PERSPECTIVES

Promoting research ethics and integrity in the humanities in Cameroon

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ABSTRACT

This perspective paper examines the critical need to promote research ethics and integrity in the humanities in Cameroon. As the higher education system in the country continues to expand, it is essential that research practices in the humanities adhere to the highest standards of ethics and integrity. The article explored the current state of research ethics and integrity in the humanities in Cameroon, highlighted key challenges that can compromise research integrity, and proposed strategies to strengthen these crucial elements. The perspectives shared in this article advocates for development of comprehensive research ethics guidelines for the humanities and the significance of fostering a culture of research integrity within the humanities. The paper also emphasises the value of increased collaboration and knowledge-sharing among Cameroonian researchers, students and research administrators, as well as with their international counterparts. This collaboration will help to build research capacity, sharing of best practices and development of context-specific solutions. The article further advocates for development of transparent and accountable systems for the review, approval, and monitoring of research projects in the humanities. In conclusion, this paper underscores the moral imperative of upholding research ethics and integrity in the humanities. Through the examination of these critical issues, the paper contributes to the enhancement of the quality, credibility, innovation and societal impact of humanities research in Cameroon.

INTRODUCTION

Research ethics and integrity are fundamental to the credibility and reliability of scholarly work. It is essential for promoting free and responsible research. According to the Norwegian National Research Ethics Committee, integrity in research consists of core scientific norms, such as the "truth norm", "methodological norms", and "institutional norms"[1.] Research ethics also includes common norms derived from societal expectations, such as respect for human dignity, beneficence, and justice.[1] In Cameroon, where the higher education system is rapidly expanding, it is crucial to ensure that research practices adhere to the highest standards of ethics and integrity. As can be inferred from Mabou et al.[2,] and Ngounoue et al.[3], Cameroon has a robust system of ethics review boards at both the national and institutional levels to ensure ethical conduct of research involving human subjects. These committees review study protocols, informed consent procedures, and monitor ongoing research.[2,4,5] Despite the significant contributions of Cameroonian researchers to various fields, there are concerns about the increase in research misconduct, particularly in the humanities. Studies indicate that ethics approval and informed consent are not always adequately reported in published research in the humanities in Cameroon.[2,6] Research in the humanities often involves complex socio-cultural dynamics and intrudes into the human private sphere[7]. This is because it is inherently interested in people's personal views and often targets sensitive or intimate matters. This necessitates sensitivity to ethical norms.

Unfortunately, as pointed out in Dornyei[8], ethics are often curiously neglected in many disciplines, not only in the social sciences, but more so in the humanities. They are hardly an issue in research methodology courses nor given the space they deserve in research articles, conference presentations or theses and dissertations. The few who consider ethics in their research limit it to the issue of informed consent. This paucity of ethics is deafening in dissertation and theses defenses with colleagues expressing surprise when I emphasise ethics during discussions on research. This is worrying because ethical dilemmas and research misconduct in the era of emerging technologies, artificial intelligence, and social media are gaining prominence. The era of information and communication technologies is plagued by misinformation and disinformation. In the media, reporting on local and international cases of scandals around the themes of corruption, bad governance, abuse of public trust, value-less lifestyles, unethical behaviour, conflicts of interest and insider dealings, partiality and patchiness is widespread. Besides, retractions for fraud or suspected fraud as a percentage of total articles have increased nearly 10-fold since 1975[9]. In fact, research misconduct is by itself a field of research as a Google Scholar search has revealed that, between 2000 and 2017, 7,530 articles were published on research misconduct[10.] Therefore, it is important to investigate ways that research ethical norms can actively be incorporated as part of all research planning and reporting processes, especially in disciplines in which ethics do not seem to be given the maximum attention it deserves.

The Faculty of Arts, University of Buea, Cameroon, has heeded to calls from many scholars[11, 12] for university education in Africa to seriously promote ethics in executing its triple mission of teaching, research and outreach. I was privileged to be given the opportunity to discuss research ethics with postgraduate students during the faculty's postgraduate seminar 2021. Also, the Cameroon Postgraduate History Conference (CPHC) 2022 took interest in research ethics, reason why the theme of the conference was "Emerging and Early Career Researchers: Opportunities, New Directions and Ethical Responsibilities in Historical Research in Cameroon". I was also privileged to present in one of the plenary sessions a talk entitled "Ethics and Deontology in Research: Dos and Don'ts for Young Cameroonian researchers in the Humanities and Social Sciences". In both occasions, issues raised by some participants suggested their limited knowledge of the concept of ethics, what they entail and their importance in research.

Humanities in Cameroon encompass a wide range of disciplines, including literature, history, philosophy, and cultural studies.[6] These fields often involve long observation of a group of people, oral interviews, archival materials, focused group discussions, museum artifacts, documents, historical records, and cultural artifacts, making it essential to ensure that

research is conducted with the highest ethical standards. However, there are challenges in promoting research ethics and integrity in these fields. I have had informal discussions with some teachers and postgraduate students of history, literature and cultural studies, which reveal a second fiddle status accorded ethics. During my readings of some theses in the humanities in university libraries I have visited in Cameroon, especially theses in discipline like history, literature, performing arts, philosophy and cultural studies, I have been confronted with a paucity of ethics statements in the research. I have also observed same in nearly all literature and cultural studies PhD theses I have had the opportunity to evaluate. These concerns highlight the need to strengthen awareness and adherence to research and publication ethics among humanities researchers in Cameroon. In this perspective paper I examined the current state of research ethics and integrity in the humanities in Cameroon and the advances and progresses being made in ethics, propose strategies to strengthen these critical elements and the importance of ensuring ethics.

THE CURRENT STATE AND ADVANCES MADE IN RESEARCH ETHICS AND INTEGRITY IN CAMEROON

As observed in Mabou et al.[2] and Fomboh[13], Cameroon has made significant progress in establishing a robust research ethics framework, but this is particularly in the biomedical sciences and so disciplines in the humanities have often been overlooked. Cameroon has established about 20 Research Ethics Committees (RECs) across the country to review research protocols and ensure the protection of research participants[2, 13]. These committees play a crucial role in the governance of research, including in the humanities. However, reviews of the research protocols submitted to the national ethics committee have identified gaps, such as the need to better assess adverse events in clinical trials and include vulnerable populations in research[3]. To address these gaps, there have been initiatives to strengthen the capacities of investigators and members of RECs in Cameroon. These include optimizing review procedures, monitoring clinical research, and harmonizing standard operating procedures (SOPs)[3]. These efforts aim to improve the effectiveness and

consistency of ethical review processes that include humans, pinpointing a gap in the ethical review processes in the humanities.

Furthermore, Cameroon has developed national guidelines and regulations to govern medical research involving human subjects, including a comprehensive law on medical research passed in 2016 that sets clear ethical standards and requirements.[2, 13, 14] However, these regulatory frameworks have primarily focused on the biomedical sciences, with limited attention paid to the ethical considerations in the humanities. This has led to misunderstandings and non-compliance with ethical standards among humanities researchers[14]. Additionally, the pressure to publish and the need for funding sometimes compromise the integrity of research in the humanities, leading to issues such as plagiarism, fabrication, and falsification of data.[13] The current state of research ethics and integrity in the humanities in Cameroon appears to be lagging behind the progress made in the biomedical sciences. This calls for the need to understand the peculiarity of ethical challenges in the humanities and foster the culture of ethics and integrity in the humanities in Cameroon.

UNIQUE ETHICAL CHALLENGES IN THE HUMANITIES

Compared to other fields, the humanities have peculiar ethical challenges. Research in the humanities often relies on interpretive and subjective approaches, rather than pure quantitative methods. This can create challenges in maintaining objectivity and consistency in ethical review and assessment. Also, research in the humanities often engages with diverse cultural, historical, and social contexts. This means that researchers must understand and be aware of the nuances of these contexts and avoid ethnocentric biases. Sometimes, research in the humanities may involve studying marginalized, oppressed, or vulnerable populations. This calls for ethical frameworks that must prioritize the protection of these groups and ensure informed consent, minimized risks, and promote equitable representation. Furthermore, there is often need for research in humanities to deal with issues of intellectual property, cultural artifacts, and traditional knowledge rights. This calls for ethical guidelines that

must address the ethical use and preservation of these materials, respecting ownership and attribution. Moreover, researchers in the humanities have to deal with their personal biases, assumptions, and positions of power. Therefore, ethical frameworks should encourage critical self-examination and acknowledgment of the researcher's role in the research process. Additionally, research in the humanities sometimes have to address topics that are politically controversial or sensitive for various groups within the society. Researchers may face pressure from external parties, requiring ethical guidelines to protect the autonomy and integrity of the research. Apart from the foregone, challenges related to methods of assessing the quality of research in the humanities are often subject to debate, as multiple theoretical approaches and interpretations co-exist. Ethical frameworks tailored for research in the humanities must acknowledge this diversity and promote good faith in the evaluation process. Above all, in this era of multidisciplinary research, research in the humanities also often benefits from interdisciplinary collaboration, which raises unique ethical considerations around the sharing of data, resources, and expertise across disciplines. All the above issues point to the key challenge researchers in the humanities face in promoting research ethics and integrity in the humanities in Cameroon, which is the lack of clear and comprehensive guidelines tailored to our specific context. With these peculiar ethical challenges to the humanities and to the Cameroonian context, there is need to foster responsible and sensitive attitude for impactful and reliable research results in disciplines in the humanities in the country.

STRATEGIES TO FOSTER RESPONSIBLE RESEARCH ETHICS AND INTEGRITY: A PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE

While there have been significant strides made in establishing research ethics committees and developing national regulations for biomedical research, ethics committees and regulations tailored towards specific ethical challenges in the humanities have often been neglected. This tendency needs to change and for this growth and transformation to take place, there is need for researchers in the humanities in Cameroon to adopt practical strategies to address unique humanities ethical challenges and need to advocate for the development of research ethics guidelines that address the unique considerations and challenges faced by researchers in humanities.

To become responsible and sensitive to ethical dilemmas, researchers in the humanities, students and research administrators must prioritize building of their capacity in learning, understanding and upholding research ethics principles. This can be achieved through targeted training programs, mentorship initiatives, and ongoing support and guidance. If the culture of research integrity is fostered from the junior to senior researchers, we can ensure that the next generation of scholars in the humanities in Cameroon are well-equipped to navigate the ethical complexities of their work.

Another critical aspect of promoting research ethics and integrity in the humanities is fostering a spirit of collaboration and knowledge-sharing. As researchers, we must be willing to learn from our colleagues both within Cameroon and internationally, to share best practices, and to work together to develop context-specific solutions to the challenges we face. Researchers in the humanities need to be actively seeking out diverse opinions and perspectives, especially during this era of multidisciplinary research in order avoid personal biases. This engagement in conversations with people from different backgrounds, cultures, and experiences can help broaden understanding and challenge personal biases. This collaborative approach will not only strengthen the quality and impact of our research, but it will also help to build a more robust and resilient research ecosystem in Cameroon.

Ultimately, the promotion of research ethics and integrity in the humanities is not just a matter of compliance with regulations or institutional requirements. It is a moral imperative, a commitment to upholding the values of honesty, transparency, and respect that are at the heart of scholarly work. If we embrace this commitment and work together to create a culture of research integrity in Cameroon, we can ensure that the humanities continue to play a vital role in shaping our understanding of the world and our place within it.

As a researcher in the humanities in Cameroon, and one who has had the privilege to work as a research manager at the University of Buea, I have seen firsthand the transformative power of ethical and responsible research. I am deeply committed to upholding the highest standards of ethics and integrity in my work. The disciplines in the humanities, which encompass fields like literature, history, philosophy, and cultural studies, play a vital role in advancing knowledge, preserving cultural heritage, and promoting critical thinking. However, to ensure that this work has a meaningful and lasting impact, it is essential that it be conducted in an ethical and responsible manner. When conducted with the highest standards of integrity, our work has the potential to challenge assumptions, spark new ideas, and bring about positive change in our society. However, I have also witnessed the damaging consequences of research misconduct, such as the erosion of public trust, the undermining of academic freedom, and the perpetuation of harmful stereotypes and biases.

One of the most pressing issues we face in promoting research ethics and integrity in the humanities in Cameroon is the pressure to publish or perish. In an academic landscape that increasingly prioritizes quantity over quality, it can be tempting to cut corners or engage in questionable research practices in order to meet publication targets. However, I firmly believe that this is a false economy. When we compromise our ethics, we ultimately undermine the credibility and impact of our work, and risk losing the trust and respect of our peers and the wider public.

Another challenge, as indicated above, is the lack of clear and consistent guidelines for research ethics in the humanities. While there have been significant strides made in establishing research ethics committees and developing national regulations for biomedical research in Cameroon, the humanities have often been overlooked. This is a gap that needs to be filled. We must advocate for the development of research ethics guidelines that are tailored to the unique needs and challenges of researchers in the humanities, and that provide clear guidance on issues such as informed consent, data management, and the responsible use of cultural heritage materials, ensure clear guidelines on issues related to academic integrity

and honesty, ethical decision making in research, protecting vulnerable populations from sexual exploitation and abuse, conflict of interest and financial disclosure, promoting diversity and inclusion in publishing and in workplace, adapting to technological disruptions and combating corruption and bribery from the perspective of the humanities.

At the same time, I believe that promoting research ethics and integrity in the humanities is not just about developing guidelines and regulations. It is also about fostering a culture of ethical reflection and moral courage within our research community. As humanities researchers, we have a responsibility to engage in critical self-reflection, to question our assumptions and biases, and to be willing to challenge unethical practices and behaviours when we encounter them. This requires courage and conviction, but it is essential if we are to maintain the integrity and credibility of our work.

Finally, I believe that promoting research ethics and integrity in the humanities is not just about protecting the interests of researchers and institutions. It is also about serving the greater good of society. Therefore, if we conduct our research in an ethical and responsible manner, we can contribute to the advancement of knowledge, the promotion of social justice, the achievement of quality, innovation, impact, trust and the betterment of the human condition. This is a lofty goal, to be sure, but it is one that I believe is worth striving for.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, promoting research ethics and integrity in the humanities in Cameroon is a complex and multifaceted challenge that goes beyond informed consent. It requires a combination of clear guidelines, robust oversight mechanisms, and a strong culture of ethical reflection and moral courage within our research community. However, I firmly believe that it is a challenge that we must rise to meet, for the sake of our own integrity, the credibility of our work, trust in our research results and the greater good of society. When we embrace this challenge and work together to create a culture of research ethics and integrity in the humanities, we can help to ensure that our work

continues to have a positive and lasting impact on the world. This perspective article has examined the critical importance of promoting research ethics and integrity in the humanities in Cameroon. As the higher education system in the country continues to expand, it is essential that research practices in the humanities adhere to the highest standards of ethics and integrity. The article has highlighted several key challenges that must be addressed. Firstly, the lack of clear and comprehensive research ethics guidelines tailored to the unique needs of the disciplines in the humanities in Cameroon has led to misunderstandings and non-compliance with ethical standards. Secondly, the pressure to publish and the need for funding sometimes compromise the integrity of research, leading to issues such as plagiarism, fabrication, and falsification of data. To address these challenges, the article has proposed several strategies. Foremost among these is the development of comprehensive research ethics guidelines that cover critical issues such as informed consent, data management, and the responsible conduct of research. Additionally, the article emphasizes the importance of building the capacity of researchers, students, and research administrators to understand and uphold research ethics principles through training programs and mentorship initiatives. Furthermore, the article underscores the significance of fostering a culture of research integrity within Cameroonian academic and research institutions. This involves implementing robust mechanisms for the prevention, detection, and management of research misconduct, as well as the establishment of transparent and accountable systems for the review, approval, and monitoring of research projects in the humanities. Finally, the article suggests that increased collaboration and knowledge-sharing among Cameroonian researchers, as well as with their international counterparts, can help in learning from best practices and developing context-specific solutions for promoting research ethics and integrity in the humanities, by so doing this article has aimed to contribute to the enhancement of the quality, credibility, and societal impact of research in the humanities in Cameroon.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST
No potential conflict of interest relevant to this article was reported.

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