Is social sciences and humanity (SSH) research, by nature, the domain of blatant misconduct? Drawing the line between acceptable and contemptible behaviour is a much more complicated matter in the SSH than in the other sciences. It may require a revision of the principles governing research to provide a solid basis for enforcing good practices. In this opinion piece, Ioana Galleron, who is chair of the European Network for Research Evaluation in Social Sciences and Humanities (ENRESSH), an European Cooperation in Science and Technology (COST) Action, shares her perspective on this thorny issue.

Navigating SSH research integrity straits: between Scylla and Charybdis

Social science and humanities researcher need to re-appropriate the fundamentally humanist concepts of integrity and ethics

Talking about research integrity is like navigating the sea between the two mythological sea creatures from Homer's Odyssee, named [Scylla](#) and [Charybdis](#). In the same way that avoiding sea monsters on either side of a sea channel, requires zig-zagging, drawing the line between acceptable and contemptible in research is not straightforward. And it appears to be a much more complicated matter in the social sciences and humanities (SSH) than in the other sciences. Today, there is a clear need to reassess the principles governing SSH research to provide a solid basis for enforcing good practices and rejecting bad ones.

Different realm

One of the cornerstones of research integrity principles is to conduct research without ideological bias. However, many anthropologists, historians and sociologists have grown cautious of this approach. Instead, they prefer an "objectivation of the subjective relation to the object (of knowledge)", as defined by sociologist, philosopher and anthropologist [Pierre Bourdieu](#). In other words, objectively analysing the subjective approach towards the object of research. They know full well that attitudes and beliefs are unavoidably and even necessarily interfering with research in the SSH.

In practice, applying the concept of research integrity to the social sciences and humanities raises a number of questions. Isn't SSH research, by nature, the domain of blatant misconduct? According to a recent [ScienceEurope report](#) on the topic, the definition of research integrity is: "to produce knowledge that is true, complete and unbiased by ideological, economic or political influences." However, it may not necessarily be applicable to the SSH. What is the truth when applied to readings of literary works? Aren't inspirational readings often rooted in ideologies and beliefs? And how is the completeness to be appreciated in, at least, certain studies of philosophy or architecture?

The magnitude of the intellectual effort required to address all of the above issues, may explain why, in many cases, the SSH have neglected introducing committees or offices for ethics in research.

There are, however, existing [online recommendations specifically geared towards the SSH](#) and even [codes of conduct for research](#) in these disciplines. Nevertheless, large parts of academia do not feel concerned. Nor have they even heard of such activities. The problem is that existing guidance covers almost exclusively "research involving human subjects," a kind of research many SSH scholars do not practice.

Misconduct in the SSH

Still, cases of research misconduct exist in the SSH. Plagiarism is a hot subject. There are highly publicised cases of [complacency PhDs](#) awarded to politicians in Romania, for example. But this is not the only country where such practice has happened.

SSH researchers too are caught in the universal process of acceleration of academic life (see H. Rosa's concept of "[social acceleration](#)." They are under pressure to "[publish or perish](#)". This, in turn, incites them to adopt questionable research practices and governance. They routinely resort to craft publications aimed at artificially inflating their CV and heighten their reputation via the use of [predatory journals](#), double publication, parroting, unnecessary self-citation, complacent cross-citation and cronyism.

Scholars' reluctance

Strengthening and improving evaluation methods and procedures of the SSH research is therefore of paramount importance. This will help maintain--and, in some cases, to introduce--new levels of trust and accountability in SSH research.

Yet some scholars do not like the idea of being evaluated, let alone that their research integrity is placed under scrutiny.Some are concerned about the discomfort that questioning colleagues' work

brings to a professional group based on collegiality. Others argue that after all, in SSH research lives are not, in the great majority of cases, under threat. Some others may consider that a quite Don-Quixotesque attachment to honesty and personal responsibility, is unnecessary. Thus, these SSH scholars blur the message about their societal relevance and impact, mainly because they are reluctant to engage in defining an adapted understanding of research integrity and in fighting research misconduct.

Besides, there is no institutional pressure to comply with research integrity. Indeed, it is not in the interests of funders to push the issue too far, as this would inevitably lead to a more general discussion of the place given to these disciplines in national and European research funding frameworks. There, the SSH are under-considered, in spite of recent efforts for embedding SSH research in Horizon 2020 funding programmes.

Suggested solutions

Overcoming the reluctance of SSH researchers towards adopting good practice in research integrity requires a thorough understanding of the ways the SSH generate knowledge. We also need to assess the underlying representations of quality among SSH scholars.In addition, we need to find the most adapted metrics for evaluation of SSH research, taking into account the specificity of dissemination practices. This is precisely what the [European Network for Research Evaluation in the SSH](#) (ENRESSH) aims to accomplish, by coordinating research projects across Europe.

ENRESSH has been recently launched as a European Cooperation in Science and Technology (COST) Action, dedicated to support the SSH research and to improve its evaluation. As such, ENRESSH is a step towards strengthening the integrity of European research as a whole. It also represents a call to all SSH researchers to better appropriate the ethics agenda. After all, 'integrity' and 'ethics' are fundamentally humanist concepts.

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