

Knowledge and attitudes about research ethics among social researchers in Vietnam: A cross-sectional study

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Article Info

Article history:

Received Jul 14, 2021

Revised Jun 9, 2022

Accepted Jun 29, 2022

Keywords:

Research ethics principle

Research ethics value

Social research ethics

Vietnam social research

ABSTRACT

Social research has attracted significant attention in Vietnam during recent years with more questions and discussions about how to promote the research outputs and publications in this area. However, there is limited information about the knowledge and attitudes of social researchers for research ethics in Vietnam. This paper aims to assess the knowledge and attitudes of social researchers about research ethics in Vietnam. A survey with 1200 questionnaires, through convenience sampling, was sent either printed copies or email to social researchers in the universities and research institutions in Vietnam. Our response rate was 65% (782), with mean age: 35.9 years (sd=.307). The results show that around one fifth had been trained with research ethics (23.5%), which led to significant responses to the "do not know" about the research ethics principles and research ethics committee with 14.3% and 55.3%, respectively. Despite such few experiences on the research ethics, the participants presented a positive understanding of the general principles of research ethics and positive attitudes to the importance of the related general ethics principles to social research in Vietnam. Such understandings and attitudes also led to the readiness to apply the research ethics values and principles while there are no formal ethical guidelines in Vietnam social research. These findings suggest that Vietnamese social researchers understood most critical ethics principles in social research and expect formal ethical guidelines.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Ethical practice is vital for social researchers as it is an important tool to protect the participants and researchers in the research activities, in which they involved [1]. Clear research ethics are principles and guidelines that protect the participants and researchers from any potential harms [2]. At the basic level of doing research ethically, the dignity, rights, safety and wellbeing of participants must be the primary consideration [3], especially for those research with vulnerable groups [4] or investigation of complex issues involving cultural, legal, economic and political phenomena.

Research ethics has been initially considered in the medical sciences then highly given attention in social sciences [5]. However, there is a lack of such consideration for developing countries in general and

Asia and Vietnam in particular [6]. Research ethics are recently stated in the medical sciences [7] and mentioned in some research institutions, which be included into some institutional policies in terms of academic integrity, solutions for plagiarism, or at legal documents, the ethical consideration was less mentioned in the scientific documents [8]–[12].

In Vietnam, while there is a lack of such regulation and documents about ethical practices in social sciences [13], there are more discussions and arguments about how to improve the social science research outputs in the non-Vietnamese publication or improve the status of Vietnam's social research [14], [15]. This paper aims to assess social researchers' knowledge and attitude regarding social research ethics and propose suggestions to develop and apply the research ethics in social sciences in Vietnam.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

A cross-sectional survey was carried over 12 months (2018-2019) in Vietnam. All the participants have given their consent for being part of the study. The study participants included social researchers and university lecturers in social sciences in three parts of Vietnam. A survey questionnaire was developed to assess social researcher's knowledge, attitude, and practices regarding research ethics and their preparedness to apply social research ethically in practice. The research team developed the question banks from current literature and discussed the appropriate items in the questionnaire. A pilot test study on 30 random participants from Hanoi was carried out to estimate the reliability and validity of the questionnaire. The questionnaire was re-evaluated, and minor revision was made for better understanding and flowing of the questions. An additional pilot study on 20 different participants was done to determine the reliability of the questionnaire (Cronbach's Alpha=0.76).

The survey questionnaires, through convenience sampling, were sent to 1200 researchers in three main parts of Vietnam while maintaining the anonymity of all the participants. The questionnaire consists of 11 main questions (personal information, general awareness on research ethics and research ethic committee, general perspectives on research ethics, general perspectives about research ethic activities at institutions, researcher's experiences related to ethical practices, institutional research supports, personal perspectives on human research, attitudes to central research ethic values, and researcher readiness on applying the research ethics). The questionnaire responses to the main questions on understanding, attitude and practice section were rated on a 5-point Likert scale.

The data obtained were analyzed by the SPSS version 25 software. Participants' responses were collected, calculated, and presented as a percentage of subjects answering particular answers to each question. A Chi-square test was used to compare the correlation among dependent and independent variables (gender, age group, academic position, academic title, and location). A p-value of <.05 was considered statistically significant. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. Throughout the study, privacy and confidentiality were taken into account by clearly mentioning and ensuring that information collected from the survey was not shared with any other than researchers who conducted the study.

3. RESULTS

This study included 782 social researchers in Vietnam, aged from 20 to 63 years, with a mean age of 35.9 (SD=.307), which was grouped into under 35 years (48.8%) and above 35 years (51.2%). Nearly a half held the master level (45.8%) while 36.1% had the PhD degree. Only 23.5% had been in research ethics training, and only 9.0% knew the research ethics committee throughout the research ethics application's process. Low research output (non-Vietnamese publication) is responded in the recent three years. Further sociodemographic information is presented in Table 1.

Responses to the general understanding of research ethics are shown in Table 2. Almost all responses to these 11 items were positive on understanding the ethical principles and importance of the research ethics regulations for Vietnam's social research development. The only item of "Vietnam has not any ethical regulations in social sciences), the responses were not differentiated, with nearly 10% less in not agree, which was only significant by gender ($p=.001$). The responses to these items were significant by gender (except for items 5 and 6), qualification (except for items 1, 7 and 8) and position (except for items 4, 8 and 11). The responses were not significant by age group in almost all items, except for item 11.

There were 10 items on attitudes to research ethics were included in this survey as seen in Table 3. High responses (around agree and strongly agree) were presented in those items with positive attitudes. Hence, low responses were accounted for those items with negative attitudes (item 5, 6 and 7).

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of study participants (n=782)

	Characteristic	Total (n=782) N (%)
Gender	Male	378 (48.5%)
	Female	402 (51.5%)
Age group	Under 35	382 (48.8%)
	Above 35	400 (51.2%)
Qualification	Bachelor	142 (18.2%)
	Master	358 (45.8%)
	PhD	282 (36.1%)
Academic position	University lecturer	618 (79.0%)
	Researcher	164 (21.0%)
Prior trainings in research ethics	Yes	172 (23.5%)
	No	560 (76.5%)
Prior trainings in research methods	Yes	476 (64.3%)
	No	264 (35.7%)
Prior trainings in publishing	Yes	224 (30.6%)
	No	508 (69.4%)
Awareness of research ethics	Do not know	154 (19.7%)
	Know but not clearly understand	465 (59.6%)
	Know and clearly understand	161 (20.6%)
Awareness about research ethics committee	Do not know	478 (61.3%)
	Know but not clearly understand	232 (29.7%)
	Know as used to apply for ethical approval	70 (9.0%)
Experiences in the application of research ethics	Never	318 (40.8%)
	Self-application	365 (46.8%)
	Compulsory application	97 (12.4%)
Research outputs in Vietnamese in last 3 years (mean)		5.38
Research outputs in non-Vietnamese in last 3 years (mean)		1.36

Table 2. Social researcher understandings on research ethics

Statement about general ethical principle	Option/Total (%)	Gender		<i>p</i>	Age group (%)		<i>p</i>
		Male n (%)	Female n (%)		Under 35 n (%)	Above 35 n (%)	
1. Protect the participant information	Not agree/44 (5.9)	30 (8.1)	14 (3.7)	.011	20 (5.6)	24 (6.2)	.714
	Agree/702 (94.1)	339 (91.9)	362 (96.3)		339 (94.4)	364 (93.8)	
2. Participant is well-informed about the study	Not agree/34 (4.7)	22 (6.3)	12 (3.2)	.050	16 (4.6)	18 (4.8)	.918
	Agree/686 (95.3)	326 (83.7)	360 (96.8)		330 (95.4)	357 (95.2)	
3. Given consent form before start studying	Not agree/50 (7.4)	29 (8.9)	21 (5.9)	.016	27 (8.2)	23 (6.7)	.478
	Agree/624 (92.6)	304 (91.1)	319 (94.1)		291 (91.8)	332 (93.3)	
4. It is not necessary to protect the participants from risks, harms	Not agree/568 (81.8)	258 (77.2)	309 (86.1)	.002	272 (82.4)	298 (81.4)	.731
	Agree/126 (18.2)	76 (22.8)	50 (13.9)		58 (17.6)	67 (18.6)	
5. Conducting study while no consent form is normal	Not agree/294 (90.2)	293 (86.9)	331 (90.7)	.651	296 (89.2)	328 (91.1)	.388
	Agree/68 (9.8)	34 (10.4)	34 (9.3)		36 (10.8)	32 (8.9)	
6. Adjusting the data to increase the research outputs	Not agree/552 (83.4)	272 (83.4)	280 (83.3)	.972	264 (84.6)	290 (82.4)	.441
	Agree/110 (16.6)	54 (16.6)	56 (16.7)		48 (15.4)	62 (17.6)	
7. Vietnam has not any ethical regulations in social sciences	Not agree/236 (45.7)	120 (48.4)	116 (43.3)	.045	120 (46.2)	116 (45.0)	.785
	Agree/282 (54.3)	128 (51.6)	152 (56.7)		140 (53.8)	142 (55.0)	
8. It is not necessary to have ethics in Vietnam social sciences	Not agree/642 (86.3)	294 (82.1)	347 (90.2)	.001	302 (85.8)	342 (86.8)	.690
	Agree/102 (13.7)	64 (17.9)	39 (9.8)		50 (14.2)	52 (13.2)	
9. Having research ethics increases the administrative requirements only	Not agree/554 (83.4)	264 (86.3)	290 (81.0)	.049	241 (80.5)	315 (85.8)	.070
	Agree/110 (16.6)	42 (38.2)	68 (19.0)		58 (19.5)	52 (14.2)	
10. Citation guideline is not clear in Vietnam social sciences	Not agree/192 (32.3)	88 (30.1)	104 (34.4)	.023	80 (30.3)	112 (33.9)	.346
	Agree/402 (67.7)	204 (69.9)	198 (65.6)		184 (69.7)	218 (66.1)	
11. The disciplinary has got its professional ethical regulation	Not agree/100 (17.5)	38 (13.5)	62 (21.5)	.011	30 (11.7)	70 (22.3)	.001
	Agree/470 (82.5)	244 (86.5)	226 (78.5)		226 (88.3)	244 (77.7)	

Table 2. Social researcher understandings on research ethics (*continued*)

Statement about general ethical principle	Option/Total (%)	Qualification (%)			<i>P</i>	Position (%)		<i>P</i>
		BA n (%)	MA n (%)	PhD n (%)		Lecturer n (%)	Researcher n (%)	
1. Protect the participant information	Not agree/44 (5.9)	12 (8.8)	18 (5.4)	14 (5.0)	.268	27 (4.8)	16 (9.9)	.015
	Agree/702 (94.1)	123 (91.2)	316 (94.6)	264 (95.0)		557 (95.2)	146 (90.1)	
2. Participant is well-informed about the study	Not agree/34 (4.7)	14 (10.3)	8 (2.5)	12 (4.5)	.002	29 (5.3)	4 (2.6)	.014
	Agree/686 (95.3)	122 (89.7)	309 (97.5)	256 (95.5)		540 (94.7)	147 (97.4)	
3. Given consent form before start studying	Not agree/50 (7.4)	18 (14.5)	14 (4.7)	18 (7.2)	.002	38 (7.2)	12 (7.8)	.040
	Agree/624 (92.6)	106 (85.5)	285 (95.3)	232 (92.8)		481 (92.7)	142 (92.2)	
4. It is not necessary to protect the participants from risks, harms	Not agree/568 (81.8)	89 (78.9)	264 (79.5)	216 (86.4)	.049	439 (80.9)	130 (85.5)	.189
	Agree/126 (18.2)	24 (21.1)	68 (20.5)	33 (13.6)		103 (19.1)	23 (14.5)	
5. Conducting study while no consent form is normal	Not agree/294 (90.2)	112 (91.8)	278 (87.4)	234 (92.9)	.047	480 (88.9)	144 (94.7)	.032
	Agree/68 (9.8)	10 (8.2)	40 (12.6)	18 (7.1)		60 (11.1)	8 (5.3)	
6. Adjusting the data to increase the research outputs	Not agree/552 (83.4)	76 (79.2)	254 (82.5)	224 (86.2)	.039	424 (81.9)	130 (89.0)	.039
	Agree/110 (16.6)	20 (20.8)	54 (17.5)	36 (13.8)		94 (18.1)	16 (11.0)	
7. Vietnam has not any ethical regulations in social sciences	Not agree/236 (45.7)	38 (45.2)	102 (44.0)	96 (47.5)	.757	178 (44.1)	58 (11.2)	.047
	Agree/282 (54.3)	46 (54.8)	130 (56.0)	106 (52.5)		226 (55.9)	56 (49.1)	
8. It is not necessary to have ethics in Vietnam social sciences	Not agree/642 (86.3)	104 (81.3)	292 (86.4)	248 (88.6)	.136	508 (86.1)	136 (87.2)	.727
	Agree/102 (13.7)	24 (18.8)	46 (13.6)	32 (11.4)		82 (13.9)	20 (12.8)	
9. Having research ethics increases the administrative requirements only	Not agree/554 (83.4)	84 (76.4)	232 (80.0)	238 (90.2)	.001	436 (82.3)	118 (88.1)	.007
	Agree/110 (16.6)	26 (23.6)	58 (20.0)	26 (9.8)		94 (17.7)	16 (11.9)	
10. Citation guideline is not clear in Vietnam social sciences	Not agree/192 (32.3)	36 (37.5)	78 (28.9)	78 (34.2)	.023	157 (34.6)	35 (24.6)	.028
	Agree/402 (67.7)	60 (62.5)	192 (71.1)	150 (65.8)		298 (65.4)	104 (75.4)	
11. The disciplinary has got its professional ethical regulation	Not agree/100 (17.5)	12 (12.0)	34 (14.0)	54 (23.7)	.006	82 (18.6)	18 (14.1)	.240
	Agree/470 (82.5)	88 (88.0)	208 (86.0)	174 (76.3)		360 (81.4)	110 (85.9)	

Table 3. Attitude toward the importance of research ethics

Statements	Total (mean, SD)	Responses (%)				
		Strongly disagree	Disagree	Not sure	Agree	Strongly agree
1. Research ethic regulation is essential for every research institution	4.46 (0.783)	16 (2.1)	4 (0.5)	32 (4.2)	276 (35.8)	442 (57.4)
2. Research ethic regulation is useful	4.19 (0.808)	10 (1.3)	16 (2.1)	86 (11.1)	368 (47.7)	292 (37.8)
3. Human research should be supervised by a research ethic committee	4.12 (0.882)	16 (2.1)	18 (2.3)	110 (14.2)	342 (44.3)	286 (37.0)
4. Members of a human research ethic committee should be trained professionally	4.42 (0.806)	14 (1.8)	10 (1.3)	42 (5.4)	278 (36.0)	428 (55.4)
5. In Vietnam, research ethic is required only for the international research activities/projects	2.35 (1.159)	184 (23.9)	332 (43.1)	102 (13.2)	106 (13.8)	46 (6.0)
6. In Vietnam, personal research is not required to have the research ethical approval	2.11 (1.058)	234 (30.4)	346 (44.9)	92 (11.9)	68 (8.8)	30 (3.9)
7. Evaluation of a research ethical application is administrative	2.04 (1.013)	242 (31.3)	364 (47.2)	82 (10.6)	58 (7.5)	26 (3.4)
8. Research ethics should be a compulsory unit in postgraduate training	4.16 (0.935)	18 (2.3)	38 (4.9)	62 (8.0)	336 (43.5)	318 (41.2)
9. Annual research ethic training is compulsory for university staff/ social researchers	4.21 (0.857)	16 (2.1)	16 (2.1)	54 (7.0)	304 (39.7)	376 (49.1)
10. All human researchers should be trained with human research ethics	4.32 (0.797)	8 (1.0)	16 (2.1)	64 (8.3)	312 (40.4)	372 (48.2)

Note: meaning of mean: from 1 to 1.80: Strongly disagree; 1.81 to 2.60: Disagree; 2.61 to 3.40: Normal; 3.41 to 4.20: Agree; from 4.21: Strongly agree

The reliability of this scale is .623 of Cronbach's Alpha, which is acceptable for the Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA). The EFA showed the value of KMO at .834, with p -value=.000 and two factors were created as positive attitudes (item 1, 2,3,4,8,9 and 10) and negative attitudes (items: 5, 6 and 7). The total variance explained is at 61.9% of the respondents. The mean value of component 1 is 4.28 (SD:.022), which means the responses to the positive attitudes of the research ethics is "strongly agree", while the mean value of component 2 is 2.16 (SD:.032) with the meaning of responses to the negative attitudes is "disagree". The Anova analysis of these two component's means as seen in Table 4 shows no difference by gender and age group; it is different significantly among the academic level between that bachelor and doctoral (p -value is .003) in the components of attitude about harms, and between lecturer and researchers in both component 1 (positive attitudes, with p =.000) and component 2 (negative attitude, with p =.0003).

Table 4. EFA of attitudes toward social research ethics

Item number	Loading factors	
	Component 1 (positive)	Component 2 (negative)
Research ethic regulation is useful	.802	
Human research should be supervised by a research ethic committee	.790	
Research ethic regulation is essential for every research institution	.784	
Members of a human research ethic committee should be trained professionally	.767	
All human researchers should be trained with human research ethics	.728	
Annual research ethic training is compulsory for university staff/ social researchers	.701	
Research ethics should be a compulsory unit in postgraduate training	.646	
In Vietnam, personal research is not required to have the research ethical approval		.872
Evaluation of a research ethical application is administrative		.835
In Vietnam, research ethic is required only for the international research activities/projects		.781
KMO	.834	
Barlett's Test of sphericity's sig.	.000	
Initial Eigenvalues' cumulative %	61.8%	
Mean (SD)	4.28 (.022)	2.16 (.032)

The majority of participants responded to the ready application of research ethics in their social research activities (76.3%) if there is a regulation about the research ethics related to humans. Meanwhile, those were not ready and to apply per request with 1.9% and 24.8%, respectively. There is a significant correlation about the readiness of social ethics application by gender (p =.001), academic level (p =.000) and academic positions (p =.045). The list of ethical principles was highly responded at "strongly agree" as in Table 5.

Table 5. Main values on implementing research ethics

Main values for the regulation of social research ethics in Vietnam	Mean (SD)
1. Voluntary participation in research	4.30 (0.746)
2. No harm	4.43 (0.667)
3. Benefits for participants	4.12 (0.781)
4. Integrity	4.34 (0.693)
5. Confidentiality	4.52 (0.667)
6. Justice	4.38 (0.703)
7. Intellectual property	4.50 (0.674)
8. Cultural appropriateness	4.31 (0.678)
9. Community respect	4.40 (0.651)
10. Colleague respect	4.37 (0.684)
11. Respect to legal documents	4.46 (0.692)
12. Trustworthy	4.52 (0.682)
13. For institution's values	4.42 (0.673)
14. For the funding body's values	4.41 (0.672)

Note: 1 to 1.80 (Strongly disagree); 1.81 to 2.60 (Disagree); 2.61 to 3.40 (Normal); 3.41 to 4.20 (Agree); from 4.21 (Strongly agree).

4. DISCUSSION

Social research ethic has been attained significantly in developed countries. There is limited literature about research ethics in human conduct in developing countries. The limited discussion about the social research ethics application in Vietnam is similar to that of developing countries and the regional countries [16]–[19]. This study has been the first to assess the understanding and attitudes toward research ethics among social researchers in Vietnam.

Most study participants have limited experience attending the training about research ethics and applying the research ethics principles. Such experience is compatible in the Vietnamese context as there are no existing general ethical guidelines for conducting social research in Vietnam [13], [20]. Recent initiatives related to social research ethics have been introduced as regulations on plagiarism prevention [8]–[10] and institutional research ethical guidelines [11], [12]. The introduction and establishment of such initiatives aim to deal with the existing issues and support developing social research activities at these institutions rather than following the national regulation and guidelines.

Responses by participants showed a positive understanding of social research ethics principles. The researcher must protect the participant's information and maintain academic integrity from collecting, analyzing data and presenting the findings. In addition, high responses to the positive items and inadequate responses to negative items also support explaining good attitudes toward the research ethics principles among this survey participants. Such understanding and attitude lead to the critical requirement of having ethics regulation for Vietnam social research and high commitment to applying the regulation in the social research. The low response to "research ethics increase the administrative requirement only" differs from recent research about the delay of research performance by the research ethics principles and research ethics committee [21]. It would be an interesting finding from this survey. It is supported by the significant responses about the readiness to apply research ethics guidelines even though it is voluntary and not mandatory from the research institution.

Our survey also yielded an exciting list of the universal values on recommending the research ethic regulation in Vietnam. This list is similar to the developed countries' current research ethics principles [2]. These universal values with 14 items as seen in Table 5 would be the critical contents for the recommendation on developing Vietnam's national standard on human research as having experiences from other contexts [19], [22]–[27].

Social researchers in this survey responded with a significant majority without any training about research ethics. A minority (23.5%) had such training, which would be for those involved in the international research project or engaging the postgraduate studies abroad, where research ethics were widely introduced. Following that situation, research ethics would be integrated into the social research method courses at undergraduate and postgraduate levels of social sciences in Vietnam. Moreover, the research ethics would be integrated and introduced for early social researchers and university lecturers as a significant component of personal development, which Vietnam can learn from regional countries [19], [27]–[30]. It is a significant shortcut to include the social research ethics for social research in Vietnam.

We recognize several limitations to our study. Firstly, our research followed convenience sampling. Thus the social researchers who completed the survey might not reflect the entire social researcher's understanding and attitude toward research ethics in Vietnam as following the great experiences from other contexts [16], [23], [26], [29]–[31]. Secondly, this study involved the participants in three main cities of Vietnam (Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh city and Dang Nang city), and fewer participants from the provincial and regional universities/research institutions. Hence, that further limits the generalizability of the findings. Future studies are suggested to investigate the voice of social researchers qualitatively from regional universities for a comprehensive understanding and attitude toward social research ethics in Vietnam.

5. CONCLUSION

This is the first study about the understanding and attitude toward social research ethics in Vietnam. Research participants had fewer experiences in training and applying the research ethic principles in practice, but their responses showed a positive understanding and attitudes toward the social research ethics. High responses to the list of universal values/principles about social research ethics regulation as provided in the different contexts, which would be suggested as the main content for Vietnam's social research ethics regulation. Having the national research ethics regulation is a benefit to the social researchers and value for research participants. It is a way to improve the position of Vietnam social sciences in the globalization era.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This paper is a part of the research project supported by The National Foundation for Science and Technology of Vietnam (NAFOSTED): 504.01-2016.09.

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