

THE ETHICAL DIMENSION OF ACADEMIC RESEARCH WHICH INVOLVES INVESTIGATIONS ON PEOPLE WITH VISUAL DISABILITIES

Alina GÎMBUȚĂ¹⁶, PhD
“Al. I. Cuza” University of Iasi

Abstract: The ethical dimension of academic research which involves investigations on people with visual disabilities can be ignored or made non-priority, hidden behind objectivity and validation of the research. Often, this ethical dimension can be in a shadow when the researcher takes some of the most important decisions for the success of the research.

However, the human existential condition involves naturally the ethical dimension as responsible rationality (Gadamer, ed.2001) in all the circumstances of the human interactions, and because the academic research is exactly a human interaction form, the respect for involved people's life must be a priority.

The *existential fragility* legitimates the ethical intentions for any research which involves disabled persons and validates the relativity of the human universe, as proof and guarantor for existential infinity and authenticity. Ethics does not disturb an academic research work that starts from the probable hypotheses because a really truth intention cannot omit the duality of the human whole and cannot put in the brackets a subsidiary privacy of the feelings (in case of the researched and the researchers) by concentrating on what are often seen as measurable and accounted realities.

Keywords: ethical difficulties, responsibility, probability, existence

1. Introduction

The academic research is generally seen as intended and planned activity in a controlled and organized context, using specific indicators for actions and results. Although is exciting, academic research requires a very good control of all predictable or unpredictable inter-actions, especially when humans “subjects” are involved and they belong to vulnerable and delicate existential categories.

The *acceptance* of the *delicate existence* concept in academic research equation means that any research action must to be done with maximum responsibility because each human being signifies a unique and unrepeatable micro-cosmos, a sensitive replica of the “holographic” macro-cosmos.

The *assumption* of this *human fragility* is decisively for the decisions and elections of the design research project, of the methods and tools action. Fragility, as existential dimension, highlights the possibility of some dangerous action

¹⁶ cgimbuta@yahoo.com

consequences and a huge responsibility for the physical and moral integrity of the human beings who are involved in research. In this sense, the academic research on human beings requires three different and simultaneous types of responsibility which must be generally reflected by the researcher's the attitudes and actions, but also by affiliated- institutional decisions:

* *Academic responsibility*-as academic rigor, a coherent logical approach, validity of dates, innovation and scientific impact;

* *Legislative responsibility*- as respect for civil law and human rights;

* *Ethical responsibility*- as non-affecting personal dignity, as valorisation of the soft aspects of the human interactions, as respect of all human beings involved in research, as maximizing the others Good.

If the legislative responsibility is indubitable because the civic laws are clearly and easy to identify (as common and mandatory rules for all the citizens), is not the same view in the case of the moral responsibility which is dubitable and involves optional prerogatives. In fact, the tendency is often to neglect or to make compromises when the scientific and moral imperatives are in contrariety, most time the balance being influenced by the force of the some pressure factors which can come from inside or outside the researcher realities. Certainly, the responsibility problem is not unilateral or simple because the involved parts must find *an equitable and common way* to respect simultaneously and to put in equilibrium *all* types of the required imperatives by different responsibility areas. For example, when the researchers enter in the privacy of the human feelings, the justification of academic knowledge can not be an indestructible and legitimate argument for any lack of moral in this area.

The academic investigator can not speak about *the moral norms as optional norms* and only about *the legal laws as compulsory norms* because the human being is a compulsory priority and an ethical behaviour is also compulsory...Actually, the norms take the optional or compulsory sense by the specific attitudes, decisions, options and actions of the person who chooses apparently just for himself as singularity, but in fact any of his/her chooses involves and affects a plurality of human beings. This is means that no research decision can be taken casually because the first and the last destination of knowledge and research is not just the truth, but also you, they, I...and finally all, as Human Beings.

Sometime, as in the Greek antiquity where human destiny was inexorably affected by a tragic dimension (due to the impossibility to comply strictly and simultaneously the three main laws of life- divine, social and familial), in the academic research which involves vulnerable people (as people with disabilities) can be observed a high level of tension at the researchers who are very pressed exactly by this requirement, for a simultaneous respect of the possible contrary imperatives.

The problem of responsibility can be schematic reflected, using the unbroken circularity of the circle as:

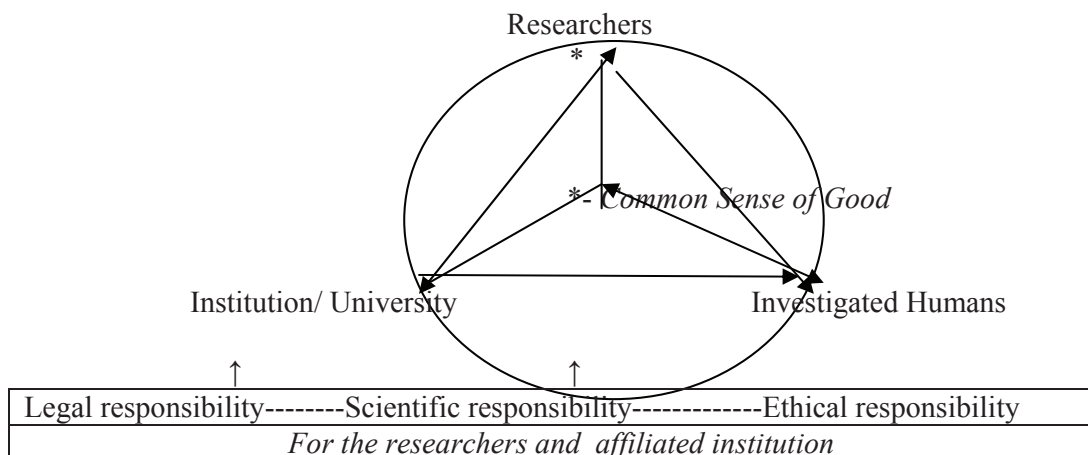


Fig.1-The responsibility model for academic research that includes investigations on disabled people

An academic research which investigates disabled people involves a *progressive* process for the identification of the common sense of Good, as a *changeable* value, because no one is morally legitimated to decide the Good like an *absolute* and *a-priori* end of the action (De Beauvoir, 1949). A justified research can not use human beings as research *objects*; it should identify a convergent way for different perspectives of the Good understanding, even the academic rigor and rationality seem to be incompatible with moral subjectivity.

From this point of view, any research thesis should begin with the assertion of an ethical principle that guides the research intentions and efforts. Any research activity must include in its context the importance and the influence of the imperceptible human emotions because without this subtle music of the human life, no any discovered formulas can be a *phenomenal* formula...

2. The ethics and the human existential context

Understanding of the ethical dimension in the case of the academic research which involves any human beings investigations can not be separated by a specific understanding of human nature. Its omission leads to a false science...

For example, if somebody is investigating the rabbit habits, these can not be broken by what rabbit is; the same problem is for the human investigations. But really we know what human being is? May be we already know some important facades of human life, but who really know the end of the human nature questions which are transforming in a new questions when the answers are coming?

Many old or contemporary thinkers have emphasized the importance of considering human individual as an intrinsic value, as spiritual and unfinished existence. Philosophers such Sartre, Heidegger or Gadamer, gave to human being the status of the central, unique and unrepeatable existence.

At Sartre for example the human being is an unfinished project, a unique *existence* form that does not have an end because this is choosing himself continuously,

absolutely free and totally responsible, while other life or without life forms are just *being* forms because are already ended and closed (Sartre, ed. 2005).

Heidegger also has spoke by the human being as an unique life form that is auto-interrogating about his own nature, as a Dasein who is *thrown into the world*, to live specifically among another word forms (Heidegger, ed.2003), while Gadamer has highlighted the unrivalled human capacity to communicate and to interpret messages by some cultural predetermined shapes (Gadamer, ed.2001). Even they had different ideas, all of them have thought the human being in a subtle relationship with the others human beings and have done from *the others* a key-term which includes the *ethic as existential dimension*.

When Heidegger has spoken about the human being as *thrown into the world*, he also said that human being *meets, lives and confronts* with the other word forms and this is not just a simply life location. The human complexity is more obvious when Dasein is interrogating himself/herself about the cryptic code of his/her profound nature because the answers for “Who am I?” involve a distance by himself/herself and many confrontations with the others. In the adventure of the self-search, the *questionable ego* meets and interacts with *other* objects and forms of *being* and also with *the other’s* egos that *exist* and are unfinished life *partners* (Sartre, ed.2004). At Sartre this is a very important mark for human universe because *the others* represent a natural limitation for every existence that must stop the personal freedom there where starts the other freedom.

Exactly in this self-searching process, in time, the human thinking has divided the word and the knowledge in two relative opposite and incompatible parts: the natural science-as Being word and the spiritual science-as Existential word. While in the natural sciences the dominance of the objects is very important, in spiritual sciences is desired the welcoming of the others existence because every step in understanding and knowledge is a together step, as Gadamer said in his reflections.

By this perspective, the contemporary academic persistence for elimination the human subjectivity is as a failed effort because the academic concepts are inevitably a part of a subjective connected network, predetermined by a heritage that can escape to any scientific vigilance (Gadamer, ed.2001). In fact, the academic research should not necessarily give a science of truth, but *a study of the experience of truth* (Gadamer, ed.2001) and this does not eliminate decisively the dimension of the human emotions.

But why are necessary to put in attention here the philosophers ideas? The simply answer is that from a long time the ethical aspects of academic research are not considered very important and often go unnoticed. If ethics can be understand as a priority for any academic research, the research process, strategies and decisions will be compulsory orientated by and to a truth which doesn’t renounce at intimate, profound human inside, but a truth which try to incorporate, to understand and to open this encrypted dimension of human being.

If Sartre, Heidegger and Gadamer’s conceptions are linked and put in other form, can be seen clear where is the place of the ethics in existential context and why this dimension is so important and imperative for all the human actions. The figure 2 sows that ethical dimension, as responsible rationality (Gadamer idea), is a natural and necessary aspect for all the human inter-actions and a specific way for human being to be ontologically situated, as thrown into the word (Heidegger idea).

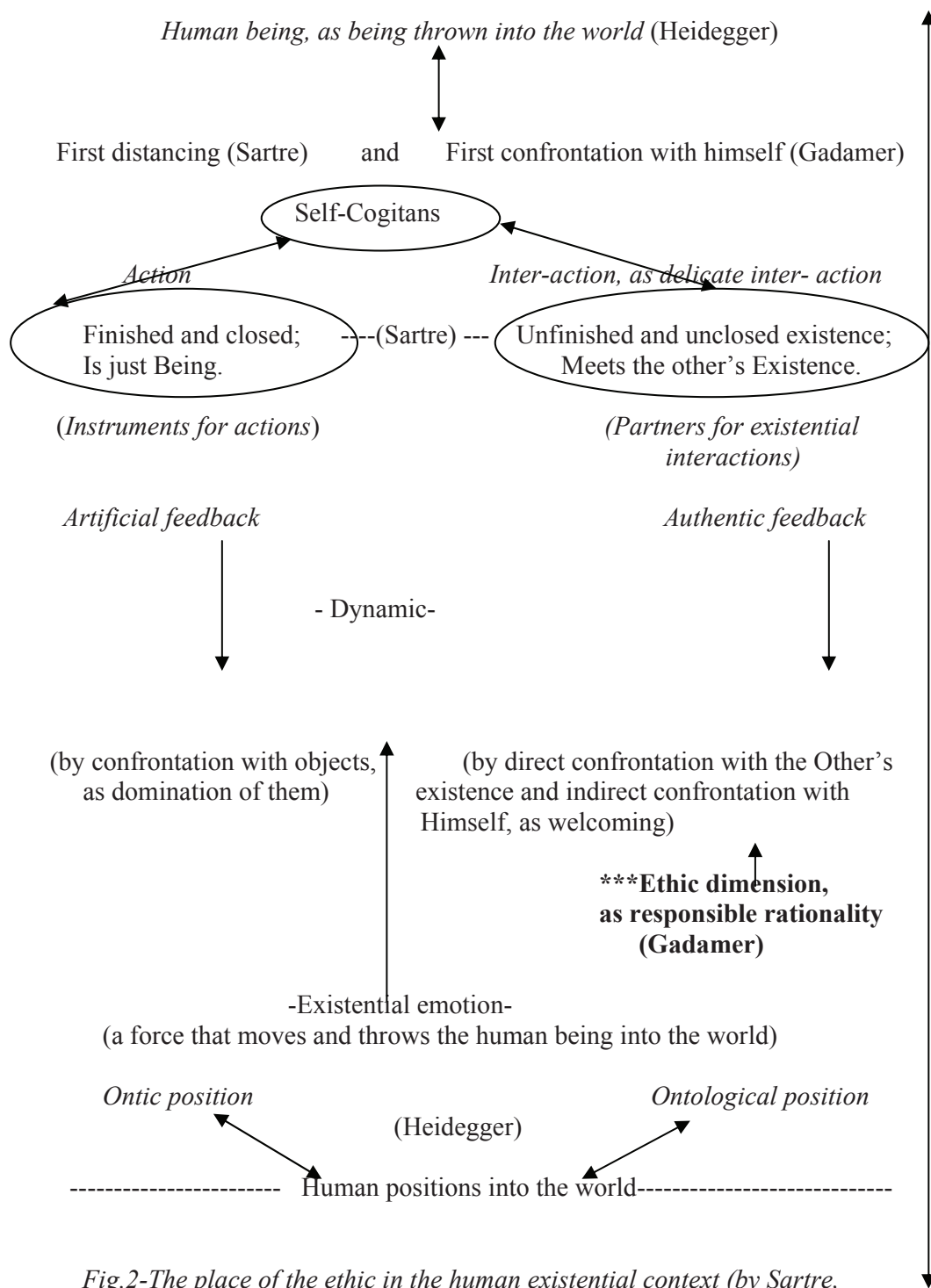


Fig.2-The place of the ethic in the human existential context (by Sartre, Gadamer and Heidegger reflections)

Even the world is out-of-self thinker, every existential intersection is an intimate interpretation and an emotional exchange that makes possible the exit and the returning to himself, because every meeting with the Others egos reveals the personal limits (Gadamer, ed.2001). The experience of Truth can not be broken by the human subject of this experience and by his subjective life.

From this specific perspective, the ethic animates the world of the human intersections with existential emotions thrill which can not be quantified in some formulas. The ethical behaviour is an intrinsic consequence of the authentic way to exist because authentic is means ontological and ontological is means ethical...

The effort for knowledge as academic research, especially when it involves human beings investigations must start and finish with the ethical dimension, as compulsory existential dimension.

3. Ethical difficulties, probability and interpretation in academic research which investigates people with visual disabilities

If someone puts on a flat surface two metal balls and move them one to other, the balls can pass one beside other, can easily collide or they can strongly collide. Because the balls are closed objects, the human can calculate the impact force and the force with that each ball has contributed to the impact. It is not the same for the people interactions whose interior force is unpredictable and is permanently changing; the human beings can only know that every incidental or intentional meeting with people from their proximity implies a mutual influence.

But who can afford the action to move the balls and who can afford the action to move the human beings? In the name of knowledge the human being can *afford* to do any think? With this type of questions may be starts every ethical disturbance of the researcher conscience, especially when the focus group implies vulnerable people. But I can speak just about me, about my ethical difficulties...as a researcher and a teacher-partner of the students with visual impairments.

The ethical dimension of academic research often goes unseen for those who do assessments and often people may ask where the ethical problems are if the participants say yes or sign for the investigation acceptance. The ethics is not a matter of the legal agreement; it is a problem of *how* can researchers find the correct way to maximize the Good, as *common sense*, and to avoid or to minimize the damage of the investigated people. Identification of this way becomes more difficult if the investigated people are not considered object (and indirectly tools) or simply subjects of investigations (and indirectly finished), but existential partners, as unfinished and changeable existences (Sartre, ed.2004).

The research decisions are also more conflicting when the investigated existences are people with visual impairments because interfere the force of the other two possible and adjacent existential hypostases: *physical imperfection* and *a relative, marginal social location*.

The experience of the physical imperfection in interaction with other persons often can cause isolation, self-isolation, self-doubts and desire to be unobservable.

Even the person with visual impairment is agree with the research participation, this does not really know how much will be forced the opening of his/her intimate interior and also the research can not perfectly predict the sensitive limits of the others investigated universe. For all of these reasons, the academic methods and instruments should be selected so as to not expose the participants to an artificial exteriorization or to harm the personal dignity.

Is also very important that researcher to manage good distances with participants who already have the experience of the marginal social existence because as investigator, the researcher can be perceived by participants as being in a central position and the investigation like an experience that exposes them at a new marginal situation. The ethical difficulties are also in this case *a problem of priorities*, because the researcher can not completely and definitively reconciles the objective imperative of science with the subjective imperative of morality.

Another identified ethical problem is related by the legitimacy of constructions for the others people or by the ability to collect relevant dates about the investigated people life. Even the participants are agree that the researcher to build a specific reality in their name and for them, it is not means that, compulsory, he/she will have at the end of work a compatible building with the other expectations and desires. From start to finish of these constructions, participants, as recipients are changing...they are changing their options, needs or desires and the researcher, too. How can be objectively measure all the imperceptible and unaccounted transformations?

Also, the researcher must have a common language, as instrument for communication with participants, but how can this identify, understand and reflect the privacy behind the language? In fact, with every data collection step, the researcher intentions are to scratch the cryptic and intimate dimension of the others existential partners, to put the others insides in the light of academic analysis, to make visible and understandable the diversity of the particular universes, using the common and standard benchmarks. No matter how carefully the researcher builds the relationships with investigated people, he/she can have access just at the peculiarities which the participant *wants* to bring at surface, to be visible for the others analysis.

In these circumstances the work results, as an indubitable truth, are not possible because are many cryptic and hermetic dimensions of the investigated existences that escape by any academic vigilance. Indeed, the science is based in the most cases on the inductive logic, but a clear and coherent logical thinking warns that the conclusions of the inductive research are in *terms of probability*. To put together the particulars dates as the *different* perceptions, visions, actions and reactions and to extract from their analysis a result as *possible interpretation*, this is the *experience* of the relentless search of the truth. The real task of academic researcher is not to discover an implacable and immediate truth, but to check *the probability value* of the initial assertions, as research hypothesis.

Directing of the research actions toward the universal truth revelation is a mistake because the researcher will see this as an expected final and will be tempted to sacrifice the existence of the others in the name of a wrong finality...he/she will be tempt to sacrifice the ethical principle and may be will make it.

Usually, the researcher starts the work from some personal opinion, as reflections about the similarity of the some situations, and must prove if these probabilities reflect a similarities coincidence or a causal relation; the results can confirm or infirm the probability of these personal assumptions and all that the researcher can really do is *to grow the probability chances* towards the truth. This is the real task of the researcher work.

Another important aspect for academic research that generally investigates human beings is the interpretation problem. Gadamer highlighted that science is not a really discovery, is rather a predetermined interpretation because in communication process people mutually use some signal systems to send the information and they also interpret these for understanding the messages sense (Gadamer, ed.2001). The language is a naturally system that *partially* reflects personal realities and has limitations; also the researcher, as human being thrown into the world, gives sense and interprets the signals of this world where he/she was thrown in different intersections. This can not skip, cancel or minimize the importance of another kind of signals (as emotional signals for example) because the investigated human beings are not only pure rationality.

The sciences can not consider the humans intersections just simple meetings of the rational individuals from a global society; these are much more... these involve the participation of the *identities as personalities* and here again is ethics. The researcher from the spiritual sciences must be release by method obsession and by the complex of the scientific insufficiency (Gadamer, ed.2001) because the desired objectivity inevitably meets the human subjectivity and its signals. This subjective human dimension can be essential for some aspects of knowledge and here can not be a competition for the relevance of validity; as different particularities of the human life, they have relevance and validity in their genus (Aslam, 2006).

In conclusion, the ethical difficulties, especially in the case of research that investigates people with disabilities and their delicate inter-existences, involve a tri-dimensional intersection (from researcher, institution and investigated people perspectives) of the different options, visions, interpretations and existential priorities, *in terms of probabilities*. No any researcher can search the eternity formulas absolutely free by the others or him-self/ her-self emotions because this will cancel any infinity of the human intentions. The ethics is an existential infinity guarantor and this human existential nature *legitimizes the science to be compulsory based on ethics...*

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