their research. The response options were as follows: 5 - Perfectly Acceptable; 4 - Acceptable; 3 - Neither Acceptable nor Unacceptable; 2 - Unacceptable; 1 – Totally Unacceptable.

In order to minimise a 'response set' (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011) the items in section B of the instrument dealing with the consideration of ethical issues were rewritten in such a way that their similarity with those in section A (which measured ethical awareness in social research) was not immediately apparent to the participants. The reason was to ensure that participants read through the items carefully before attempting to respond, instead of simply running through the items because they were already familiar with the items in the previous section.

Apart from the structured questions as contained in the two sections of the questionnaire described above, Section C dealt with unstructured (free-response) questions. All copies of the questionnaire were administered personally by the researcher – and were collected back on separate dates because participants could not complete them straightaway. The questionnaire was translated into French language to aid understanding and to avoid any confusion, since majority of the expected participants were French speaking with varying levels of competence in the English Language. Fifty questionnaires were administered and 46 were completed and returned, representing a 92 percent return rate.

ata Analysis

The data collected from Sections A and B of the Likert-type questionnaire was analysed using the median as the measure of central tendency, and the Inter-Quartile Range (IQR) as the measure of spread/dispersion. These measures were chosen, instead of the mean and standard deviation, because individual items in the questionnaire were analysed instead of computing a composite score for a group of items; and also because Likert-type scales largely generate ordinal data, and 'means and standard deviations, have unclear meanings when applied to Likert scale responses' (Sullivan and Artino, 2013, p. 541). Furthermore, if participants responses were to cluster at either 'high or low extremes, the mean may appear to be the neutral or middle response, [which] may not fairly characterise the data' (Sullivan and Artino, p. 541).

For both Sections A and B of the instrument, any IQR equal to or larger than 2 was considered large, and suggests that participants are somewhat or extremely polarised in their opinion on a particular item. In this respect, the exact IQR were reported in order to show the degree to which the opinions are polarised. On the other hand, small IQR (of a value 0 or 1) was taken as indication of consensus amongst the participants for the questionnaire item under consideration. An IQR was judged small or big in relation to its associated median, lower quartile and upper quartile (Q1 and Q3) values. The data collected from Section C were analysed qualitatively – using content analysis techniques.

Results and Discussion

Results

Analysis of the profile of the 46 participants who returned their completed questionnaires has revealed that 43 were master's level graduates, and three were PhD holders. The year in which they were recruited ranged between 2002 and 2017. Regarding their professional grades, three were senior researchers; 23 were research officers; and 20 were assistant researchers. For those who answered the question regarding the number of publications they have, 30 published between 1 and 5 articles; six published between 6 and 10 articles; and two published between 11 and 15 articles.

Answering the Research Questions (Quantitative data)

Research Question 1

This research question sought to determine the level of awareness and consideration of ethical principles in social research; and how and when researchers came by this awareness and consideration (that is, the first-time researchers applied ethical principles in social research). The results related to Research Question 1 are presented in Tables 2 and 3 below, and continued in subsection 9.1.2.

Table 1: Participants Level of Awareness of Ethical Principles in Social Research

| S/N | ITEM | MEDIAN | Q1 | Q3 | IQR |
|-----|--|--------|----|----|-----|
| 1 | Respect the privacy and confidentiality of research participants | 5 | 4 | 5 | 1** |
| 2 | Respect and promote participants' right to opt out of an ongoing study at any time | 4 | 3 | 5 | 2* |
| 3 | Avoid plagiarism in your work, by ensuring that all sources are acknowledged | 5 | 5 | 5 | 0** |
| 4 | Obtain ethical approval from a relevant ethics committee before | 3 | 2 | 4 | 2 |

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| | the commencement of your study | | | | |
| 5 | Treat research participants with respect and prevent them from harm | 4 | 3 | 5 | 2 |
| 6 | Accept responsibility for all published results, and be ready to publish correction to wrong results | 5 | 4 | 5 | 1 |
| 7 | Avoid publishing other researchers results as your own; i.e. respect the intellectual property rights of other researchers | 5 | 5 | 5 | 0 |
| 8 | Avoid fabricating, falsifying or misrepresenting data used in your study 'to show a result different from the truth' | 5 | 4 | 5 | 1 |
| 9 | Uphold the integrity of the research enterprise in the conduct of research | 4 | 4 | 5 | 1 |
| 10 | Ensure topic chosen for investigation is risk free and has 'potential benefit to the participants and the society' | 4 | 3 | 5 | 2 |
| 11 | Be aware of the potential harmful effect the chosen method has on study participants | 4 | 3 | 4 | 1 |
| 12 | Carry out studies without bias, and demonstrate competence in the use of chosen procedures | 4 | 3 | 5 | 2 |
| 13 | Be aware of the local customs, standards, laws and regulations in force in the study area | 4 | 3 | 5 | 2 |
| 14 | Be familiar with, and respect, the host culture acknowledging 'the concerns and welfare of the individuals or communities being studied | 4 | 4 | 5 | 1 |
| 15 | Obtain freely given informed consent from study participants, informing them of the purpose of the study and the methods and procedures to be used | 4 | 4 | 5 | 1 |
| 16 | Avoid tactics that suggests participants are being coerced to take part in the research study | 4 | 3 | 5 | 2 |
| 17 | Offer and maintain 'full confidentiality of all information and the anonymity of research participants' | 5 | 4 | 5 | 1 |
| 18 | Ensure research participants are 'offered access to research results' | 4 | 3 | 5 | 2 |
| 19 | Ensure adequate information is provided 'in all (published works) to permit the proper assessment of the methods and findings of the study' | 4.5 | 4 | 5 | 1 |
| 20 | Be aware of the responsibility to acknowledge both 'the unpublished and published work of other' researchers | 4 | 3 | 5 | 2 |
| 21 | Adhere to any agreement made with study participants to preserve the material used for the study, such as recorded interviews | 4 | 4 | 5 | 1 |

** All items with IQR of '0' or '1' denote consensus in opinion.

*All items with IQR of '2' denote polarisation in opinion.

The ethical principles or statements which participants have unanimously agreed that they are 'extremely aware' of (5 in the Likert scale questionnaire), as reported in Table 2, include the following items (shortened to maximise space): Item 1 – Respect ... privacy and confidentiality ... [Median = 5; IQR= 1]; Item 3 - Avoid plagiarism in your work ... [Median = 5; IQR=0]; Item 6 - Accept responsibility for all published results ... [Median=5; IQR=1]; Item 7 - Avoid publishing other researchers results as your own [Median=5; IQR=0]; Item 8 - Avoid fabricating, falsifying or misrepresenting data used in your study ... [Median=5; IQR=1]; Item 17 - Offer and maintain 'full confidentiality of all information ...' [Median=5; IQR=1]; Item 19 - Ensure adequate information is provided 'in all (published works) ...' [Median=4.5; IQR=1].

The results presented in Table 2 also show unanimity in participants' responses to the fact that they are 'very aware' of (4 in the Likert scale questionnaire) the following ethical statements: Item 9 - Uphold the integrity of the research enterprise ...

[Median = 4; IQR= 1]; Item 11 - Be aware of the potential harmful effect (of) ... chosen method ... [Median=4; IQR=1]; Item14- Be familiar with, and respect, the host culture ... [Median=4; IQR=1]; Item 15 - Obtain freely given informed consent from study participants ... [Median=4; IQR=1]; Item 21 - Adhere to any agreement made with study participants ... [Median=4; IQR=1].

The results equally show that there was lack of consensus amongst participants regarding their level of awareness of some of the ethical statements examined. The ethical statements which participants were 'very aware' of (4 in the Likert scale questionnaire), but without a consensus include the following items (also shortened to maximise space): Item 2 - Respect and promote participants' right to opt out of ...study ... [Median = 4; IQR= 2]; Item 5 - Treat research participants with respect ... [Median = 4; IQR= 2]; Item 10 - Ensure topic chosen for investigation is risk free ... [Median = 4; IQR = 2]; Item 12 - Carry out studies without bias ... [Median = 4; IQR = 2]; Item 13 - Be aware of the local customs ... [Median = 4; IQR=2]; Item 16 - Avoid tactics that suggests participants are being coerced ... [Median = 4; IQR = 2]; Item 18 - Ensure research participants are 'offered access to research results' [Median = 4; IQR = 2]; Item 20 - ... acknowledge both 'the unpublished and published work of other' researchers [Median= 4; IQR = 2].

Table 2: Participants' Consideration of Ethical Principles in Social Research (This was measured by asking participants to respond to statements enumerated in the questionnaire, as shown in the table below, regarding whether they were acceptable or unacceptable things to do in the course of doing research. These are similar to items in Table 2, but slightly changed in wordings)

| S/N | ITEM | MEDIAN | Q1 | Q3 | IQR |
|-----|--|--------|----|----|-----|
| 1 | Once the research participant has given consent to take part in a study that individual has surrendered their privacy and all information they provide should be freely shared with the public. | 3 | 2 | 4 | 2* |
| 2 | It is needless obtaining ethical approval in a research study, as long as you have clarity in problem statement, objectives, and procedures | 3 | 2 | 4 | 2 |
| 3 | It is okay to allow a research participant to opt out of an ongoing study at any time | 4 | 3 | 4 | 1** |
| 4 | It is sometimes permitted to use part of another author's work without acknowledging the source | 1 | 1 | 3 | 2 |
| 5 | As some study participants are hard to convince to be part of a study, any tactics that can coerce them to take part in the research study can be judged to be ethical | 2.5 | 2 | 4 | 2 |
| 6 | Avoiding bias in the conduct of social research is not something to worry about as long as the researcher demonstrates competence in the use of the chosen methods and procedures | 3 | 2 | 4 | 2 |
| 7 | It is important for the chosen research method to not have potential harmful effect on study participants | 4 | 4 | 5 | 1 |
| 8 | It is mandatory to always obtain freely given informed consent from study participants before engaging them in your study - informing them of the purpose of the study and the methods and procedures to be used | 5 | 4 | 5 | 1 |
| 9 | It is needless to uphold the integrity of the research enterprise in the conduct of research as long as you attain your research objectives in the end | 2 | 1 | 3 | 2 |
| 10 | It is not necessary to keep the information obtained from study participants confidential and anonymous since the research participants would not be present during data analysis | 2 | 1 | 3 | 2 |
| 11 | It is sometimes permissible to fabricate, falsify or misrepresent data used in your study in order to show the result that your readers might like to see | 1 | 1 | 2 | 1 |
| 12 | It is the responsibility of all researchers to publish correction to | 4 | 3 | 5 | 2 |

| | | | | | |
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| | wrong results | | | | |
| 13 | Local people know very little about research and do not actually care, so it is needless to worry about local customs, standards, laws and regulations in force in the study area | 2 | 1 | 3 | 2 |
| 14 | The intellectual property rights of other researchers may not necessarily be respected; because they are not the originators of the material in their own work | 1.5 | 1 | 3 | 2 |
| 15 | The local culture of your study area might hardly influence the research results, so it is a waste of time to be familiar with, and respect, the host culture and to acknowledge the concerns and welfare of the individuals or communities you are studying | 2 | 1 | 3 | 2 |
| 16 | The topic chosen for investigation must be of interest first to the researcher and must not necessarily have potential benefit to the research participants | 3 | 2 | 4 | 2 |
| 17 | Treat research participants with respect and prevent them from any form of harm | 5 | 4 | 5 | 1 |
| 18 | It is optional to adhere to any agreement you have made with study participants regarding the preservation of the material used for the study, such as recorded interviews | 2 | 1 | 3 | 2 |
| 19 | Be aware of the responsibility to acknowledge the unpublished work of other researchers | 4 | 4 | 5 | 1 |
| 20 | Ensure adequate information is provided in all the work you have published to permit the proper assessment of the methods and findings of the study | 5 | 4 | 5 | 1 |
| 21 | Research participants do not need to be 'offered access to research results' since they are not policy – or decision makers | 2 | 1 | 3 | 2 |
| 22 | It is sometimes permitted to use unpublished data, methods, or results without obtaining permission, especially when credible sources are hard to come by | 3 | 2 | 3 | 1 |

** All items with IQR of '0' or '1' denote consensus in opinion.

*All items with IQR of '2' denote polarisation in opinion.

On the other hand, the results for the analysis of data regarding participants' consideration of ethical principles in research as presented in Table 3, show a mixed picture (with participants expressing varying levels of consideration or application of ethical principles in social research), as indicated by the medians and IQR values of the items. Principles or ethical statements for which opinion was polarised amongst participants regarding whether they accepted/did not accept the principles or 'ethical statements' provided in the questionnaire as things that they could do (or actually do) in the course of carrying out their research work include: Item 4 – It is sometimes permitted to use part of another author's work without acknowledging the source [Median=1; IQR=2]; Item 5 - As some study participants are hard to convince ... any tactics that can coerce them to take part in the research study can be judged to be ethical [Median=2.5; IQR=2]; Item 9 - It is needless to uphold the integrity of the research enterprise in the conduct of research ... [Median=2; IQR=2]; Item 10 - It is not necessary to keep the information obtained from study participants confidential and anonymous ... [Median=2; IQR=2]; Item 12 - It is the responsibility of all researchers to publish correction to wrong results [Median=4; IQR=2]; Item 13 - Local people know very little about research ... so it is needless to worry about local customs ... [Median=2; IQR=2]; Item 14 - The intellectual property rights of other researchers may not necessarily be respected ... [Median=1.5; IQR=2]; Item 15 - The local culture of your study area might hardly influence the research results ... [Median=2; IQR=2]; Item 18 -It is optional to adhere to any agreement you have made with study participants ... [Median=2; IQR=2]; Item 21 - Research participants do not need to be 'offered access to research results' since they are not policy – or decision makers [Median=2; IQR=2].

Answering the Research Questions (Qualitative data)

Research Question 1 continued

Furthermore, part of Research Question 1 requested participants to indicate how and when they came by the awareness and consideration of ethical principles in research (that is, first time they applied ethical principles in social research).

First time participants became aware of ethical principles

When participants were asked to state the first time they became aware of ethical principles in social research; of the 29 out of 46 participants who answered the question, eight said this was during their postgraduate training; two said it was less than a year since they became aware of ethical principles in research; five participants said they first became aware of ethical principles between 1-5 years ago, ten participants between 6-10 years ago; two participants between 11-15 years ago; and two said it was in the course of their work as research employees.

The particular occasion in which participants first considered or applied ethical principles in their research work

On the particular occasion in which participants first considered or applied ethical principles in their research work; of the 26 out of 46 participants who answered the question, ten said this was during their postgraduate studies; two said it was during their undergraduate studies; five said it was during their work as researchers with their current employer. The responses for the remaining nine participants were not very useful for the study.

Research Question 2

This research question sought to know the ethical framework's principles that researchers in the selected research structures abide by.

The ethical framework or set of ethical principles used

When participants were asked to state the ethical framework or set of ethical principles they use as guide for their work; of the 21 out of 46 participants who provided responses to this question, only one mentioned anything close to an ethical framework or set of ethical principles. The participant said they use doctoral school guidance related to scientific writing and research publication. Two particular responses are worthy of note here. A participant said their professional conscience guides their ethical decisions, while another said 'ethical framework governing social science research', but without specifying the social science field. The rest of the responses were far from addressing the question, and are thus not relevant to this study.

Research Question 3

This research question was concerned with the ethical challenges researchers in the two selected research structures face or have faced in the course of doing research, and how they dealt with these challenges.

Ethical challenges encountered in doing research and how they were resolved

The researcher sought to know the ethical challenges participants have encountered in the course of doing research, and how they were resolved. Some of the responses that kept on repeating from amongst the 19 participants who responded to this question are summarised as follows: 1) having access to sensitive information, especially from victims of terror; 2) preservation of personal data; 3) sharing of research results with participants; 4) how to convince the potential participants to join the study freely without any form of compensation - and on how this particular challenge was resolved, one of the participants stated that it was by negotiating, dialoguing, and showing that they understood the participants' unwillingness; 5) how to reconcile the participant's responses with the researcher's expectations, and avoid the biases of the researcher - according to one of the participants, when this happens, it is important 'to remain conscious, to respect [their viewpoints] but sometimes to bring the [participant] to understand you so that your [study] objectives are reached.'

Research Question 4

This research question sought to know the nature of ethical violations in social sciences in Cameroon as perceived by researchers in the selected research structures, and how these challenges have been addressed.

Ethical violations in social sciences in Cameroon and how they were resolved

Regarding the ethical violations in social sciences in Cameroon, and how they were resolved; the following statements, which were recurring in different shades, were summarised from the responses of the 21 participants who answered the question: 1) to own the work of others and publish the results of a study the individual did not take part in; 2) the habit of disclosing the

identity of the participants whereas they have requested for anonymity; 3) to divulge the information that a research participant has explicitly requested to be kept confidential; 4) the habit of falsifying research journal covers, to show an article as having been published in that journal; 5) plagiarism (almost all the participants mentioned plagiarism as a violation).

Regarding the resolution of these 'violations', none of the participants suggested any clear approach that had been adopted to resolve them; however, for the case of plagiarism majority of the participants suggested that detection software should be used more. Further on how violations were resolved, a participant decried that 'much is yet to be done in this light', and that policing violations is not actually a priority, 'given that the objectives [of the various research studies that have been carried out] seem to be achieved in general', regardless of whether there are violations.

Discussion

The findings of this study show that participants are generally aware of ethical principles in social research, albeit to varying degrees – but with a clear lack of consensus in their level of responses to some of the items, which may suggest variation in their level of awareness of the ethical issues under consideration. While it is assumed that some of the principles or ethical statements under consideration are things which should be critical to the survival of the social sciences today, and which every social researcher should be expected to be aware of/ and apply to their work, especially as Crossman (2014) suggests that a 'vast majority of today's social scientists [this may include in Africa, too] abide by their respective organisations' ethical principles'; yet a closer look at the values of the median and interquartile range for the various ethical statements as reported in Tables 2 and 3, reveal that, although participants might be aware of the ethical principles or statements that were examined, it seems some might not have effectively been considering them as they go about their research work (see Table 3), as suggested by the lack of consensus in their responses to some of the statements.

However, this situation is not unexpected, because as Resnik (2015) notes, some individuals could actually be aware of the existence of ethical guidelines or principles, and yet fail to make use of them; or if they do, interpret them differently sometimes because of their ontological and epistemological positions (Powell et al. 2012, p. 8, citing Dew, 2007), as well as some axiological considerations (the values and beliefs that they hold) (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011).

However, to guarantee the success of the social sciences in the research structures involved in this study, in particular, and Cameroon, in general, there is need to enforce the respect of ethical guidelines by researchers; because, without any form of enforcement each researcher could be left to their own devices to decide on what is right or wrong when conducting their research, and could end up taking actions that are against social research norms, and which could adversely affect the society. Hence, the necessity for '...established and published formal codes of conduct describing what constitute acceptable and unacceptable professional behaviour of researchers (Bhattacharjee, 2012, p. 140).

The issue of harm and risk to research participants deserve particular attention here (see items 5 and 10, Table 2) because of the impact it may have on the researcher-participant relationship, and future 'recruiting difficulties' (Regents of the University of California, 2017), and the possibility that a 'lack of cooperation [from future and current research participants] could torpedo [any] project' (Hunter, 2013. p. 19). The seeming lack of consensus amongst participants to these items could suggest that they do not see how the idea of harm and risk to participants could be an issue in the social sciences; yet it has been noted that a chosen research method or poorly designed data collection approach could cause 'emotional or physical harm to informants' (Nkwi, 2008, p. 54).

Also, participants were not in agreement on whether or not it was right to coerce research participants to take part in a study. One would normally expect social researchers to be unanimous in their opinion regarding the practice of recruiting study participants. However, the opinion of participants were polarised regarding this issue, both when asked to indicate their level of awareness of this ethical statement or principle (see item 16, Table 2); and when asked to indicate whether it was acceptable or unacceptable to ignore the principle in their work (see item 5, Table 3). This might suggest that participants in this study do engage in a whole range of practices in recruiting study participants – some of which might be unethical. [T]he desire to participate in a research study depends on the participant's willingness to share his or her experience (Orb et al., 2001, citing Ramos, 1989, p. 93), consequently, the methods used to collect data should not lead to coercion or pressure on participants to participate in the study (Adams et al., 2013).

The findings have shown that the first time participants became aware of ethical principles (or issues) in research ranged from 6 to 15 years during their postgraduate studies; also, participants first had the opportunity to apply ethical issues in practice largely during their postgraduate research work (thesis, project work, assignments, etc.), debunking Munung et al. (2011) assertion that '[t]raining in research ethics in Cameroon is mainly in the form of workshops; [and that] research ethics is not part of the curriculum of universities in Cameroon' (p. 93). However, there is a likely explanation for this scenario; perhaps it could be that since Munang et al. made their assertion some universities might have started introducing their students to ethics in research. The findings also go against Fomboh (2017) assertion, who while citing (Tangwa, 2007), stated that research ethics is not gaining grounds in Cameroon in spite of the 'increasing research activity ...' (p. 22) going on in the country. There are two ways of explaining this scenario - It could be that research ethics is going in these schools, but it is not being taken seriously, or the schools are kidding with research ethics.

If there is one thing the two findings above tell us about the issues we are examining in this study, as a whole, it is that participants ought to have a strong consensus amongst themselves on these issues, if the number of years since they first became aware of ethical principles and when they first applied these principles to their research, as the findings have shown, is anything to go by. In other words, they are expected to have experience in those ethical issues by now.

The existence of ethical violations in social science research in Cameroon cannot be denied, but it seems not much is talked or written about it; or perhaps the actions taken to curb it are not being publicized within the research community. It perhaps explains why majority of the participants for this study who attempted a response to this question could not remember any action that was taken against those culpable. The statement by one of the participants, that 'much is yet to be done in [the] light [of violations in Cameroon]', and that it is not really a priority to police violations in the country, because the objectives of studies will still be achieved, regardless of whether or not there are 'violations' was very revealing. But social 'science progresses through openness and honesty...' (Bhattacharjee, 2012, p. 139), and a dishonest researcher 'can get only short term gains by unethical means' (Exell, 1998).

Again, participants' apparent lack of knowledge of the many ethical issues examined in this study as reflected in the number of unstructured questions they left unanswered, even on issues that any researcher should normally express an opinion, further raises the question as to whether some of the participants are even aware of/consider or apply ethical principles in research.

One important observation from the findings of this study relate to ethical framework or code of ethics. Participants could not mention any specific ethical framework or code of ethics that they abide by or make reference to in the course of their work. If participants do not abide by any ethical framework or guidance – whether local or foreign - as the findings seem to show, then it could be difficult to see how they can ensure the ethical probity of their research, putting their claim of ethical awareness in doubts.

Potential Limitations

This study has some limitations that should be taken into consideration for future research. These include: 1) The sample size was small, which makes it challenging to generalise the findings beyond the two research structures involved in the study; 2) Four participants attempted comparing their responses to the questionnaire items amongst themselves – the affected questionnaires were withdrawn and discarded, and a fresh set of questionnaires re-administered to different participants. Perhaps if the researcher was present at the time of administering the questionnaires, and made effort to collect them back on the spot this could have helped to prevent this practice; 3) Some of the open-ended questions (such as the ones asking for the ethical framework participants use; and for them to mention some ethical violations in social science research in Cameroon) were not answered by a number of the participants; and when they were answered, the responses were not relevant; this could suggest that participants misunderstood the questions, or they might not be familiar with the issues being addressed. A pre-test of the instrument could have helped determine if there were issues with the clarity or appropriateness of the items. In spite of all this, it is not thought that these issues would affect the results of this study in any significant way.

Conclusion

This study explored the extent to which participants were aware of ethical issues in social science; and whether they apply or consider these issues in their everyday practice. This research suggests that participants are generally aware of ethical issues in social research, albeit to varying levels - variations which were not expected during the analysis of data to the levels seen,

given that the majority of the participants have had not less than 5 years of ethical awareness (that is, the period when they first became aware of ethical issues in social research). In some cases, a few have had up to 15 years of ethical awareness. Given this situation, therefore, one had expected a strong level of consensus to participants' responses, both regarding their level of ethical awareness, as well as their consideration of ethical issues thereof – this, again, considering the fact that majority of the participants first applied ethical issues in research as far back as during their postgraduate studies.

In spite of this awareness, it would seem, in most cases, there was no strong indication that participants were likely to consider/ have considered same in their work. In some cases, there was no relationship between their awareness of particular ethical principles or statements and their likely consideration of this same principles in practice (this was revealed after a careful examination of the values of the mean; lower quartile and upper quartile; and interquartile range [IQR]).

This situation has important implications in how the two research structures involved in this study could handle ethical issues of their researchers. Whilst a commitment from the centres in supporting researchers, after being exposed to the findings of this study, would demonstrate an acknowledgement of the challenges researchers face in the course of their work; there would be a need for the centres or structures to commit to programmes that will help raise researchers' levels of awareness and the applicability of the ethical issues examined in this study, and others not addressed here, to demonstrate how deliberate change can be expressed in policies thus making a difference in the careers of individuals.

Furthermore, in order to address the observed lack of researchers' awareness of a number of issues examined in this study, the centres should invest in formal mentoring schemes aimed at researchers at various stages of their careers, whereby researchers are encouraged to find mutual support from experienced colleagues who share their vision, and use it in advancing their career goals.

Some of the ethical challenges highlighted in this study have important implications for how the research structures involved in this study should manage ethical issues. Although it would be hard to prescribe an absolute ethics for the social science field, nevertheless, researchers are expected to behave in ways that can ensure positive outcomes of their various studies. This implies that they must be 'ethically sensitive and morally competent', while being continually mindful of the likely impact that their ethical decisions might have on those involved in their studies, and on the credibility of what they write, since 'ethically sound techniques are perceived as adding to the value of research.'

Overall, what would essentially be needed to enhance researchers awareness and consideration of ethical issues in research would be an attitudinal shift concerning the positive contributions and the benefits that research ethics could make to social science research – a shift which could bring a significant change in ethical practices in the centres; and lead to the possibility of developing in-house ethical statements or principles to guide researchers in their work.

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Disclosure statement

None declared

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