

**PHRONESIS AND THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL JOURNEY
THROUGH RESEARCH UNDERTAKINGS INVOLVING
HUMAN PARTICIPANTS IN THE CONTEXT OF SIERRA
LEONE**

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Abstract

This article has provided some philosophical thoughts concerning the journey of research undertakings involving human participants, with consideration given to both natural / physical and human / social science fields, and with a focus on the situation in Sierra Leone (where ‘ethical prudence’ seemed to be lacking for various reasons). In the process of professional engagement, researchers must seek to give serious reflective thoughts on how their engagement may affect participants and communities - this study has unravelled some thoughts on evolving perspectives (technology-mediated engagement and feminist views). Ethical code of practice has been highlighted as an important instrument in helping researchers (particularly in the Sierra Leone context) manifest serious thoughts in their epistemic quest for pursuing knowledge, through engagement with human participants. The ethical requirement of a researcher to demonstrate intellectual virtue / prudence is a key aspect of the discourse in this article - that which enable trust to be established, and more so, the researcher's ability to exercise practical wisdom in their engagement with research communities.

Keywords: Phronesis; Epistemology; Ethics; Praxis; Human Participants; Sierra Leone

Introduction

The process of research is in itself an ontological and epistemological journey (CHISOLM, 1989) in engaging with human participants (both in the natural and social sciences fields) – such journey can prove very challenging, particularly in under-developed economies like Sierra Leone where phronetic virtues during research undertakings is proving highly critical.

The ontological aspect of research deals with the exploration of how best knowledge is obtained in the natural world, and predominated

by the existence of human beings with exhibit of varying characteristics (determined by natural, environmental and behaviour circumstances). This may at some point in time involve observations on how human beings are reacting to changes in circumstances affecting their lives (for example, *Ceteris Paribus* condition - see JACKSON, FC1, FC4 and JACKSON, 2016c) or as part of research undertakings in a controlled environment as seen in the case with research in the natural sciences.

Majority of the time, researchers may gear their efforts in ensuring proposed hypothetical statements are answered in the best way possible (except in the case with grounded theory research, where theoretical construct is grounded on evolving data), and mostly in satisfying demands posed by funding agencies, with the ultimate goal of ensuring positive outcomes are produced in a bid to please stakeholders wishes. This can then lead to a situation where researchers are seen to be engaging themselves in unethical dealings, mostly through fictitious manipulation of research processes so as to make it possible for them to win the minds of those from whom funding is (to be) sought; this is typical of a country like Sierra Leone where ethical code of practice is virtually lacking.

The above explanation then brings one to introduce the concept of *Phronēsis*, a Greek derivative interpreted as the manifestation of '*ethical virtue / prudence*' (JACKSON 2016a; EIKELAND 2006; and FLYVBJERG 2001); ethically construed by Socrates as the manifestation of good-will towards mankind in all forms of undertakings (JACKSON 2016a, 2; FC3, GADAMER 1980; and ENGBERG-PEDERSEN 1983, 236). With reference to this article, there is normally scope for researchers to exhibit phronetic virtues in pursuit of their epistemological journey(s), but the power to do so is mostly subsumed by the hegemony of funding organisations to dictate the direction and outcomes of research so as to prove their points to society - the situation is worse in Sierra Leone due to the fact that external agencies are in a better position to influence local researchers' decisions due to better contractual pay deals.

There is an innate tendency for human beings to think and act selfishly, and with the demand placed on human beings to seek oneself as the priority, it is highly likely for the mind to act on the negative side of manifesting unethical deeds - this for example may involve manipulating responses received from respondents or even leaking confidential information as a way of satisfying the selfish side of the human mind. The prevalence of ethical code of practice (customised to take cognisance of local circumstances, for example, cultural dynamics) will serve as a guide to curb such type of unethical behaviour

manifested by people, and particularly those who purport themselves to be professional researchers.

Phronesis according to works produced by Kinsella and Pitman (2012) is implicit of the word '*intellectual virtue*', that part of ethical philosophy which Aristotle (1975) distinguished from the other two ethical dictums, '*episteme and techne*'; based on Flyvbjerg's (2001) interpretation of concept around phronetic social science, *episteme* in contemporary society, is characterised by terminologies such as '*epistemology and epistemic*' (perceived as scientific means of universal knowledge, that is, context-linked to concepts in society, and can be pursued in both the social and natural sciences fields), while on the other hand, *Techne* is context-dependent, and practically oriented towards a conscious goal, incorporating contemporary usage terms like '*technique, technical and technology* – an ontological base of present day development in the field of *Information systems / Internet technology* (JACKSON 2015a; 2015b; and 2016b)'.

Epistemological journey through research is normally geared towards an end goal of using the most appropriate means of ensuring knowledge is explored effectively. In so doing, the process can be fraught with concerns around the opposite of what Aristotle and contemporary writers in the field of phronetic philosophy like Gibbs et al (2007, 367-368), Flyvbjerg (2001) and Eikeland (2006) perceived as intellectual virtues, channeling the human mind to act ethically, more so in the direction of enhancing lives, for example, through research undertakings in both fields of social / human and natural / physical sciences.

Phronetic Research Methodology and its Link to Research as a Profession

Phronesis is a methodology epitomised by its unique approach to ensuring [good] ethical value is set at the forefront of research undertakings. A great pioneer to this is Flyvbjerg whose work in project planning and management addresses key ethical values like '*power relationship, rationality, optimism, misrepresentation, delusion, and deception*' as a way of ensuring participants (both researcher and the researched) are fully engaged in the process of fostering (social) participation with the intention of impacting changes in reality (KULJAK 2014). A new entrant in the field of research undertakings, the principles of phronetic research is not specifically defined by a particular methodology / approach, but proponents have stressed that pertinent questions (see section heading on '*Engagement in the Human Sciences Environment*') are raised while the focus is geared towards

ensuring (good) virtue ethics is set as the priority for impacting changes in the final outcome of research ventures.

Research in the practical world is considered as a profession, and in real sense, it is governed by certain values which dictate how professionals can execute their duties, through the legitimisation of '*ethical code of practice*' in guiding practitioners' engagement in the research environment – this will enable the professional researcher to execute intellectual virtue in their research activities (Council for International School [CIS], n/d and JACKSON, FC2). In the works of McPeck and Sanders (1974, 64), and also Ellett (2012, 13), a profession (also akin to professional research) is considered to have four requirements as highlighted below:

- that there exists a specialised literature which forms an intellectual basis for practice;
- that the occupational group provides a needed social [or public] service as its *raison d'être*;
- that there exists a set of standards designed to ensure, or certify, minimal competence in membership in the group;
- that there exists a broad range of autonomy both for the individual and for the occupational group to practice according to its own judgment.

In this case, the pursuance of research activities involving human participants at all-time should be embodied by ethical codes, given the professionalism status attached to it, and more importantly, the need to ensure integrity (intellectual virtues) is maintained in the profession. One way of protecting such professional integrity (particularly in the case with Sierra Leone) is through the publication of guidance documents, flexibly adapted to suit institutional way of practices as in the case with HEIs research practices, for example, '*ethical code of practice*' (see UoB 2015). Ethical code of practice documents is mostly published by academic institutions to increase assurance from the general public about ethical / intellectual virtues of character (akin to *Phronesis* - as profusely expressed by its founding fathers, Aristotle and Socrates) that encourages the manifestation of ethical justness in every research undertakings involving human participants (EIKELAND 2004).

In the case with Sierra Leone, research as a form of professional undertaking is very ill equipped, simply because of the absence of professional standards, particularly at Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). There is a need to institute / monitor a global style of standard, for example, the '*Code of Ethics for Higher Education*' serving as the

golden mark for all practicing professionals, and more so for academic research ventures (CIS, n/d and JACKSON, FC2).

The praxis of research as a discipline of professional engagement actually requires the manifestation of integrity by those involve in the process of dealing with human participants (for example, the retrieval of data, mostly through primary and secondary means). There needs to be an understanding and sincerity from the body of professionals to act ethically when capturing data from human participants; this must be supported by the use of ethical codes of practice to assist with transparency of engagement during the epistemic journey of knowledge exploration. The epistemological journey of knowledge pursuance requires people / professionals to probe (IJIOMAH 2011; and BRINKMANN 2007), but should be done in an ethical manner that brings about the development of constructive theorisation of concepts rooted on ethical values.

Phronetic Research and its Associated Links

The praxis of research can be carried out in any discipline (Natural / physical and as well as in the Human / Behavioural Sciences fields); the epistemological journey of fact finding needs to be well planned, and particularly when it involves dealings with animate objects, irrespective of whether pursued in the physical or social world of interaction.

There have been countless arguments around the claims of scientific research in both the social and physical sciences, particularly in terms of which discipline is perceived as being scientific in nature - a proof of which Popper (1959 and 1962) classed as the scientific falsification. In all of these, the most important is the manner in which knowledge is being (to be) pursued, particularly the involvement with animate objects. Care needs to be taken so as to ensure intellectual wisdom is manifested throughout the process of inquiry about concepts. This is where both the natural and social sciences fields seemed to be battling with each other, particularly in terms of their claims of authority in justifying superiority.

Physical / Natural Science Environment

In the physical/natural science, research exercises are normally conducted under controlled environment, mostly in a laboratory environment. There has been some form of intense argument / debate around the pure scientific approach to knowledge exploration as being the most prudent, and for which Popper's scientific falsification concept is set to be challenged, given the manner in which knowledge is being pursued (POPPER 1959 and 1962).

According to Wang (N.D, 1), science (episteme) from Aristotle's view is thought to be divided into three parts, namely '*physical science (theoretike)*, *productive science (poietike)* and *practical science (praktike)*'. Practical science, also a form of physical science is normally explored through laboratory / scientific demonstration, for example, as in the case with the medical sciences, considered a form of practical science involving the techne of human engagement with natural phenomenon. In a similar token, the pursuance of such approach to knowledge exploration requires planning that involve practical demonstration of phronetic virtues of ethical good-will, particularly for the benefit of enhancing human understanding of *physis*; the nature of being, more so the physical state of the human race to express disposition of wellness, for example, the case of a medical practitioner's demonstrating skills in applying sufficient knowledge of diagnosis for the ethical good of his / her patient.

In the physical science as opposed to the social / human science field, the episteme of knowing is normally considered to be pursued scientifically, more so through laboratory experimentation or practical demonstration of knowledge as exemplified in the case with medical practice(s). The process of knowledge exploration, involving the professional researcher with living object(s) require the manifestation of practical wisdom; an embodied action(s) of researchers to act ethically to those from whom information is to be sought. Frank (2004) as applied in the health care profession, expressed six claims as applied in the process of knowledge exploration involving Phronesis (a form of reflective and futuristic process):

Practical claims address the expectation of an outcome from the consultation; professional claims that the practitioner will meet the expectations of peers, both institutionally and personally; scientific claims call on practitioners to act according to the science on which their practice is based, or to "have very good reasons for any deviation" (Frank, p. 56); commercial claims act on practitioners as employees, as investors and/or as owners of practices; ethical claims concern standards of practice, respect of patients, etc.; and moral claims call practitioners to moral actions, for example, witnessing the patient's suffering (also an extract in KINSELLA and PITMAN 2012, 4-5).

Genuine ethical manifestation of phronetic virtues by professionals requires an act of practical wisdom to detect when things are not right,

as in the case with a medical practitioner, striving to take the right action to act ethically during the distress of his / her patient. In a similar note, the extraction of vital information from research participants during scientific experimentation requires thoughtful reflection on how outcome(s) is perceived to impact on professional practice. Many a time, this may result in tarnished reputation of professionals, and the research profession in general when engagements are proved to be unethically pursued, particularly in a country like Sierra Leone (and more so at HEIs' level) where research as a profession is not very well remunerated.

Engagement in the Human Science(s) Environment

Flyvbjerg (2001), a renowned scholar in the field of Phronesis, and also, an international figure in programme management and planning, made very good progress towards eliciting the field of '*phronetic social science*' - a term used to express the application of '*practical wisdom or prudence*'. Despite the instrumental work of others in the area of Phronesis, Flyvbjerg's construct of phronetic methodology has been very instrumental in bringing to the fore, techniques associated with knowledge exploration in the social sciences compared to that pursued in the natural sciences. According to Kuljak (2014: 81), the four step approach to the Flyvbjerg's methodology is listed thus:

- a) where are we going,
- b) is this development desirable,
- c) what, if anything, should we do about it, and
- d) who gains and who loses, and by which mechanisms of power?

An expression of honesty, for which the concept of Phronesis is modelled must be articulated during professional engagement with human participants in order to facilitate overt expression of virtuous action of ethical deeds. There is always an implication of actions (which may be positive or negative) as a result of researchers' engagement in unethical practices during the process of extracting information from participants.

According to Kuljak (2014, 80), "*phronetic methodology is advantageous in analyzing and changing social phenomena that rely on values and power of social actors*". In this vein, phronetic methodology in the social science field will always seek to model its analysis of concepts around social phenomenon, involving in-depth study of human behaviours. Researchers engaged in practical work of eliciting information from participants during research undertakings must seek to tread cautiously in order to avoid unethical act of behaviours during their engagement with research participants / communities. The exploration of knowledge in the humanities / social science field is

differently pursued from that experienced in the natural / physical sciences. This is simply based on the nature of dealings with human beings in general, whose actions cannot be easily determined or predicted, when compared to the nature of research work in the natural sciences field.

Therefore, adequate planning is essential so as to make it possible for ethical values to be adequately expressed, and more advantageously, the possibility of increasing participation in the overall process. Where possible, adequate training must be set in place for professional research engagement in the field so as to raise their understanding of ethical concepts while dealings with human participants (Jackson FC2 – for highlights of recommended points relating to virtuous ethical practices for research engagement).

Evolving Approaches to Phronetic Research

In modern time, and particularly with the advent of information technology in the current Information Age, the study of Phronesis in research is proving to be evolving with concerns around ethics, particularly for research undertakings involving medium such as the Internet, Video and Audio recordings. This is more of a concern in the humanities / social sciences field(s), and more so in under-developed economies like Sierra Leone, where engagement with participating communities by professional researchers may be fraught with issues around the inability to plan research, and also the unsolicited publication of results without sufficient negotiation and consent from participants. As expressed by Kemmis (2005), praxis that is geared towards the manifestation of ethical virtues is considered a prerequisite for Phronesis; in this case, engagement of practice must be supported by the need for professionals to exhibit virtuous actions to those from whom information is to be sought.

In a world where information can be easily sought, the professional (researcher) must endeavour to demonstrate high sense of intellectual virtue(s) in order for Phronesis to become a reality. The pursuance of research involving the use of Internet should be treated cautiously as the extraction of information needs to be well planned, and with the ultimate goal of ensuring integrity is maintained throughout, with the intention of ensuring that information extracted from participants are only utilised for the purpose intended - an area of concern in a country like Sierra Leone, where people, and particularly professional researchers may perniciously be inclined to use information to smear character(s).

Buchanan (2011) stressed the importance of risk faced by research participants in technology-based research; honesty by research

professionals is very key in reducing unethical concerns in online / technology research practices. This type of research has brought with it the ease of capturing vital information like graphic, visual / video, and audio contents. In their dealings with the research communities, professional researchers have to display a praxis of honesty that portray a form of tradition in the field (KEMMIS and SMITH 2008, 4), considered a prerequisite for Phronesis, and also seen as the centerpiece of the execution of good ethical form of morality (LATOUR 2000; GIBBS and COSTLEY 2006; and JACKSON FC2).

Also evolving in the domain of Phronetic research is that of '*feminist Phronesis*' (Choi, 2015); this addresses both hermeneutics and phronetic philosophical interpretations of women's voices, particularly those perceived as being oppressed on the basis of their classification as '*other*' - simply on the basis of their colour or ethnic background. Equally, drawing on reference from Eubanks (2011), feminist Phronesis has laid emphasis on '*reflexivity and praxis*' - the doctrine is focused on reflection of the biased manner in which women have been subjected, on the margin of men's hegemonic dominance in society.

Therefore, a phronetic approach to research work carried out by professional researchers must endeavour to take reflective approach as the starting point, so as to ensure their engagement with the research community is not totally dominated by the subjectivity of the male gender act of hegemony, in exclusion of female voices during their endeavours (an area that needs more endeavours, particularly in the case with developing economies around Africa, where the culture of male hegemony seemed to be in dominance). In this regard, practical wisdom must be carefully thought through in order for research to be perceived as being '*good*'; such type of practice must encourage researchers to incorporate outside voices in their planning - one that seek to accommodate various perspectives and allegories, with different political, religious and socio-cultural interests as emphasised by Grant and Golnaraghi (N.D, 9).

Critical Approach to Practical Wisdom: Overt and Covert Researcher

Practical wisdom provides the scope for information to be sought in the most ethical manner that creates less of a discomfort to those from whom information is to be sought. A researcher should always seek to demonstrate praxis of intellectual virtue(s), whether through overt or covert means. In the practical world of research, and more so when it entails the ontological and epistemological pursuance of knowledge exploration (JACKSON 2016b; BRINKMANN 2007), researchers must

endeavour to demonstrate strict form of ethical code of practice (UoB 2015; Jackson 2015c).

Van Niekerk and Nortjé (2013) in their study, promoted the theory of '*Ethics of responsibility (ER)*', originally introduced by Max Webber (N.D), and later developed by the German Philosopher, Hans Jonas (1984); the theory is exemplified around the under-mentioned excerpt:

To take or accept responsibility means to be able to be held accountable for whatever decisions are taken, on the basis of the assumption that reasons can be provided, that they have been thought through, and even though they might be fallible (van NIEKERK and NORTJÉ, 2013: 28).

Negotiation with research communities is essential in the epistemological journey of research undertakings. In this case, researchers must endeavour to apply '*ethics of responsibility theory*', particularly in ensuring intellectual virtue of knowledge is sought (either *overtly or covertly*), so as to protect those from whom information is intended to be obtained. The whole idea is based on trust, and backed by adequate training to professional researchers, particularly in the case with Sierra Leone where ignorance of professionals to assert ethical code of practice is a common thing. The lack of adequate professional training on ethical values for professional researchers is quite prevalent at HEIs level in Sierra Leone (JACKSON 2016a; FC2); the way forward on this, and particularly that which demonstrate ethical good for the research community is to ensure that researchers at all-time make their presence known to participants.

The whole idea of practical / intellectual wisdom for research pursuance(s) involving human participants must strongly focus attention on the concept of reflexivity, with the underlying thought focused on the resultant '*harm or good*' outcomes of engagement with communities. With some of the above evolving approaches to research endeavours involving human participants, adequate preparation is considered vital prior to engagement with participants; in this case, the epistemological journey of knowledge pursuance (see JACKSON 2016b) must ensure that consideration is given to the multiple characteristics present in communities (for example, with high premium given to feminist views in ensuring equality of gender balance is given priority, and particularly in the case with Sierra Leone, the inclusion of cultural and ethnic composition of identified groups considered for participation). Professional engagement in the field when applied to the concept of

Phronesis must be based on the outcome of ethical good, which in the future may also enable communities to develop trust for the research profession (JARVIS 1998; GRAY 2004; ROBSON 1993).

On reflection, doubts surrounding phronetic practices (*concerned with prudence and intellectual virtues*) in the case with research in Sierra Leone can possibly be attributed to ignorance on the part of research professionals to manifest adequate care of responsibility to the researched. Recent upheavals (more so the interruption of the rebel incursion in the country between 1991-2000) in the country and the dwindling progress made at HEIs level to keep pace with professional endeavours in the area of research and development is largely to be blamed for the problem (JACKSON 2016a and 2016b). Suggestive recommended points proposed by Jackson (FC2), has thrown light on the need for adequate training in areas like ‘intellectual virtue / prudence’ amongst academic/other research professionals as a way of ensuring research is proven ethically sound for the good of the researched community. Academic institutions, and other reputable institutions mandated with research responsibilities to society must endeavour to engage in ethically prudent research activities.

Phronesis is a critical concept in the field of research, through manifestation of honesty on the part of research professionals to the researched community. As in the case with developed countries, there is a proven level of guidance governing researchers’ actions when obtaining information from the researched; this is demonstrated on the basis of ethical documentations, normally produced by established institutions, for example universities (mostly moderated by ethics committee) to ensure trust is maintained within the research community. In contrast, the situation as seen in the case with developing economies like Sierra Leone, is quite hard to demonstrate given difficulties associated with of researchers, and the relaxed legislation governing research undertakings.

Conclusion

The process of research is in itself a philosophical journey; one that is geared towards the development of enriching human existing knowledge, through fact finding engagement in communities or with participants in the field. In some cases, the manner of knowledge pursuance may bring about serious questioning of the integrity of those whose approach(es) may result in serious ethical questioning around professional praxis of research. As highlighted by professional researchers like Eubanks (2011) and Flyvbjerg (2001), good professional practice must be the backbone of intellectual virtue / practical wisdom. This is equally emphasised by Eikeland (2006) as the

virtue of character - signifying that professional engagement must endeavour to manifest justness, fairness and care for those whom information is to be sought. In so doing, research undertakings involving praxis of judgment must endeavor to reflect on Flyvbjerg's four steps methodology to the elicitation of information by those engaged in empirical research studies. Research undertakings in the African context, and particularly in Sierra Leone has been challenged (JACKSON 2016a; GREEFFIE and RENNIE 2016), more so as a result of ignorance on the part of researchers in ensuring that (good) value ethics is set as the priority for engaging with participants. In this vein, professional conscience must always be set as the priority by researchers in order for practical wisdom to be fully appreciated, given the high state of vulnerability from those whom information is to be retrieved. Research engagement in the African continent is quite different from that pursued in the developed economies; this is simply so as a result of the absence of guided principles (legislations) meant for protecting the vulnerable state of the researched.

As a practicing researcher, I strongly believe that research as a profession is highly rooted in the subject matter of philosophy, and with complex range of sub-disciplines within it brought to the fore in addressing the process(es) of professional engagement with communities - such engagement must bear in mind the methodological approach(es) by which information is to be sought, and with consideration given to *Phronesis* as part of the philosophical means through which *virtuous action / practical wisdom* is to be demonstrated. Professional engagement must always seek to pay attention to multiple factors which may render their engagement as being either ethically just or unjust. This for example, may incorporate evolving issues like '*gender imbalance, ethnic mix and also cultural diversity*' of the intended research communities.

A reflective approach is always an essential step leading to the way of good professional engagement, and trust for the entire body of the research profession. In a situation where consideration is to be given to covert engagement, professional researchers must endeavour to adhere to strict ethical code of practice, for example, discouraging the publication of unethical information about communities, and the manifestation of equality in addresses imbalances in gender.

Currently, there is no established and recognised professional body in the country assigned with the task of monitoring wider ethical issues for activities involving engagement with human participants during research undertakings. In such a case, HEIs endeavour and collaboration across the country will be of great help in addressing deficiencies / incapacities, where the execution of ethical praxis in

research is concerned. Where possible, HEIs' support in the area of phronetic research (with sufficient training input for professionals and organisations across the country) must endeavour to discourage the marginalization of research ventures that do not promote equality in society, as exemplified by researchers like Heidegger (1977 and 2000) and Readings (1997) in developed economy like the UK in the late 1990s to the early 2000s.

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