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## Ethical challenges in cross-cultural field research: A comparative study of UK and Ghana

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## **Ethical Challenges in Cross-Cultural Field Research: A Comparative Study of UK and Ghana**

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**Abstract:** *Research ethics review by ethics committees has grown in importance since the end of the Nuremberg trials in 1949. However, ethics committees have come under increasing criticisms either for been 'toothless or too fierce' (Fistein & Quilligan, 2012:224). This paper presents a personal account of my experience in obtaining ethical approval for my PhD study from a UK university and the ethical dilemmas encountered in the fieldwork in Ghana. In this paper I question whether strict adherence to ethical guidelines developed from western perspectives is useful in conducting research in non-western societies. As more academics are increasingly been mandated to undertake international research, the paper argues for more flexibility in the ethical approval process to accommodate cultural differences.*

**Keywords:** Ghana, overseas fieldwork, ethical guidelines, ethics committee

### **Introduction**

This paper presents a personal account of my experience in obtaining ethical approval from a UK university's ethics committee and the ethical dilemmas encountered in the fieldwork in Ghana. It is worth pointing out that I am mindful that ethics committees exist 'as much to protect researchers and institutions where research is carried out as those who may be the subjects of research' (Morrow, undated:7). Therefore this paper is not in any way meant to be a personal attack on ethics committee members. The intention of this paper is to draw attention that the checklist approach to research ethics approval needs reconsideration. In this paper I question whether strict adherence to general ethical guidelines developed from western perspectives is useful in conducting research in non-western societies, and argue that it is paternalistic for research ethics committee in one country to determine how research in another country should be conducted, especially when the committee has little knowledge of practices in the other country. Whilst the paper adds to the growing call for rethink of research ethics and ethical approval process (see Haggerty, 2004; Beaulieu & Estalella, 2012; Van Den Hoonaard, 2001; Schrag, 2011; Dingwall, 2008; Hammersley, 2006; Riviere, 2011), it in particularly fills a void on the paucity of literature on ethical dimensions of social science research in Africa. Most studies on ethical issues in Africa have concentrated on informed consent to the neglect of other ethical issues (see Tindana, Kass & Akweongo, 2006; Andoh, 2009; Ijsselmuiden & Faden, 1992).

### **Research Governance Framework in the UK and Ghana**

Research governance is about procedures instituted in the research process to manage and/or reduce risk to both the researcher and the researched. Research Ethics committees (or Institutional Review Boards) are ever-gaining prominence in research processes. These

committees, whose primary role is to ‘protect the dignity, rights, safety and well-being of all actual or potential research participants’ (Fistein and Quilligan, 2012:224) are more robust in Western countries than in developing countries. For example, In the UK most research councils and professional associations have research ethics guidelines, such as the Medical Research Council’s good research practice (2012); British Educational Research Association’s ethical guidelines for educational research (2011); and most certainly all UK universities have ethical guidelines and research ethics committees. As noted by Hammersley (2006:4) ‘research ethics committees have existed in many British universities for some time’. The situation is however different in many African countries, and in Ghana research ethics is not given prominent attention in the country. Most universities in Ghana do not have research guidelines and research ethics committees as research supervisors are entrusted to guide students in undertaking ethical research.

In the UK obtaining ethical approval is pre-requisite before the commencement of any research and the researcher must satisfy ethics committee members that the study will adhere to strict ethical standards, as stipulated in research ethical frameworks and guidelines. For example, the Economic and Social Research Council (UK) has produced a research ethics framework that emphasize the role of ethics committees to which researchers seeking funds from ESRC are required to conform (ESRC, 2005). These standards include signed written consent, adherence to confidentiality and anonymity, and formal request to gate-keepers. There is also the expectation that research subjects will voluntarily participate, therefore subjects should not be unduly influenced by money to participate. In accordance with the research governance framework of my university I sought ethical approval before commencing the fieldwork. Whereas the university’s ethical approval process stipulates maximum of 7 weeks to obtain a decision, it took more than 3 months for me to receive a decision. This was primarily due to my inability to adhere strictly to the university’s ethical guidelines, accordingly some of the ethics committee members were unsatisfied with how I proposed to conduct the study.

Another important policy in the UK in relation to contact with people deemed vulnerable is for the researcher to obtain a Criminal Records Bureau clearance. As my study was with 15-17 years old young people, who are deemed vulnerable I was expected to obtain this clearance. The university’s ethical guidelines state that ‘Criminal Records Bureau clearance *should always be sought* when conducting research with children under the age of 16’ (ethical guidelines, 2010:4, emphasis added). However, unlike the UK, in Ghana Criminal Records Bureau clearance is not required of people who come into contact with ‘vulnerable groups’. Even before the fieldwork begun the ethical approval process had unearth a discrepancy in imposing a UK framework on research in Ghana. In spite of the numerous literature that suggest a need to consider cultural differences in the research process (see e.g. Hudson & Taylor-Henley, 2001; Sue & Sue, 1990), ethics review continue to depict Euro-American culture. As argued by Hammersley (2006) even where there is agreement about the universality of some ethical principles, individuals may still make different judgments. There is therefore the need to contextualize the interpretation of ethical guidelines.

## **Methodology**

The paper reports a phenomenological study based on the author’s observations of the norms

associated with ethical approval in the UK and the lived reality and knowledge of ethical practice in the author's home country, Ghana. Although 'a consensual, univocal interpretation of phenomenology is hard to find' (Giorgi, 1985:23–24), it can be summed up as inquiry into people's subjective experiences of a phenomenon. This paper presents my lived experiences of obtaining ethical approval and the dilemmas encountered in the fieldwork. The goal of the paper is to expose some of the ethical challenges in designing and conducting research across cultures through a Centre-periphery lens by comparing UK and Ghana.

*Theoretical framework: Ethical multiculturalism.*

There is general consensus that social scientists need to adopt a pluralistic position on culture and diversity. Social scientists therefore have an obligation to suspend any single position from which to judge or assess other cultures. And yet, in relation to research ethics the underlining framework is premised on western normative ethics that tend to rest on the principle of 'primacy of the individual'. There is a pretence to the existence of different ethical codes. Bhutta (2002) has however noted that the individually oriented Western ethical framework is inappropriately usurping other relevant frameworks in developing countries. For some authors, this is 'colonization of local practices and traditions of knowing by the Centre' (Honan et al., 2013:386).

Ethics, as a principle is universal but there are variations in how ethics is practiced. This is in view of the fact that ethics is about values and moral conduct (Azenabor, 2008) but what is morally desirable conduct is culturally relative. To resolve the tension between 'procedural ethics' - i.e. process of seeking approval from ethics committees to undertake research, and 'ethics in practice or microethics' - i.e. the everyday ethical issues that arise in undertaking research (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004), the theoretical framework of this paper is situated in Crigger, Holcomb and Weiss' (2001) concept of 'ethical multiculturalism. Ethical multiculturalism advocates for the appreciation of 'alternative choices and actions rather than marginalizing or condemning them' (Crigger, Holcomb and Weiss, 2001:462). In other words, western normative ethics should not be strictly adhered to if they would not make sense in a context where a study is to be carried out. In the next section of the paper, I present my experience of the clash between 'procedural ethics' and 'microethics'.

**Findings: Tales from the Field**

*Entry into the Field*

Gate-keepers' permission is deemed very important in the literature (King and Horrocks, 2010; Roberts-Holmes, 2005; Denscombe, 2007). However, the process of gaining gate-keeper permission was more complicated than I anticipated. In negotiating access to the organizations involved in the study the research ethics committee were satisfied that I had written formal letters to the heads of 4 organizations requesting access to interview staff. However, in gaining access to the organizations I received prompt response from 2 organizations granting access, but the 2 other organizations did not respond to my request. Nonetheless, I gained access to those organizations without the knowledge and consent of the head of the organizations through a third party who introduced me to a worker at the organization and this worker helped me to recruit

interviewees. Also through an interviewee I gained access to the other organization that did not respond to my request. These experiences highlight that in some societies informal and personal contacts are more valuable and more effective in gaining access to organizations than formal requests.

### *Consent*

The third issue that the research ethics committee had with my proposed research was about consent. Since my study did not seek to elicit sensitive personal or familial information, parental consent was not sought. Instead consent was sought directly from the young people and other key informants. Seeking consent directly from the young people was intended to recognize them as active and competent social agents. According to Mayall (2002) viewing young people as having agency is recognition that young people are capable of reflecting upon and making decisions about issues of concern to them. In seeking consent, participants were not required to sign written consent form agreeing to participate in the research. This was against the dictates of my university's ethical guidelines that require researchers to obtain written consent:

Researchers must obtain and record consent from participants...in writing...signed consent forms should be stored separately from the research data (ethics guidelines, 2010:2-3).

Piquemal (2001 cited in Marshall and Batten, 2003) has argued for a definition of informed consent in cross cultural research. Marshall and Batten further argue that ethics is more fluid in some cultures therefore the standard letter that participants sign can act as a barrier to research participation. Accordingly, in my study consent was regarded as an ongoing verbal process (Thomas and O'Kane, 1998) such that participants could withdraw their participation anytime they wished without having to give reasons. Simons (2009) has argued that asking participants to sign a consent form is insufficient for good ethical practice and in some contexts inappropriate. Some researchers who have conducted studies in Ghana have concluded that it is inappropriate to ask participants to sign consent forms (Twum-Danso, 2008; Boakye-Boaten, 2006). Boakye-Boaten argues that in Ghanaian culture any agreement that requires signature 'connotes a level of seriousness, bureaucratic and often misconstrued with trustworthiness' (Boakye-Boaten, 2006:121). In seeking informed consent, participants were informed of the nature of the study, its aims, how data will be stored and used. This was in relation to Kellett's (2005) argument that informed consent is not simply a question of informing participants about the research and asking them to sign a consent form.

The research ethics committee members were unhappy about my decision not to obtain signed written consent form. They seemed pre-occupied with getting some form of recorded consent hence an email question was later sent asking whether I will tape record the 'ongoing verbal consent'. I responded to the committee that recording participants giving oral consent even before they have agreed to take part in the study would be unethical, and also it would be inappropriate to seek consent off-tape and ask participant to repeat themselves giving consent just so it can be captured on tape.

The requirement to have signed consent form is highly contested (Reinharz, 1993; Van Den Hoonaard, 2001). Reinharz (1993) has argued that it is problematic and coercive to require

written consent from research participants. As also argued by Charbonneau (1984:20) an individual's informed consent as 'the cornerstone of all western ethical codes' is however difficult to apply in situations characterized by secrecy, especially in research on sensitive topics (Van Den Hoonaard, 2001). It must also be emphasized that written consent is not possible to obtain from some groups of people, for example, people with disabilities such as cerebral palsy, Duchene muscular dystrophy, severe learning disability and severe autism. Furthermore, in many developing countries, due to the level of illiteracy there are a substantial number of people who use inkpad to thumbprint documents instead of signature. For this group of people signed written consent cannot be obtained. Hence the insistence of ethics committees on signed written consent must be re-considered.

### *Confidentiality and Anonymity*

The fourth area of contention with my university's ethics guidelines was around the issue of confidentiality and anonymity. Confidentiality involves protecting the privacy and trust of participants to enable them to freely share their experiences with the researcher (Cree et al., 2002). Confidentiality and anonymity obligate the researcher to ensure that no harm befalls any research participant. Since my study did not seek personal or sensitive information, it was not expected that participants will make any disclosures. It was however acknowledged that sensitive organizational information could be obtained during data collection, in which case confidentiality was to be highly maintained. As it turned out during general conversation with some key informants sensitive personal and political information were disclosed. Duncan et al., (2009:1694) have noted that 'the nature of qualitative methods and the way in which researchers and participants interact creates a space that invites disclosure of personal intimate information'. To help deal with such challenges Kirk (2007) argues that it is good practice to inform participants about the limits of confidentiality and about how and when such limits come into play. Honoring confidentiality means being alert to the issues that participants wish to keep private. According to Simons (2009:106) it is about acknowledging that 'not all information obtained in interview or discovered about the person in the case becomes public'.

My university's ethical guidelines state that 'participants must be assured that their anonymity will be respected at all times unless otherwise determined by law' (ethical guidelines, 2010:2). Therefore the committee was unhappy with my decision not to offer blanket anonymity. Walford (2005) has however challenged the principle of anonymity arguing that it is useful for research sites and participants to be known so that other researchers can verify the validity of accounts. He strongly argues that it is impossible and undesirable to ensure anonymity. Kushner (2000 cited in Simons, 2009) also questions the essence of anonymity. He argues that denying identity is an ethical issue which according to him is as damaging as naming people in reports. Moreover, Silverman (2006) argues that some people may actually want to be identified in research reports and feel let down if their identity is concealed. In view of these assertions, I chose not to offer blanket anonymity, however participants in my study were explicitly asked to sign a form if they wished to be named in the report.

I observed that some participants signed the form without reading it; some also signed after reading it, supposedly agreeing to be identified in the report but told me not to quote what they have said in my report. This made me question why they signed the document if they did

not want to be identified. This experience highlighted that asking participants to sign a form does not take away the dilemma inherent in the triad of consent, confidentiality and anonymity. The researcher must evaluate the information obtained to decide whether to respect confidentiality and anonymity, but bearing in mind that participants must be protected from harm, which includes loss of job, loss of status in society, and stigmatizing. In other words, respecting anonymity is dependent on the sensitivity of the research area and being guided by the principle of no harm to participants.

### *Payment for Participation*

Participation in any research is thought to be voluntary and therefore devoid of any undue influence and/or coercion. Hence it is presumed to be unethical to offer financial rewards as inducement to participation. Macklin (1989) argues that it is ethically inappropriate to pay research participants because it violates ethical requirements that research participation is altruistic. She further argues that paying participants coerces them to participate even when they would like to withdraw from the study. It is also argued that financial inducements to research participants is psychologically manipulative and potentially exploitative (Edwards et al., 2004). But how does a researcher deal with research participants who demand financial payments for their participation? Indeed, Arnstein (1969) reported of a situation where some community residents demanded a fee to participate in research interviews.

I encountered the issue of financial payment during a meeting with one of the Programmed Coordinators who was also in charge of an advocacy project that was very important to my study. He demanded GH¢200 (i.e. £100) before he will grant an interview and also for his time in arranging for me to meet the young people. He described the payment as 'motivational fee'. As we discussed the ethics of such a payment he queried how beneficial my research was for him personally such that he will 'waste' his time for me. As I reflected on his question I kept asking myself, who else could grant me access to the young people that I needed for my study. I realized that he was the only one as he was the program coordinator (i.e. gate-keeper to the project), so I paid the GH¢200. By implication, the decision to pay or not to pay a research participant is dependent on how important the participant is to the study. If the participant is pivotal to the success of the study (i.e. gate-keeper), or the participant cannot be easily substituted for a voluntary participant, or the participant is in a hidden population, then the researcher has to pay 'motivational fees'. Of course, paying participants to secure their participation could be deemed as bribery. But it must be acknowledged that bribery - as unpleasant as it is - has become a part of the fabric of life in many societies and not much business is transacted without it.

### **Concluding Remarks**

There has been a barrage of criticism against research ethics committees (see for example Edwards et al., 2004; Dyck and Allen, 2013). There have equally been a number of publications in defense of research ethics committees (see Garrard & Dawson, 2005; Dunn, 2013). This requires research ethics committees to maintain delicate balance to satisfy both sides of the debate. As argued by Fistein and Quilligan (2012:224) research ethics committees must ensure that research participants are 'adequately protected from unjustified risk' while also avoiding



overly paternalistic inferences. Whereas I wholeheartedly agree that research ethics committees are instituted for very good reasons I believe that subjecting all research proposals to mandatory ethical review is unnecessary and a waste of time. I share the views of Dyck and Allen (2013) that the responsibility for determining the ethics of non-medical research should be transferred to researchers and their supervisors. Until such time that the regulation of social science research is discontinued (see Schrag, 2011; Dingwall, 2008), there should be more flexibility in ethics guidelines and ethical approval process, especially in respect of research undertaken by nationals of non-western countries in their home-countries, for they know more about the practices in their home-countries. Being culturally literate would increase their chances of conducting studies in ethical manner in such ethnic minority settings (Marshall and Batten, 2003).

The stories shared in this paper highlight that ‘the practice of ethics in the field is not a one-dimensional issue’ (Weinberg, 1999 cited in Van Den Hoonaard, 2001:22), yet ethics guidelines and ethical approval processes treat ethics as one-size fits all. With the increasing admission of students from non-western countries to universities in western countries and the increasing demand on academics to conduct international research, there is the need for more flexibility in ethical guidelines to take account of cultural differences. These non-western students often undertake research in their home-countries, therefore as argued by Morrow (undated:7) although broad ethical guidelines are useful, there should be ‘room for the personal ethical choices of the researcher’. Ethics committee members should accept that signed written consent is not always possible; they should accept oral consent. A good example is the position of the University of Toronto’s ethics review which explicitly states that written consent may not be appropriate or required, and gives researchers the opportunity to explain the form of consent that is appropriate for their project (Riviere, 2011). Research Ethics committees should also accept that anonymity need not ‘always be a gold standard of proper research ethics’ (Beaulieu & Estalella, 2012:36), and finally, accept that sometimes it is necessary to make payments to some research participants. Perhaps it may be useful for the committee to invite international students to discuss their proposal and answer questions directly to clarify areas that committee members have concerns. This will greatly reduce students’ anxiety levels, time wasted and help demystify the ethical approval process.

More importantly, there is the need for flexibility to accommodate cultural difference since research committee members do not follow the researcher into the field and do not also monitor the conduct of the research to determine if the researcher is acting ethically. In other words, being ethically cleared by an ethics committee does not guarantee that the fieldwork will be ethically conducted. It will be helpful if research ethics committees do not force researchers onto supposed ‘standards’ to avoid incidence of researchers telling ethics committees what the committee want to hear but researchers doing what they want to do in the field. As noted by Riviere (2011:200) ‘ethical dilemmas cannot necessarily be resolved or addressed through the ethics processes. In view of the numerous challenges in cross-cultural research, researchers conducting studies in developing countries need to adapt ethics to local conditions, a process described by Crigger, Holcomb and Weiss (2001) as ‘ethical multiculturalism’. To this end, Knight et al., (2004 cited in Riviere, 2011) have advocated for the recognition and implementation of cultural relevance as an ethic of research.

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