

## ETHICS IN RESEARCH: RELATIVITY, TRUTH AND RELATIONSHIPS

Wazir Jahan Karim  
Academy of Socio-Economic Research and Analysis (ASERA)  
Kuala Lumpur  
Web: [www.wazirjahan.net](http://www.wazirjahan.net)  
E Mail: [wazir@wazirjahan.net](mailto:wazir@wazirjahan.net)

### **The Relativity of Ethics**

Ethics lies in the liminal area of uncertainty between norms and laws. It is a doctrine, written or oral of the importance of codes, protocols and standards, a step closer to “fairness” in Rawls idea of justice (1999). It stands close to practices adopted by State institutions before they are adopted as laws. The difference between ethics and laws is that most people believe in ethics but are ambivalent in the actual practice of it whereas most people obey laws but may disagree with the reasons to uphold them. Ethics is also related to conformity to fundamental human values which may be so relative as to make it part of our arbitrary behaviour towards one another. For this reason ethics may be subjective or normative since our personal standards may not be anything close to those of others. We may even find ourselves obsolete in the understanding that we need to be ethical or principled when the usual ball game is to play strategic politics for personal or group advantage, in the words of Bailey, the “stratagems and spoils” of society (2002;2003). To demolish a person’s reputation and honour without cause or reason is unethical but it may be justified by the actors if the end result is a perceived improvement of a situation or event. The relativity of ethics makes it Machiavellian or Utopian and righteousness and justice may be the imagined emotion of personal attacks, vendettas, poison-pen letters, slander, libel and other forms of vindication. Sub-alternists like Nandy (1990; 1995) state that marginalised people may feel morally correct or justified for committing such acts of transgression but these acts are nonetheless not only unethical but unlawful. Those under attack are powerless, unable to defend themselves and the demonisation of individuals may be directly linked to primordial emotions of hatred and jealousy, a lust for the glory of fame and fortune of another human by bringing her down without much conscience or effort. Conscience is a component of “cultured emotion” which preserves ethics while passion is the raw emotion which destroys it. Thus ethics lies in the heart bed of a school of thought based in culture and the refinement of action and behaviour based in the existence of conscience.

### **The Field of Ethics**

The “field” is more than an ethnographic community based in geographical space .It is also a “system of thought”, a “theory of ideas” or a “range of information”. Bateson discussed it as an “ecology of mind” (1972), a way of structuring ideas in the context of

a particular study. Hence the “field” is about what we are and “how we do things”, the process of arriving at new knowledge through construction and deconstruction. To add or link ideas together is a way of expanding the “field of experiences” we have in the context of research. Ethics in the “field” then is about directing our actions towards a concern for human welfare or the human condition and setting limits and boundaries to our search for the “truth” or “excellence” based on our subjective or limited experiences in observation and analysis. However it should be based on the relativity of choice, what we can do under certain challenging conditions to improve the field of knowledge we pursue. It is also concerned with creating the right kind of social and intellectual climate to enable others to pursue the production of new knowledge.

### **Ethics and the Idea of “Truth”**

Whether ethics is linked to a universal idea of truth based in for example, a generally agreed upon fundamental of human rights or an impaired perspective of truth, such as designing history to legitimise the occupation of lands, it is concerned with the impact of one’s actions upon other things and beings. Stem cell research has been governed by two opposing and controversial viewpoints ; one that it positively accelerates the process of regeneration of life and another that the process of regeneration of life intervenes with the process of life itself - humans playing God But if God is concerned with the regeneration of life in the long-term, then God is another way of explaining infinity. And stem cell research enhances the process of infinity which God seeks. Hence whether we are pro or against stem cell research, we are either way right about God but maybe not so right about ourselves in relation to our action on others .The human effort for survival goes beyond the human dimension of powerlessness but empowerment must have a limit. I have previously said, in relation to life-long learning “New knowledge is power but power is only powerful if we can empower others to seek new knowledge” (Karim, 2002) . Hence ethics is about setting limits and boundaries to power and the process of self-empowerment through a sense of self-righteousness This will always be argued in relative rather than absolute terms making us rather self-conscious in our effort to define what these limits and boundaries are and the extent to which we must be committed.

### **Research on the Indigenous**

I have had many close encounters about ethics in research particularly living with the cultural minorities of Malaysia (Orang Asli) and realising that destitution is not such a noble thing. I had never met a rich Orang Asli who was close to being comfortably poor in the course of my field research but I had met many poor Orang Asli who were comfortably rich in culture, cosmology and religion. But those who have keenly benefited from the wealth of Orang Asli culture have been Orang Asli entrepreneurs, who convert culture to tourism and anthropologists who convert culture to material artefacts in the form of doctoral theses and books. I have previously argued that anthropological research must be “humanistic”, yet if I had not developed a certain personal subjective sense of ethical conduct in my fieldwork I would not be here to tell my story of ethics. In the **Future of Anthropological Knowledge** (1996:113) I explained this more forcefully,

*“...anthropology should not only be demystified, it should be people-oriented and popular, representative and reciprocal. Its intellectual historicity should be integrative and relational and its sentiment humanitarian and messianic. Its method should be equitable and its objective commitment, equity. It may not be able to save the world from the chaos of today but it can at least put it in remission, like the ashes of Sai Baba on the palms of an ailing man. It must be brave and express itself more clearly as to what its role is in the theory of the creation of knowledge”*

Most of my colleagues who have lived with the Orang Asli have developed the same feelings of self-consciousness and humility and none that I know of have developed ethics leading to self-righteousness. The Orang Aslis own candid assessment of life-experiences makes one reflexive about morality and what it has to offer to the poor and powerless. The only thing we can do is provide them with new knowledge for their own self-empowerment but this new knowledge is not necessarily derived from western or middle-class traditions of formal knowledge. It can be about what “they have but cannot see, what they know but cannot say and what they want but cannot reach”. It can be about self-realisation but never about self-righteousness and the need to champion a cause of justice to gain acceptance or popularity. That in itself is deceit and in the long-term destructive to those whose causes are being championed.

As an example, an ethnographic researcher could master the link between modern with indigenous knowledge to demonstrate to locals the choices and alternatives they have to save their environments from further degradation. Indigenous Orang Asli knowledge does not envisage the evolution of humankind from a more primitive stage of barbarism towards greater scientism and civility. From the wealth of knowledge we have discovered on early pre-industrial cultures globally, we realise their scientific techniques of conservation in preserving the biodiversity of the environment to ensure the continuity of their food chain and sources of medicine. They seem to have evolved ethical concerns of civility in cooperation and sharing of surplus so that everyone regardless of age, rank and gender will have a little of everything at any one time. The Ma’ Betise’ of Carey Island call it *munte’ muleh*, to mean the sharing of resources among those who earlier shared their so that others will also share theirs in the future.(Karim, 2002) None suffered from the misery and pain of hunger, illness or homelessness as has befallen more than half of the world’s population.

In industrial or post-industrial society, the rush for the massive accumulation of wealth is no longer on a local but global scale and most of this is seen in mega industries leading to deforestation and environmental degradation. The increasing privatisation of bio resources in the North derived from thousands of years of pharmaceutical knowledge founded by indigenous people in the South is a manifestation of the gradual extinction of systems of indigenous heritage and the destruction of indigenous codes of ethics against the justification of capitalism, that it is more democratic to share resources with a global community of consumers than to conserve them for a limited community. The ethics of democratic action for the global, conflicts with the local and the conflict is created by the unlimited “field” capitalism enjoys. Ethical capitalism sets boundaries to “fields of experiences” and limits choice. Both the local and global range of choice seems to practice democratic action but one contradicts the other and is relatively intrusive and destructive.

It is difficult to envisage commonalities in ethics between the local and global since the range of “fields of choice” differ and contrast. Besides, systems of social stratification will widen within and across regions in the North and South as greed, materialism and self-interests creates a stressful dialectics between and among the powerful and powerless. Humans and humanity become separable as they compete for different “fields” of choice.

In the many years in which I have done gender research I have found that the most satisfying experiences have been with researchers who share similar life-experiences with people in the field and colleagues whose school of thought are ideologically similar because they are good brain-storming partners to work out solutions to problems and issues. Hence there is a sense of intellectual intimacy and romanticism devoid of a sense of guilt about being elitist in the understanding of intellectual preferences. This is what the academe is about and there are universities where graduate students want nothing more than to “jam” theory with their professors. Hierarchies exist only when students or colleagues are unable to do this and create the critical mass.

However, in Malaysian academe, a mentor-mentee relationship is sometimes confused for cronyism and corruption, that individuals choose whom they want to work with because they can shape research findings to suit their mutual interests. If it is unethical to choose a research team based on mutual interests, similar perspectives and personal compatibility, it is even more unethical to conspire to remove such a group because its existence intervenes with one’s sense of self-righteousness about equal merit and democratic research. There are very few research teams based on equal merit or democratic research. For this reason the principal investigator is always the most well researched person in the team and should be respected for generating new knowledge since this can only benefit others who are less experienced.

The principal investigator should also be a good research manager and should be able to deal with the geo-logistics of the research process. It is not necessary to dwell on popularity or visibility, as long as excellent results are achieved. Co-researchers need a principal investigator with sound foresight and judgement and an inspirational vision about hypotheses and theories. The principal investigator does not need this as much. He or she needs good support for complementary activities relating to comparative data, developing analytical constructs further or even editorial support but it is the principal investigator as mentor who will be able to recognise the genius in the other younger person. We hear in Malaysian academe of the clear separation of role and function between deanships or directorships and researcher because the former does not control the path to new knowledge generated in research unless the dean or research director is also the principal investigator. There have been several incidences of deans or directors wanting to control the research project for the sake of championing researchers or controlling funds or equipment or the sheer glory of being in command but such an arrangement usually has disastrous results. It is unethical to hold clandestine meetings to incite conflicts within research teams or mistrust for a principal investigator since there is a sacred halo which binds a research theme together based on field intimacy and trust. Mistrust breeds more mistrust and the pursuit of new knowledge becomes an unproductive event, breeding mediocrity. Academic mediocrity has reached epidemical proportions in universities merely because many researchers feel they are as good as the other and do not want to share ideas but develop their own in isolation of the other.

Although research clustering has been encouraged, this may not lead to productive intercourse or debate if clustering is merely an attempt to administer projects more efficiently. Efficiency is the least important thing in research while trust and confidence in leadership is crucial but we are here talking of scholarly and not administrative leadership. To apply the same standards of democratic consensus in committee meetings to the research process, such as brain-storming is unacceptable because research is not about consensual decision-making but global competitiveness.

I would like here to relate some of my experiences working as a research director in a local university where accusations of unethical practices bordering on unlawful behaviour was bestowed upon me on my last month in the university this February. I had to retire midway through teaching two courses and although my dean had approved of my extension at least until the end of the semester in March 2004, no word came from the administration about this extension and I was forced to leave. My graduate students had been reassigned earlier but the procedures for reappointment of supervisors were not completed before my retirement and they were also not sure whom they could consult. I received many phone-calls, and short mail messages from them and was traumatised by this because I had told them that I could see them through for at least a few months. One was about to submit her thesis and two others had completed their final draft. Two were just about to begin their fieldwork. My research projects were transferred to various co-researchers and although I was interested to be a consultant in one of them, this did not materialise and I then lost total contact with the university. Four months later, I learnt that some academicians felt that I was unethical to have abandoned my courses and not completed them. Some were stunned at my sudden departure and some thought I was hired as a consultant in the corporate arm of the university. The truth was I was not able to explain what happened since I was also taken by surprise. The climate of mistrust and suspicion prevailed and whatever distinguished record I had as a scholar was extinguished the last month of my stay because of my own sense of confidence or false consciousness that I was an asset to the university and felt this was the truth. But in terms of ethical practices, I thought I had completed all the necessary procedures in teaching and research to be relieved of accusations of irresponsibility. The interpretation of ethics is so relative, everyone feels that their interpretation of what it is must be justified simply by the sentiment of reading the truth about the motives of people and the hidden agendas they are supposed to harbour. Hence even research excellence may not be enough. One must have the confidence to know that one is able to produce excellence despite conflicts of interpretation of good conduct and practices in a university.

Reading the stories of Nobel Laureates in the Economic Sciences from 1996-2000 (2003), I was struck by their sense of compassion and comradship they developed with their professors and supervisors and the sharing of ideas across a critical mass of undergraduates, graduates, colleagues, senior professors and mentors. However, the Nobel Prize is awarded to one person, or two co-researchers working on different aspects of a research project but arriving at two related discoveries. In this sense, the Nobel is awarded to individuals but the university receives the credit for generating the right kind of climate for excellent research without much intervention from administrators, directors or deans who are not involved in the research projects being undertaken in their departments. Prof Amartya Kumar Sen, of Harvard first studied at Presidency College in Calcutta where he was struck by the quality of sympathy and egalitarian commitment of

the “left” for the poor which left him with a deep sense of commitment to welfare economics (Nobel 2003). It was the ability to share ideological similarities with friends and colleagues which spurred him on to greater heights. This was the ethics of committed research, very well developed in post-modernist ethnographic writings of the new century (see Marcus and Fisher 1986) But Amartya moved on to develop a critique of “bourgeois democracy” because the democracy introduced from the West by the West was based in the capitalist enterprise of colonialism. It did not share the same ethics of concern for the underprivileged recipients of capitalism under which capitalism thrived.

It was at the London School of Economics that Amartya began to fully develop the theoretical constructs to social choice theory, interacting with choice graduates like Kushik Basu, Siddiq Osmani, David Kelsey and later with colleagues like Peter Hammond, Kotaro Suzumura and Susan Hurley. Amartya also worked closely with Sudhir Anand an expert on Malaysia, although not a Malaysian.

Amartya writes,

*“ If my work in social choice theory was initially motivated by a desire to overcome Arrow’s pessimistic picture by going beyond his limited information base, my work on social justice based on individual freedom and capabilities was similarly motivated by an aspiration to learn from, but go beyond John Rawl’s elegant theory of justice, through a broader use of available information. My intellectual life has been much influenced by the contributions as well as the wonderful helpfulness of both Arrow and Rawls” (2003:173)*

What is stated here is that ethics in research is not only about externalised values or codes of behaviour in individual or team research. It is about the way we think about ideas and the generosity of sharing idealisms of human concerns across generations, dead or alive. It is about wanting to make a worthy contribution to improving human society through the generation of new knowledge or methodologies. It is not about the control of grants, money or team leadership since everyone eventually has their time and place to shine. It is about making and sharing a contribution to new knowledge and this can only be successfully achieved if the right kind of intellectual climate is offered. The stories of Robert C. Merton and Myron A Scholes (Nobel prize 1997) for theories of “Applications of Option-Pricing Theory” and “Derivatives in a Dynamic Environment” are the same and so are those of Robert A. Mundell ( Nobel Prize 1999) for “analysis of monetary and fiscal policy under exchange rate regimes and of optimum currency areas” and James J. Heckman and Daniel L McFadden ( Nobel Prize 2000), for “ analysis of development of theory and methods for analysing selective samples” and “theory and methods for analysing discrete choice” respectively (Nobel, 2003). All worked under mentors, became mentors and were central in the circuit of economic sciences in M.I.T, Columbia University, London School of Economics, University of Chicago, Oxford University and University of Cambridge. They all benefited from the culture of promoting and building talent and colleagues were quick to recognise their talent without rancour and prejudice. Above all they worked for the production of knowledge and not for departments, centres or universities. In the process , their departments, centres and chairs thrived but only through their hard work and intellectual productivity.

The academe is created by talent and codes of ethics are nurtured through the production of knowledge in research and analysis. It is relative to the context of events of knowledge production and no one can know what is just or justified in research. The researcher has a task to justify his or her research and others cannot be dictating the terms and conditions under which justice should lean. The creation of a conducive climate for research is part of the ethical concerns of a university and any attempt to impede its progress should be averted at all costs.

### **References:**

Bailey F.G. ( 2002 ), "Stratagems and Spoils", in J Vincent, *Anthropology of Politics*, London: Blackwell Pub. Ltd.

- ( 2003 ), *The Saving Lie: Truth and Method in the Social Sciences*

Bateson, G (1972) *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, New York: Ballantine Books

Marcus and Fisher (1986), *A Critique of Anthropology*, Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press,  
*Nobel Lectures, Economic Sciences*, 1996-2000, ed. T Persson, Inst. for Int. Economic Studies, Stockholm Univ. World Scientific: New Jersey, Singapore

Rawls, J (1999), *A Theory of Justice*, Oxford: Oxford University Press; first pub. Harvard Univ. Press: Cambridge MA 1971

Caplan, P , Bell D .and Karim, W, (1994), *Gendered Fields: Women, Men, Anthropology*, London: Routledge

Moore, H ed. (1996), *The Future of Anthropological Knowledge*, London: Routledge

Karim, W (1996), "Anthropology Without Tears: How a "Local" sees the "Local" in the "Global" in H Moore ed. *The Future of Anthropological Knowledge*, London: Routledge

- (2002), "Constructing Emotions and World of the Orang Asli", *Minority Cultures of Peninsular Malaysia: Survivals of Indigenous Heritage* ,Universiti Sains Malaysia, Academy of Social Sciences: Penang