



Managing Normative Challenges and Deceptive Publishing: An Introspective Analysis of Social Science Research Practices

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Abstract

The civilizational advancement depends on research, and social science research is no exception to it since it helps in comprehending the complexities of the modern world, human and societal behaviour, critical thinking, testing theories, and evidence-based policy formation. Nevertheless, embedded with human experiences and societal advancement, normative or ethical norms are the standards of any social science research. This article points to major challenges in the field today: the normative intricacies in research where human participants are involved, like informed consent, privacy, and potential harm, and the upsurge of publishing predatory materials that threatens the integrity of academic work. The article comprises a literature review, historical case analysis, and content evaluation based on a qualitative methodology. It focuses on issues and gaps and advocates an applied and adaptable normative ethical guidelines that guide researchers in avoiding deceptive, pseudo-journals, and publications. Using frameworks developed by scholars such as Jeffrey Beall and Eriksson & Helgesson, the article sketches common features of predatory publishing and provides researchers with tools to assess the legitimacy of the journal. Finally, the article explains the close link between ethical research practices and trustworthy publishing. It argues that keeping ethical integrity and avoiding deceptive journals is essential for protecting participants and preserving public trust in social sciences academics. The findings suggest a practical, evidence-based guide for current and future researchers to write impactful, responsible, and trustworthy academic authorship.

Keywords: *Exploitative journals, research dissemination, multi-layered approach, exaggerative advertising, transparency*

Introduction

A researcher working on a research paper is immersed in transcripts, field notes, and all types of qualitative and quantitative data, information, facts, or ideas, and narratives on different aspects. The goal is to comprehend the living experiences, challenges, and strengths of a community, not only to analyse numbers or trends. In these situations, the researcher is a guardian of accountability and conviction in addition to being an academic. As he/she starts to formulate conclusions, he/she is faced with a perennial ethical dilemma: how can the drive for knowledge be balanced with the necessity to uphold the self-esteem of the individuals who provided the data? Social issues and behaviours are complex, and hence social science research, human values, individualities, and weaknesses are connected in a multifarious way, and this complex balance between the human characters is the basis of the ethics we apply in social science research. Best and Kahn (1998) argue that being strict to the formal processes and standards is only the surface aspect of research ethics in every research. As a core fact, justice, accountability, reliability, and empathy are the core of ethics in any research in every discipline throughout the years.

Ethical questions and the need for self-evaluation arise frequently, such as when handling participants' private data, sometimes controversial material, and socially unacceptable information. Past disputes in social science research prove that these issues are genuine and persistent, and common in every research. The ethnographic study of a family in Mexico by Oscar Lewis (1961) and Edmund Leach's research in 1954 in Africa were criticised for irregularities and unethical practices. These scholars deny the criticism, although their work has made an important impact on research and the knowledge creation turf in general. These incidents indicate clear warnings, presenting how research works, if not done ethically, can challenge the integrity of the researcher, knowledge creation, participant's role, and the research itself, thus hurting the very people and society for which the research work was organised. These errors place participants at risk, damage the public's trust in research conclusions. Ethical concerns are very broad and multifaceted and are linked to different complexities of human and worldly realities.

Predatory publications are the key escalating problem in the recent era--publications that cheat or deceive, attempt to extort money from novice authors, especially young scholars, and, in some cases, even the experienced senior ones. These predatory publishers are fake publishers, and their sole intention is to earn money. This article studies these issues by critically studying the moral complications present in social science research and shows the threat created by predatory publishing agencies. It suggests a practical code of ethics respecting transparency and community empowerment, and provides tools to help researchers identify and avoid predatory journals. In real-world case studies, academic writings, and current publishing norms,

it provides a realistic as well as easy-to-use framework for conducting clean and ethical research. Whether one is an experienced academic or an early-career researcher, the goal is to offer a reliable blueprint or a concrete plan for conducting research that is academically arduous, morally true, and universally accepted for its purpose.

Research in social sciences has an exceptional and intensely social (human) character within the global academic circle since it focuses directly on people, their identities, communities, values, and lived experiences in their natural context, different from other fields that engage with abstract concepts and impersonal data from all sources. As social science research is complex and multi-sighted, multi-sited and even field-based, it suggests tangible ideas to eliminate core problems and challenges, social injustice, and inequalities of different forms. Similarly, social research is exceedingly fragile and sensitive as it touches human, social, and worldly issues. Embedded with critical problems, challenges, and issues, the role of the researcher as an investigator is imperative in the whole process of research and the aftermath of research. Struggling and confronting diverse challenges, the investigator's position remains a responsible pivot in the whole process of research and the processes to be followed.

Worldly issues, largely backward group people, historically marginalized people, communities, and the personal worlds of the people, are the central concerns of social research. While researching the worldly issues such as people, communities, and their problems and challenges, the main concern is to safeguard the autonomy and dignity of the studied people and their communities, e.g., how the complexities of someone's life are examined without violating their privacy, autonomy, and self-esteem, and dignity in a worldly situation. Given the power imbalance between the researcher and the subject, how to ensure the studied population's implications of their involvement in the study zone? How to ensure the psychological, emotional, and other social harms? These theoretical questions raise significant concerns in social science research. If these rules are breached, it will be unethical and, if exposed, may defame and condemn the people and the community under study. If re-analysed, such studies may breach the ethical norms for not keeping intact the ethical concerns and privacy of the studied population and the community as a whole. Joshi (2002) argues that such a type of study may depict a scenario of a total failure to incorporate the studied population and the community over the academic intentions of the researcher, consequently creating a pessimistic impact on the studied population, community, the researcher, and the whole academic circle.

The absence of an ethical framework and the inconsistency in following the framework diminish the trust and the integrity of any research. In many cases, the researcher unknowingly crosses the ethical boundaries, in the absence of applicable

ethical guidelines, faulty or biased data, and mistrust that may be created among the studied population, which may consequently harm the dignity and reputation of the academic circle. Slesinger & Stephenson (1930) state that distrust between the studied population and the researcher may jeopardise the research process and create challenges for future research, and can challenge the rationality of the research. In this regard, Upadhyay (2022) argues that the threat of predatory publication is also a key challenge that may lure young scholars. The predatory publishers are profit-oriented, exploitative publications that have spread along the open-access movements. Such predatory publications depend on the necessity of scholars to publish in a reputed international journal to achieve their career goals. Predatory publishers usually guarantee quick and easy publication with very little or no review at all, side-by-side concealing low editorial standards and questionable reliability and trustworthiness. Such predatory publications usually go unread and uncited, flagged scam or predatory. This, in the long run, may ruin a scholar's academic and professional career and reputation, waste his/her money and effort, and can proliferate unreliable, unaccountable plagiarized materials. In a real sense, the threat of predatory publications prevails in every discipline and type of study and can corrupt and erode the key principles of any research, e.g., trust, accountability, credibility, and broad service to society in a holistic sense.

Any compromise in ethical consistency or publication integrity harms academia and society. Given this, the issues raised and the discussion made in this article are urgent and complex to be raised and analysed: social science researchers are obligated to navigate the difficult issue of predatory publishing practices. Without proper direction, they risk conducting studies that can harm participants, readers, the researchers themselves, and the community itself. Hence, the article tries to point out these urgent issues by suggesting a practically ethical framework for doing research responsibly and offering strategies to help scholars and researchers avoid becoming prey to fraudulent and deceiving predatory journals. The article aims to support the development of universally endorsed, i.e., socially accountable, morally and academically ethical social science research.

Objectives and Methodology

With an objective to preserve academic integrity and the morals of normative ethical codes in social science research, this article aims to explore the increasing intricacy of human-focused investigation and the increasing challenge of deceptive, predatory research publications. The key concern is to put forward concise, comprehensive, and appropriate standards of research ethics to navigate researchers through different phases of a research project from beginning to research dissemination, focusing on how anti-intellectual academic behaviours damage

academic systems' reputation and legitimacy. The article aims to endorse the propagation of research via context-based, genuine, and expressive outlets through relevant and pragmatic tools useful for classifying and dodging unprincipled dishonest practices. Additionally, it highlights the essential connection between principled research propagation and ethical inquiry aids and skills, hence strengthening an academically excellent based ethically responsible research community. These objectives nurture the evolution of a responsible, lucid, and accountable environment for inquiry, intending to safeguard the studied population and community and to enrich the acceptability and trustworthiness of scholarly discussion.

This article is based on a qualitative research approach based on secondary data, incorporating a comprehensive literature review, case study analysis, and content analysis in order to fully and meaningfully address the adopted objectives. This all-compassing, multi-layered approach will assist in the advancement of fact-based, pragmatic applied suggestions and provide a refined knowledge of the ethical standards and challenges faced by social science researchers in the global context.

The detailed breakdown of the methodology is as follows:

Scholarly Review/Review of Literature

At the first stage, an all-encompassing, complete study of relevant research publications, including research articles, books, seminar papers, and institutional policies, as well as ethical agendas, was accomplished. Kothari's (1990) 'Research methodology', Booth et al's (2008) 'The Craft of Research', and scholarly research ethical rules by the American Anthropological Association (AAA) and Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) were the important foundations of factual data. Jeffrey Beall's (2015) criteria of predatory works and Eriksson and Helgesson's (2016) research work were thoroughly reviewed to appraise the drift and rise of predatory and unethical publishing practices in perspective.

Case Analysis

Two historically important research works- Edmund Leach's research in Africa in 1954 and Oscar Lewis's ethnographic research work published in 1961 on a Mexican family were selectively chosen for a detailed exploration of ethical issues in social science research. These case-study-based based renowned research works portray a vital moral concern in social science research, for example, lack of informed consent, exploitation of research participants, confidentiality, and privacy of research participants. In a nutshell, these works offer a decisive lesson for the present and the imminent researchers and scholars by providing a foundation for conceptual debates in empirical cases.

Content Analysis

The authors carried out a content analysis of pertinent journals classified as predatory. For this, they used Beall's criteria and factual data from relevant research sources. Important features such as the lack of proper peer review process, unreported manuscript processing fees, fake editorial boards, and false journal names were analysed to catch repetitive trends defining predatory characteristics. This approach supports drafting instruments that researchers may use in the future to evaluate the legitimacy and trustworthiness of publications.

Suggestions

Knowledge forged from the literature review, case study analysis, and content analysis was used to create a personalised conscience in the findings of the article that any social science researcher can apply for ethical, clean, and predatory-journal-proof research publication. Additionally, a set of tools (toolkit) was created to support researchers in making ethical decisions in academic publication. It gives information on ways to identify and avoid predatory journals and encourages the ethical sharing of findings.

This methodological approach promises that the article's conclusions are based on accepted academic theory, the researchers' real-world experiences, and contextual significance. The final goal is to enable scholars to do research that is academically ethical, socially conscious, and morally true to the purpose of the research.

Results and discussion

Normative/Ethical Dilemmas in Social Science Research

The main goal of social science research is to understand people and the overall social life. The case studies and literature analysis show varying ranges of ethical problems that researchers deal with, including obtaining informed consent, safeguarding participant privacy, and preventing injury. In detail, it is dissected as follows:

Participant safety and informed consent: Making sure that participants are completely aware of what the research is, what it is for, and how it will use their information is the most important ethical concern in research. Signing a form is only one aspect of informed consent; another is ensuring that participants are aware of the study's objectives, use of their data, and the impact of the results on them and society. Participants may feel misled or taken advantage of in the absence of this. Oscar Lewis's research on a Mexican family was criticized for using their and the community's poverty as a strategic point without giving it any thought. Critics questioned whether the family's assent was genuinely informed since he failed to

sufficiently express the study's implications to the people. Another important aspect of ethical research is the protection of privacy, anonymity, and confidentiality (PAC). Participants must be assured that their personal information will not be misused or exposed. Edmund Leach failed to protect participants' privacy in his research work in Africa, which resulted in charges of exploitation. These incidents demonstrate that when researchers disregard PAC, they risk hurting the subjects of their studies.

Preventing Injury: Research should not harm the human body, mind, or society. And it is not so easy to predict how research would impact an individual. For example, it can cause serious harm to draw attention to a community's difficulties in a way that stigmatizes them. Lewis's study was criticized for sensationalizing their poverty and demonising their communities rather than empowering the family.

Exploitation and Bias: In many cases, researchers may take advantage of weaker, ignorant, or backward populations for their academic benefit. Leach and Lewis both came under fire and were vehemently criticized for allegedly using the experiences of their subjects to further their academic and professional careers at the expense of the communities they researched, consequently treating the studied communities as 'guinea pigs'. The core issue embedded with a vital query is how a researcher can ensure that their work really benefits the subjects or the studied population or community rather than the researcher himself or herself? This calls for the need for well-organized normative or ethical guidelines in all types of research. Pedestalled on this, this article proposes a vigorous code of ethics, which is as follows:

1. **Use of appropriate topics:** Subjects that address actual social needs should be selected as research topics. The selection of topics just to get the research work published should be avoided. Clickbait topics, commercially viable research sectors, and controversially sensational topics should be avoided.
2. **Safeguard participants' privacy:** While conducting research work, researchers should secure informed permission (consent) and maintain the anonymity of personal information and data. The participant should be fully informed regarding the background, purpose, and how their data is going to be used while getting the consent.
3. **Do not harm:** Evaluate participants' possible dangers and take precautions to reduce them immediately. Avoiding study designs that can upset or stigmatize communities is part of this process.
4. **Be open and truthful:** Do not deceive the participants about the objectives or processes of the research. The researcher should tell the truth about his/her actions and motivations in a frank way to the people.

5. Engage the community: Do not treat people as test subjects (guinea pigs) for experimentation, but rather treat them as partners and keep them absorbed in designing the study, interpretation, and in the process of research findings dissemination.
6. Need for academic honesty or scholarly integrity: In the process of publication, the researcher should ensure that their research is pragmatic, real, distinctive, and free of plagiarism, and in a position to disseminate the findings before the studied population. This is more important for a place like Nepal and other underdeveloped countries, where there is very limited research access.
7. Enhance or augment implications: The study should be rational and should make sense in strengthening the local communities by addressing local issues and concerns, thereby advocating balanced policies and skills for the overall benefits of society. This can leave behind an everlasting legacy of the researcher.

This code is an attitude or a way of behaviour for conducting research with accountability, integrity, and empathy, not merely a list of things to do. By adhering to these guidelines, researchers can gain participants' confidence and provide reliable work that can produce reliable and credible research.

Threat of Predatory Publishing

Predatory publication has become an important concern for researchers. The open-access paradigm, which was intended to make research freely available to everyone, is exploited by predatory publishers. These journals charge authors fees, sometimes hundreds or thousands of dollars, without offering genuine peer review or editorial help. What is the probable outcome of this? A surge or deluge of ordinary, i.e., mediocre or even copied publications, that weaken the academic record of the researcher and tarnish the past publication reputation of the author.

What Makes a Journal Predatory?

Jeffrey Beall, an American academic librarian and library scientist who served as associate professor at the University of Colorado Denver, is widely recognized for coining the terms 'predatory publishing' and for creating Beall's list (a database identifying potentially predatory open-access publishers) in 2010, and for identifying key red flags in 2015. These include:

- Fake Peer Review: Generally, the predatory journals often claim to peer-review articles, but don't in a real sense. In many cases, predatory journals use generic

templates or bypass the review process, allowing poor or illogical, unproven papers to be published.

- **Hidden Fees:** In almost all cases, Article Processing Charges (APCs) are often undisclosed until after a paper is accepted, leaving authors stuck with unexpected bills at the time of publication.
- **Deceptive Branding:** Many predatory journals imitate or mimic the names or websites of reputable ones, fooling and tricking authors into thinking they're submitting to a legitimate publisher.
- **Ambiguous and Exaggerative Advertising:** Predatory publications often use unwanted and persistent contact, mostly by email, and most often from non-institutional email providers (such as Gmail or Outlook). Such emails generally contain exaggerated offers, such as quick publication, guarantees of a very short review time. Such marketing emails can be distinguished by typos, grammar mistakes, flattery, and excessive praise of the recipient's studies, without prior contact. Such marketing emails sometimes give minimal information on processing fees and publication charges or completely hide payment-related information to lure and trap inexperienced researchers and make them unknowingly agree to unethical publication agreements that compromise the integrity of the research.
- **Counterfeit Editorial Boards (with the names of Unknown Experts):** To attract the authors, many predatory journals and publishers list fake experts or just put the names of random popular researchers.

Predatory journals and publishers risk the academic reputation of the researcher, academic standing, prestige, and overall future academic career. Further, readers and other academics usually ignore content published in predatory publications; therefore, the researcher's work will never receive any citations. In cases when the predatory publishing entity suddenly closes, the published material can be damaged or completely lost. Further, the risk of intellectual theft is often high, as anyone can steal the researcher's work, as there is no legally registered body to protect the intellectual copyright of the published material. Predatory publishers do not care about the researcher's intellectual rights. All of these situations can cause immense damage to the reputation, finances, and career of the researcher.

Case Study: The Emergence and Discontinuation of Beall's List

Scholarly Open Access was a widely used tool for finding predatory journals. It was a blog operated by Jeffrey Beall, which was shut down in 2017, allegedly by legal pressure from some publishers. Beall's framework identifies red flags in

publishers and journals. These red flags include fake editorial boards and quick publishing timelines. Beall's predatory journal tracing framework continues to support the detection of such publications. Beall's experience, while headhunting predatory publishers and journals, also discloses the opposition from predatory publishers, which is making it difficult to hold integrity and maintain transparency in academic publication.

How to Stay Away from Predatory Publications?

A set of practical approaches can be applied by researchers to guard the integrity of their research work. Approaches that are grounded in well-established research and supported by sources like scholarly library guides, such as the guidelines of the University of Toronto Libraries (n.d.), are employed in this framework. Using these tools, better judgments can be made on where, why, and how to publish in a given publisher.

- **Use of Reliable Journal Databases:** Large journal indexing databases like Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ), Elsevier Journal Finder, Scopus, and JANE (Journal/Author Name Estimator) can be used to find reputable and safe journals and publishers.
- **Verify Journal's Indexing (Check Journal's Indexing):** Searching for those publications and the journals that are members of reputed institutions such as COPE, Open Access Scholarly Publishers Association (OASPA), or that are linked and listed in NLM (National Library of Medicine) Catalog or JCR (Journal Citation Reports).
- **Check the Warning Indicator (Red Flag):** Be cautious of journals with an unclear niche that have language errors on their social pages and websites, or non-professional contact mediums. Unrealistic publication timeline and too quick processing time are also red flags to keep an eye on. If they promise rapid publication or don't clearly state APCs, run the other way.
- **Check the Peer-review Process:** Legitimate journals are open about their peer-review process, retraction policies, and digital archiving plans. If these are missing or unclear, it's a bad sign and a sign that it may be a predatory journal.
- **Seek Guidance or Help:** Given the stipulation that the researcher (author) is uncertain or irresolute about a journal status, it is better to talk to a mentor, senior colleague, librarian, or any academic person who has already published their article in an authentic and reputable journal. They can help identify and spot scams and find reputable and genuine publishers (outlets).

Practical Example

Consider yourself a researcher who gets a surprise email invitation from, suppose, Advanced Research in Social Science, a publication, proposing to publish your work in an exceptionally short amount of time, usually two to three weeks. The journal's website appears professional, which might give the impression that it is reliable. A deeper examination, however, shows several issues: the editorial board has persons whose connections and qualifications are difficult to independently verify, and the contact email is a generic Gmail account rather than one connected to an academic institution.

A capable researcher can examine the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ), which is a respected site that lists reputable open-access journals, to confirm the journal's legitimacy. It is important to note that this journal not being in the DOAJ is a warning indicator - red flag, and the absence of the peer-review procedure on the journal's website indicates towards being a predatory or scam journal. In general, fake contact information, non-existent (fake) editorial board members, no indexing in reputed indexes, and unclear or no peer-review protocols are the common red flags that can be identified by the researchers in their specific cases to avoid communication with a predatory publisher or journal, thus safeguarding their money, effort, time, and academic reputation.

The Wider Picture: Academic Publishing and Ethics

Abiding by the ethical guidelines and sharing research results with the stakeholders and the community supports open access, which helps in spreading information widely. However, deceptive predatory publishers ignore quality control and ignore the ethical guidelines, and work only on a money-making business rather than publishing standard quality work. Dissemination of research findings with the stakeholder community, for example, as recommended by ethical standards, always supports the ethical principles of open access and also promotes the wide-ranging sharing of information/knowledge among the academic community. Unfortunately, such vital concerns are ignored by deceptive predatory publications, which produce poor quality materials and give priority only to money-earning business. These publications deceive authors by giving them so-called special offers, tempting them by waiving the publication charges, or offering discounts for article publications. This is important in a place like Nepal, where it is a bitter reality that research here often involves impoverished populations, and the majority of researchers lack financial backing from any research support, for example, from a university or any donor institution. Similar to this, research works conducted by foreign researchers and published in predatory journals, the concerned communities may never benefit from

the findings and may result in manipulation and exploitation rather than empowerment. Given this, it is extremely necessary to strictly follow the ethical norms and select a genuine and trustworthy publication for the publication of research work.

Conclusion

Engaging in social science research is an even more delicate and fragile process between seeking knowledge and having an ethical duty, which can be depicted in an allegorical manner by walking a tight-rope, as he/she is balancing his/her search for knowledge to protect people as well as the issues he/she is studying. The plight of having an ethically challenging issue, as in informed consent, lies at the essence of this process. Today, this code of ethics, which is anchored in principles of transparency, respect between individuals, community involvement, as well as confidentiality, as discussed in this article, provides a possible solution to this plight (mystery) for authors (researchers). This is, in fact, a worrying prospect because it is an even more difficult endeavour to deal with this plight/challenge to have a real publication to carry out this real research work in this real publication.

There are further challenges, and the journey does not end there, as the predatory publishers keep on tempting the novice and young researchers, especially from impoverished communities and countries, hence posing a simulated vested interest-based threat to academics' reputation. This is a problem not only in Nepal but also in developed countries. Young and experienced researchers may overcome these frauds by the proper use of DOAJ and other warning flags. By doing this, they may easily and safely steer and navigate away from scams and publish their genuine and hard-worked research work in an authentic quality publication that abides by strict quality and scientific standards. In the process, the authors can save their hard-earned money too.

The core conclusion of this article is that developing significant and influential research works requires high moral and principled ethical research methods and a reliable publishing house, which are not optional. The researchers' study should advance knowledge and society, regardless of whether it focuses on global social trends or local communities in Nepal. Researchers may make sure their contributions are reputable and significant by adhering to ethical and principled standards and being cautious of predatory publications. For the social sciences to endure to be resilient, academically strong, and respected, integrity, innovation, and trustworthiness in both the academic and the common circle are necessary, and hence trust-building measures must be taken in the present and the impending future.

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