

Ethical Issues in Social Science Research in Developing Countries: Useful or Symbolic

Julius A. Mollet
Flinders University

Introduction

Social science research has long been concerned with ethical issues. Social science investigates complex issues which involve cultural, legal, economic, and political phenomena (Freed-Taylor, 1994). This complexity means that social science research must concern itself with “moral integrity” to ensure that research process and findings are “trustworthy” and valid (Biber, 2005). Research involving human subjects (or ‘participants’, in the current terminology) is required to show respect for ethical issues by obtaining approval from the institution’s Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) prior to commencement.

University policies on research ethics state that all research involving human subjects must comply with the 2007 *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research*¹. This policy applies to all researchers, including international PhD students enrolled at universities in developed countries but doing research in developing countries (often their own country of origin). There has been concern, however, that the ethical principles created in developed countries might not be universally appropriate to international PhD students from developing countries.

In developing countries, where societies are often pluralistic, cultural background and security become important issues for social researchers in conducting fieldwork. This state of affairs can lead to the researchers finding it difficult to get letters of permission from the local authorities, and may lead to delays in conducting research.

¹ <http://www.nhmrc.gov.au/publications/synopses/e72syn.htm>

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In many cases, it seems that an international PhD student may have difficulty in applying for the required ethical behaviour approval to collect data (by interview or questionnaire) due to the fact that there are differences in the environment for conducting research between developed and developing countries. This concern arises particularly in relation to research topics relating to sensitive issues of culture or security in developing countries. This problem may affect the completion of research projects by international PhD students. This paper will examine the critical issues of ethical social research in developing countries, based on a researcher's experience in conducting fieldwork in West Papua, Indonesia.

The Nature of Ethics as Fundamental Basis for Social Sciences Research

Ethical issues are becoming a crucial element in social research. It is compulsory for a social researcher conducting research involving humans to apply for ethical clearance. The ethical principles set out in the *National Statement* state that all research involving human subjects should be conducted in accordance with the following : people must be respected, benefits must be maximised and harms minimised, harm shall not be done, and subjects in studies must be treated equally (SBREC Flinders University, 2007). Clearly, ethical behaviour in social science research should be required of all researchers, including international students conducting research at universities in developed countries such as Australia.

In Australia, the implementation of ethical standards should be based on the 2007 *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research*. The principle of voluntary participation requires that people not be coerced into participating in research. The process of gathering information from respondents requires informed consent, which means that prospective research participants must be fully informed about the procedures and risks involved in research and must give their consent to participate. Furthermore, ethical standards also require that researchers not put participants in a potentially harmful situation. Harm can be either physical or psychological and may refer to harm caused by the actual conduct of

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research (such as mental distress) or harm arising from the publication of research outcomes. For those reasons, Australia's ethical standards put considerable emphasis on protecting the privacy of research participants. Almost all research guarantees the participant's confidentiality. This means they are assured identifying information will not be made available to anyone who is not directly involved in the study.

The effective administration of these ethical rules means that there needs to be a procedure which ensures researchers will consider all relevant ethical issues, including guaranteeing respondents' privacy, when formulating research plan. To address such needs, most institutions and organisations have established one or more Human Research Ethics Committees (HREC), a panel that reviews research proposals with respect to ethical implications, and decides whether additional actions need to be taken to ensure the safety and rights of participants. In practice, the Ethics Committee at a number of universities has seen its task as including helping to protect both the organisation and the researcher against potential litigation with respect to failure to address important ethical considerations on behalf of participants. The Ethics Committee consists of members from several different disciplinary backgrounds and is formally independent of university and government influence. Ethics Committee members should be autonomous and must have no possible conflict of interest concerning the proposals they are judging. To ensure probity, the committee is regularly monitored and is accountable for its decisions.

Debate of Ethical Issues in Social Research

Several difficult issues have arisen in the application of ethical principles to social research. The first issue is associated with covert research. It is still questionable whether or not it is ethical for social science research scholars to covert research. According to Biber (2005, p.91), covert research is appropriate where it is necessary to achieve a better understanding of certain social phenomena. An example of this kind of research is the investigation of the social life of drug dealers and drug users. As pointed out by Williams (1996), it

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is impossible to ask for informed consent from members of such communities, because they do not want to be investigated. It has also been argued that the very act of seeking informed consent from some research participant can lead to a change in the attitude of the research participant towards giving information to the researchers. Other authorities, however, have argued against the covert research, stating that it is unnecessary in social research. Homan (1991) argues, moreover, that covert research may have a negative impact for the researchers. He believes that as long as the respondents 'trust' the researcher, there is no need to conduct covert research. Homan claims that covert research is likely to invade the privacy of the respondent to an unacceptable degree and he argues that using covert research makes social science research no different from journalism.

A second issue relates to the role of researcher as participant-observer. The main concern here is that the researcher should be neutral in order to maintain their aim of 'objectivity' in their research project (Gans, 1982). In research experience where the researcher also acts as a participant, he or she must normally develop and maintain close relationships with other community members. Some ethnographers have argued that a closer relationship between the researchers and participants of this kind can lead to conflict and deception (Biber 2005, p.93). Researchers may find it difficult to make objective judgments in their research if they are personally connected with their respondents.

A third issue concerns the nature of ethical regulation. With universities setting up Ethics Committees to review research proposals through a process of ethical review, and with academics under pressure to obtain for research grants (Biber, 2005), researchers have raised concerns that increased ethical review is circumscribing their ability to make their own decisions about ethical issues relating to their specific projects. Ethical regulation has produced a formulaic approach to research ethics, in which researchers may feel constrained to tick the right boxes, rather than to think through ethical principles themselves. There is also a problem that basic ethical principles may lead to different and conflicting prescriptions. (Social Research Association, 2003, p.12). Haggerty (2004) expresses

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her point by using term 'ethics creep' to characterize the change in social science research that has taken place 'in the name of ethics.

A further issue relates to 'vulnerable groups'. In most ethical clearance processes, the social science research category "vulnerable group" refers to children and young people, people with mental health problems and people with learning disabilities. In considering applications for ethics clearance, Ethics Committees ask for special consideration to be given to 'vulnerable groups', because they have difficulties in providing initial and continued informed consent to conduct research. This concern has led to an insistence on more complicated procedures to protect the interests of such groups. Moreover, Some social researchers, however, have argued strongly against defining such groups as 'vulnerable' and 'incompetent' on the grounds that it makes researchers more likely to exclude from research and thus to deprive them of the benefits of research. These researchers insist that it is unethical to exclude people from research on this basis. Researchers have argued, particularly in the area of child research, that interpreting groups as vulnerable has had a negative impact on the focus of research and the ways in which it is conducted. It has been argued that the onus is on researchers to find ways of obtaining consent from individuals that is meaningful to them, regardless of their abilities.

The final issue relates to informed consent. Increased bureaucratisation of social science research resulting from the broad changes taking place in research governance and regulation means that social researchers increasingly have to have their research projects assessed by Ethics Committees. One of the results of this increased bureaucratisation has been the expectation that researchers will prove that they have obtained informed consent by providing forms signed by research participants. The main reasons that Ethics Committees insist on informed consent are i) to ensure that participants understand what participation will involve and that they know their rights in relation to participation and issues of confidentiality and anonymity, ii) to protect researchers from later accusations by study participants. Some social researchers argue that the use of informed consent is not appropriate in all types of research (for instance in research involving public figures). This concern is

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that respect for confidentiality and anonymity may contribute to secrecy in matters of public interest. The objections to signed consent forms have been raised particularly by researchers working in the area of criminology.

Special Aspects of International PhD Student from Developing Countries Dealing with Ethical Issues

An increasing number of international students from developing countries now undertake postgraduate programs in social sciences (i.e. Master by research or doctoral program) in Australia. As part of the formal procedure for social science research, international students using human subjects in their research are obliged, like other researchers, to apply for ethical clearance from their university prior to data collection such as interviews or administering questionnaires. There are several issues associated with international student associated with ethical issues in their research.

First, in many developing countries such as Indonesia, there are no comparable Ethic Committees as are established in developed countries. Therefore, for many international students this formal management process for ethical issues comes as an unexpected challenge. At the same time, Ethics Committees are often unfamiliar with the social and political circumstances in developing countries. Together, these factors may contribute to international PhD students' difficulty in obtaining clearance from the Ethics Committee. This can lead to delays in their research program. There have been cases in which Ethics Committees were reluctant to permit international students to conduct fieldwork in the conflict areas such as West Papua (Indonesia), even if the student had previously conducted research there will affiliated to a local university. In such cases, the Ethics Committee sometimes not only pays attention to ethical issues and to the litigation risk to the university, but also considers that its duty of care to the student may prevent it from giving ethical clearance.

Second, research in developing countries needs to be culturally sensitive. This issue is normally considered to be less important in

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developed countries, except in dealings with indigenous peoples. The research procedure applied in developed countries may not be appropriate on ethical grounds in developing countries. Cultural sensitivities need to be taken into consideration in such instances. It is not necessarily a matter of adding layers of regulation to achieve the necessary sensitivity. For example, in West Papua some local people are reluctant to sign consent forms because in their culture signing a formal paper is impolite and is a legal act which runs counter to the norms of politeness that they expect in research encounters. Third, security has become a crucial issue for international students collecting data in conflict areas in developing countries. As noted earlier, ethical standards require that a participant be able to answer questions freely during the interview. Particularly in conflict areas, due to security concerns, it is likely that the researcher will be accompanied by police or the army when he or she travels to obtain data. In the case of West Papua, being accompanied is unavoidable: the researcher has to get a letter of permission from the local authority such as local government, police department and military prior to conducting an interview in conflict areas and those authorities will commonly insist on sending a police or military escort, partly to provide protection, partly to monitor behaviour. This requirement presents a dilemma for researchers conducting fieldwork in such conflict areas. On the one hand, the researcher has to be accompanied by representatives of the security forces to obtain an interview. On the other hand, the researcher has reason to fear that participants will not speak openly in the presence of police or military personnel. The standard formulae used by Australian Ethics Committees do not offer a clear solution to this problem. In addition, as mentioned above, it is compulsory for the social researcher to conduct fieldwork in developing countries to obtain a formal letter of approval from the local authority. In West Papua, the process of obtaining written letters from the local government is often lengthy and frustrating, due to unprofessional administrative practices by the local authority in West Papua.

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Conclusion

This article provides an insight into the debate concerning ethical issues in social science research. Although the official requirements at Australian universities are clear, it is still debatable whether ethical procedures should be applied universally. Debate within social science relating to issues such as covert research, regulation, vulnerable group, letter of consent has become important. There are numerous concerns for social science researchers when conducting fieldwork in developing countries. These include the lack of experience in dealing with bureaucratized ethics procedures, the need for cultural sensitivity, security concerns and the consequences of administrative and political practices in developing countries. Therefore, careful consideration is needed in the application of ethical approval which often cannot be applied universally in developing countries. Complex ethical issues in such countries need careful justification by social science researchers.

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