



# **ESRC Research Ethics Framework**

## ***Working paper – for discussion only***

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### ***Discussion Paper 3***

**Social science research ethics in  
developing countries and contexts**

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## **Social science research ethics in developing countries and contexts**

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### **1. Introduction**

1.1 In this paper we want to explore some of the particular ethical issues that arise for social scientists working in developing countries. This is an inherently difficult topic to address for a number of reasons, but especially in relation to problems of definition. As with any attempt to draw boundaries around regions, and characterise them according to various features, there is the tendency to draw upon highly loaded simplifications. Our ways of thinking and writing about development often rely on distinctions which are far from uniform and in many ways fall short of complex reality: 'developed' vs 'developing', 'East' vs 'West', 'North' vs 'South', etc. With this in mind, we want to address the question of social science research ethics in contexts characterised by underdevelopment, whilst acknowledging the limitations of the language and definition that we will be using. Many of the difficulties discussed below can be encountered anywhere and are far from exclusively confined to developing countries. Nevertheless, they tend to be ubiquitous and chronic amongst nations that we loosely understand as 'developing' or 'transitional'.

1.2 There are a number of special considerations for the future of social science research in developing countries and contexts:

- *Social science research (SSR) is becoming ever more globalised with an increasing focus on research in developing countries*
- *These are also regions in which major global catastrophes have attracted considerable research attention – including HIV/AIDs, forced migrations, civil and interstate warfare, etc.*
- *Research in these contexts involves some of the world's least powerful and most vulnerable populations.*
- *Such contexts also present unique sampling difficulties for SSR, undermining the validity of findings and therefore the ethics of the research conducted.*
- *Greater differences in power between researchers and the researched are more likely to give rise to problems of bias, etc.*
- *Statistical research instruments that depend on the availability of population data may have limited value in developing regions.*
- *The interpretation and analysis of findings consistently raises issues of ethnocentrism and elitism.*
- *Research results raise acute questions of property and appropriation.*
- *Vulnerable populations are poorly placed to exercise their right to chose and give consent to participation in research.*

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<sup>1</sup> Authorship of REF Discussion Papers reflects lead pen.

- *Institutional forms of governance in such contexts rarely parallel those in the countries providing the largest share of funds for SSR.*
- *The 'globalisation of research' – research becoming a widely distributed process, with many different actors across the globe – also offers the possibility of transforming the dominant paradigm of research in developing countries from one based on the logic of having a donor and recipient of knowledge, to a more collaborative and equitable process.*

## **2. The Globalisation of SSR**

*SSR is becoming ever more globalised with an increasing focus on research in developing countries*

2.1 An ever-increasing number of researchers are now encouraged, even mandated through assessment programmes like the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE), to operate on an international basis. More frequently, this involves conducting research in underdeveloped and highly stressed regions where the burden of risk borne by the researched is more severe than in more affluent contexts. Many of the specific features of these risks, peculiar to underdeveloped contexts, are explored in greater detail below. For now, we will concern ourselves with some of the factors that have been instrumental in shaping the increased focus of SSR in poorer regions.

2.2 The ESRC's £5.5 *World Economy and Finance* programme and its Research Group on Wellbeing in Developing Countries ([www.welldev.org.uk](http://www.welldev.org.uk)) are just two illustrations of an increased recognition within the research funding system of a greater interdependence across the globe, and even more importantly, its regional differences. The globalisation of research, and its ethics, therefore sit in the broader internationalising tendencies of trade (Hveem 2004), communications (Castells 2003) and risk (Turner 2001). And as these horizons expand, it will become more necessary to consider the implications for social science research subjects in areas of the world characterised by acute vulnerability.

2.3 Of course, it would be naïve to assume that these changing patterns of research will lead inevitably to improved conditions for less advantaged regions of the world. The global patterning of social science research expresses difficult tensions, many of which are ethically problematic for research practitioners and sponsoring agencies alike. Illustrating this are the huge shifts that have taken place within development economics and sociology over the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. For example, the functionalist perspectives of the 1960/70s were highly influential on agencies like the World Bank. And yet they provided what is now widely viewed as a flawed intellectual rationale for instituting Western Industrialisation as the primary model for development, regardless of economic and cultural differences. This has now largely given way to perspectives that recognise the way 'aid' and 'development' in themselves sometime contribute to conditions of chronic impoverishment through new patterns of dependency (Leys 1996).

2.4 Our point here is that the globalisation of research prompts difficult ethical dilemmas for researchers and for those institutions that fund them, and that these tensions are likely to become more acute as the global reach of SSR extends. The central tension or dilemma facing international research policy arises because the globalisation of knowledge is paralleled by a growth in disparities in regional wealth and living standards. As Bhutta observes:

'It is likely that the accelerating trend towards globalization, without the requisite safeguards and protection of humans rights, will only worsen inequalities' (Bhutta 2002, 114).

2.5 Additionally, regional governments and policy makers in developing regions are, often justifiably, sceptical of the politics and motives embedded in research which originates in the

affluent 'North' but conducted in the poorer 'South'. It is estimated that a mere 10% of international research activity is directed at problems (particularly disease incidence) endemic amongst 90% of the world's peoples (CHRD 1990). As Benetar points out in relation to expenditure on health related research:

'The fact that 90% of health research expenditure is on diseases that cause 10% of the global burden of disease, and that diseases that afflict many very poor people are minimally researched reflects a research agenda driven largely by the profit motive' (Benetar, 2002, 54).

As these balances alter under the pressures of globalisation, it is fundamentally important to assess what kinds of research are being conducted and under what regimes of governance and ethical oversight.

Another important consideration is that globalisation of research might be causing the academic impoverishment of the developing world, as academics go to developed countries to continue doing their research. This presents ethical dilemmas that could affect the definition of research processes in the long term. It is important to consider the implications of developing research based on the process of knowledge transfer to developing countries (Cordoba 2004).

### **3. The ethics of problem focussed research in developing regions**

*These are also regions in which major global catastrophes have attracted considerable research attention – including HIV/AIDs, forced migrations, civil and interstate warfare, etc.*

3.1 The globalisation of research is intimately related to the particular features of the problems characterising developing regions. Most prominently, the far-reaching impact of the AIDS crisis affecting much of the sub-Saharan continent, Asia and South America has led to a significant international escalation in both medical and behavioural research. Roughly 80% of people infected with AIDS/HIV live in the world's poorest countries. In terms of clinical rather than social science research, only a small proportion of these populations will have access to the same medicinal products that have been trialled in developing nations. Some countries have now managed to broker agreements in which they directly benefit from the results of random control trials, though these are few and far between. Nevertheless, commercially funded clinical research has been accompanied by large-scale research activity in the social sciences, particularly in healthcare organisation, nursing and behavioural psychology. New biotechnologies, particularly in relation to human reproduction, are likely to raise similar issues for ethical oversight in developing countries.

3.2 Developing countries are also characterised by the often devastating effects of political, religious and territorial conflict resulting in unprecedented levels of migration and displacement (Haug 2002). International provision for refugee communities has often been accompanied by social scientific forms of enquiry, for example into the psychological implications of catastrophic trauma, especially arising from mass genocidal events exemplified by Rwanda in the mid 1990s and the Democratic Republic of Congo more recently. These include documentary research into highly sensitive aspects of such events, particularly those exploring torture, bereavement and sexual violence (Lindsey 2002). Numerous journals have emerged as specialist areas of social science research in these and related fields including *The Journal of Genocide Research*, *International Migration*, *Journal of Refugee Studies*, *Disasters*, *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, and so on.

Our point here is that developing regions suffer some of the most extreme forms of stress experienced by the world's peoples. Given these acute vulnerabilities they are also deserving of the most stringent ethical oversight possible. And yet, they are regions of the world which present sometimes prohibitively difficult challenges to the organisation and implementation of ethical oversight. As Jacobson and Landau observe:

'Research into vulnerable populations like refugees, some of whom might be engaged in illegal or semi-illegal activities, raises many ethical problems. The political and legal marginality of refugees and IDPs means that they have few rights and are vulnerable to arbitrary action on the part of state authorities, and sometimes even the international relief community. In conflict zones, or in situations of state collapse, few authorities are willing to protect refugees from those who may do them harm, including researchers' whose action may have less than ideal outcomes' (Jacobson and Landau 2002 187).

3.3 It is fair to say that there is a notable paucity of literature that deals specifically with the ethical dimensions of social science in developing contexts. Whilst extensive work has been undertaken to both comment upon and critique medical research oversight, this is far from true for social science research ethics generally. Of the few disciplines to more directly reflect on these issues, anthropology has been engaged in sustained debate, especially since the early 1970s (Asad 1973; Bleek 1979; Mauch 1989; Anatoloy 1996; Eipper 1996; Erman 1997). With a few notable exceptions (Clark 2002), very little from within quantitative social science has been published on the ethical difficulties presented by the methodological complexities of underdeveloped regions since Warwick's (1983) edited collection in the early 1980s.

#### **4. Inequities of advantage between the researched and the researcher**

*Research in these contexts involves some of the world's least powerful and most vulnerable populations.*

4.1 It seems obvious that the relationships between the researcher and the researched in such stressed contexts are likely to be asymmetrical, and that this is indeed likely to have an impact both on the welfare of participants and the veracity of findings. Still, these kinds of considerations are notably absent from reported studies conducted amongst disadvantaged populations (Jacobson and Lanua 2002). As with many of the issues addressed in this paper, questions of both structural and more situational inequities come to the fore.

4.2 In structural terms, we have already alluded to the obvious wealth disparities which, in the first place, create the opportunities for researchers from wealthy regions to conduct research in less advantaged contexts, but less frequently the other way around. To be sure, most research conducted on vulnerable communities comes with an obligation to provide data that may ameliorate problems and guide policy. And a great number of studies are initiated with reciprocal arrangements that provide opportunities for researchers from developing countries. Nevertheless, as Benetar points out, 'While researchers are generally privileged people, many research subjects are among the most vulnerable in our world, living in the worst conditions of deprivation and exploitation... [and hence] appreciation of concerns regarding research in developing countries requires some knowledge of the growing global disparities in wealth and health, and of the lifestyle and worldview of potential research subjects' (Benetar 2002: 1131).

Importantly, additional challenges may arise for co-researchers from developing countries and their equality within the research team. This may extend both into shaping the direction of research, agenda setting, research prioritisation. At the same time, however, it is not always easy to be aware of ways in which an 'external researcher' based in the West may be making culture-bound assumptions about the research process and acting as a 'powerful outsider'.

Considering this matter further, let us remember that those who are 'the researched' could also do research. There are power issues here related to establishing research teams that might lead one to consider the ethics of research. Even if researchers from developed countries consider that they are conducting their own research, those from developing countries may see them as useful resources of knowledge. Considerations arise about the extent to which research is a one-off

exercise or, alternatively, is a process contributing to the long-term transformation of developing contexts. This also generates considerations about the ethics of researchers conducting research in the form of 'transactions' (i.e. periodic visits while funding lasts), or in the form of 'transformations' (i.e. preparing researchers in developing countries to continue with research). Considerations arise also about researchers from developed countries being used for purposes other than research (for example, for political purposes, legitimising the authority of certain stakeholders) (Cordoba 2004).

Issues of intellectual property and knowledge transfer arise also in the case where developed countries' companies use natural resources to conduct research to produce new biogenetic medicines. The transfer of knowledge to the developing world does not happen in many of these cases (Cordoba 2004).

4.3 Inequities in access to research resources are matched by parallel deficiencies in adequate ethical oversight and the institutional structures to support them. Whilst this situation is changing, research originating in the affluent North has often been seen to take advantage of such absences - through 'research tourism' - rather than seek to foster better ethical arrangements. As Bhutta notes, it has become difficult to overlook the fact that many of the most controversial research events of recent years have been conducted in contexts with poor ethical governance: 'Although it is accepted that ethics play a central role in health research in developing countries, much of the recent debate has focused on controversies surrounding internationally sponsored research and has taken place largely without adequate participation of the developing countries' (Bhutta 2002).

This has led to strong criticism and sensitivities about whether and how research originating in wealthy regions has taken account of the problems and diversity of views in the contexts where research is conducted. 'So long as all the ethicists are in the North, and the South is just the recipient of ethical principles, nothing will change' (Daar and Singer 2001).

4.4 These asymmetries in the institutional and professional embedding of ethics discourse and practice can have a significant and detrimental impact at a more local and situational level in the encounters between researchers and the researched. Anthropological enquiry in particular has been challenged by the way in which the presence of exogenous researchers can have a detrimental affect on communities. The researcher can become the focus of new tensions in relationships, destabilising existing alliances, causing conflicts which may well persist long after the research has been completed. Bleek's (1979) account of 'envy and inequality in fieldwork' is just one illustration of the disruption that can be caused by a lack of sensitivity to actual and perceived differences in wealth and status between social scientists and research subjects.

4.5 There are therefore important connections between professional considerations such as these and the particular ethical difficulties of conducting research in disadvantaged regions. These issues are in turn closely connected to the relationship between ethics and methodology, as we now discuss.

## **5. Methodological Questions**

*Such contexts also present unique sampling difficulties for SSR, undermining the validity of findings and therefore the ethics of the research conducted.*

5.1 A number of studies have observed the way in which SSR in developing regions can be susceptible to various factors that undermine the methodological, and therefore ethical, status of research. For instance, Jacobsen and Landau point out that many sponsoring organisations involved in overseas development are sometimes poorly placed to judge the methodological rigour of research proposals (2002). However, weaknesses in peer review and audit are often lessened through the creation of trans-organisational research associations involved in selecting and administering research. Nevertheless, serious considerations of methodological integrity remain:

'...that much of the current research on forced migration is based on unsound methodology, and that the data and subsequent policy conclusions are often flawed or ethically suspect... humanitarian studies in general reveal a paucity of good social science, are rooted in a lack of rigorous conceptualisation and research design, weak methods and a general failure to address the ethical problems of researching vulnerable communities (Jacobsen and Landau, 2002, 187).

5.2 Additionally, funding is more likely to be linked to various normative goals which in themselves can predispose research findings to results that are in keeping with the aspirations of the funding body (Silverman 1985; Opie 1992), or the aspirations of researchers to empower the researched. As Long and Long (1992) argued it often seems to be the case that research with disadvantaged groups can, in fact, struggle to balance normative and analytical priorities: 'Although the word [empowerment] stresses the need to 'listen to the people' in order to arrive at appropriate alternatives 'from below', it is difficult to deny the connotation of an 'injection of power' from outside... no matter how firm the commitment to good intentions, the notion of 'powerful outsiders' helping 'powerless insiders' slips constantly in' (1992, 275).

5.3 In addition to the priorities of aid and humanitarian organisations, researchers in developing countries often find themselves presented with acute political pressures. Zuniga, for instance, offers an account of the ethical problems confronted by social scientists under Chile's Allende regime and the pressures they were under to formulate findings that were politically acceptable in that climate (Zuniga, 1983). Whilst these kinds of considerations are far from unique to developing countries, they are rarely accompanied by issues of personal security that can arise in contexts where stability and the rule of law may be poorly enforced.

But such 'political pressures' are often defined according to what the developed world sees as valid. The uncritical acceptance of such views has led to the academic impoverishment of countries like Cuba, where access to electronic journals is banned not by the government but by developed nations. Or Iraq and Palestine, where sanctions in the 1990s and occupation, respectively, makes any research difficult to conduct. This presents ethical dilemmas for researchers who wish to conduct research and transfer knowledge to such nations despite political and legal pressure. The point here is that these political pressures need to be examined in the context of the implications for developing countries and their research knowledge base.

*5.4. Greater differences in power between researchers and the researched are more likely to give rise to problems of bias, etc.*

We have already alluded above to questions of the asymmetries in power and privilege between the researcher and the researched, and how this can be the cause of harm. And of course, this raises methodological issues too. It is fundamentally important for researchers to be sensitive to the aspirational goals with which they may be associated. Research always involves complex questions of identity and identification around issues of ethnicity, education, class, gender and will necessarily have an influence on the data generated. The greater these differences, the more likely it is that findings will reflect artefactual considerations of the relationship between researcher and researched. This might result in what, in social science parlance is commonly described as 'positive bias' or 'extreme' and 'acquiescence' response styles (or ERS/ARS). As Cheung and Rensvold note 'Differences in ERS and ARS, if undetected, may give rise to spurious results that do not reflect genuine differences in attitudes or perceptions' (2000). On the other hand, tensions in research relationships can give rise to hostile antagonism producing negative bias and a disinclination to collaborate with research (Bleek 1979).

*5.5 Statistical research instruments which depend on the availability of population data may have limited value in developing regions*

The difficulties faced by quantitative studies are no less problematic. Methodologically, statistical social science research often depends on population and census data and is therefore more suited to studies in contexts where public administration is highly developed. In many developing countries this kind of data may not be available, or if it is, then it may be of limited relevance in rapidly changing circumstances (Warwick 1983). This quite clearly contrasts with those countries where public records and statistical data may be both more accessible and reliable.

#### *5.6 The interpretation and analysis of findings consistently raises issues of ethnocentrism and elitism*

The interpretation and analysis of data adds to the methodological difficulties of research conducted in developing contexts, particularly where interpretation is formulated from a non-indigenous position. We have already alluded to the way functionalist development studies mistakenly attributed many of the problems of the developing world to absence of various cultural attributes, such as industriousness, instead of exploring structural and financial forms of dependency and 'neo-colonialism'. We can reasonably expect therefore that our interpretation will embody values that may implicitly endorse the mechanisms of underdevelopment that we seek to relieve. Gidwani, for instance, questions the notion of 'cultural capital' in numerous accounts of underdevelopment arguing that, as an interpretative framework, it has diverted '... attention from the role of political society and de-politicized the process of development in pernicious ways' (2002:86).

5.7 Similarly, using analysis to 'give voice' to otherwise marginalised groups can be far from ethically innocent. Lindsey's observations about the role of social science in reporting the Balkan conflict are particularly striking here (2000). Sexual violence in the atrocities of Former Yugoslavia have been at the centre of numerous social science research accounts, each seeking to represent the experiences of rape victims. She argues that many of these studies have been skewed towards material evidence to prove that rapes had taken place and were systematically related to ethnic cleansing. The result, she suggests, has been '... an overarching emphasis on evidence that has dominated the description, analysis and theorizing of the rapes and has led to the marginalizing and silencing of a range of voices, particularly of those working with survivor communities and the survivors themselves. The evidence-led debate has created a genre in which there has been an almost casual use of survivor testimony by academics to illustrate the types of violence that have taken place. This appropriation of survivors' stories has degraded survivor testimony' (Lindsey 2002).

This exemplifies the way in which the consideration of ethics in such contexts has to go far beyond the conventional terrain of confidentiality, consent, and risk/benefit considerations: clearly, in these cases, ethics is as much about being attentive to a collective morality, a political economy of ethics as it is anything to do with respect for the individual rights of the subject. As mentioned above, dominant political discourses may also serve to define what is appropriate research and bias research choices in favour of developed countries' agendas.

#### *5.8 Research results raise acute questions of property and appropriation*

Health related research has clearly been associated with accusations of material and biological appropriation where products have been developed on the basis of research conducted in developing regions. Nevertheless, though in very different ways, social scientists too have had to reflect on the way research involves processes of appropriation and even commodification.

Lindsey's account above is one illustration amongst many where research subjects, their identities, ways of life and experiences become available to others as symbolic and material resources. At the most general level, social science and anthropology have been intricately tied to the popularisation of indigenous cultures in ways that have been criticised for debasing identities, traditions and symbols. And yet this has had to be balanced with a whole range of other priorities including the moral duties of cultural conservation and the representation of marginal groups.



5.9 Nevertheless, developing regions are complex environments in which it is proper that researchers are sensitive to the historical role of social science in colonial and neo-colonial practices. Green (1996) for instance has written about the role of participatory development and research projects in appropriating the agency of the poor: 'Despite the claims of participatory development ideologies to foster the empowerment of the poor, the interventions it promotes are premised on a denial of poor people's capacity to bring about change for themselves. Agency can only be effected through the imposed institutional structures for participation' (1996, 67). Fairhead and Leach (2003) have also shown how the analytical tradition of western SSR has ignored local realities and understandings within poorer African countries, even that form of ethnography whose aims are to understand and perhaps empower indigenous communities.

In such highly stressed contexts as these, we can see inexhaustible connections between ethics and methodology - at all tiers of research design, implementation and analysis.

## **6. Normative ethics and cultural pluralism**

*Vulnerable populations are poorly placed to exercise their right to chose and give consent to participation in research.*

6.1 One of the main points that we would like to stress in this paper is that research ethics in developing regions raises difficulties for the very basis of what we mean by ethics, and therefore how we conceptualise notions of rights (consent, choice, volition, self-determination, etc). Most social science operating in developing countries stresses the importance of a pluralistic position on cultural variation and diversity. In most respects, the analyst has an obligation not to compare cultures hierarchically thereby suspending any single position from which to judge or assess the objects of their analysis. And yet, this is clearly in tension with the classical western model of ethics and its basis in universalistic normative rights.

It is clearly difficult to resolve these kinds of tensions in any straightforward way and both are open to question. The pluralistic orientation embedded in social science research is open to problems of cultural relativism whereby it becomes increasingly difficult to exercise moral judgement. In a sense, good social science suspends any single authoritative position from which to form a moral position. Additionally, pluralistic approaches force us to consider questions of representation and who exactly has the right to lay claim to a culture and represent its foundational moral attributes.

6.2 Without over simplifying the underlying basis of most research ethics, as noted in Discussion Paper 1, it tends to involve the exercise of judgements regardless of cultural variation and in reference to a timeless/invariant body of principles that apply universally (Clark 2002). Considerations of context and circumstance are often taken into account, but core notions of intrinsic value usually prevail.

6.3 Additionally, most classical western models of ethics tend to rest on principles such as the 'primacy of the individual', which can seem alien in some contexts. The individual here is both the repository of rights and the bearer of reciprocal duties to the rights of others. Nevertheless, this emphasis on the individual can seem curious outside the cultural ambit of western philosophical ethics, where the individual may take lesser precedence to broader notions of kin or community.

One example of this is the sometimes difficult balance struck between individual and public health priorities. Bhutta suggests that the Western framework, and its individually oriented ethical orientation, has sometimes inappropriately usurped frameworks that may have greater relevance in developing countries. 'It is in the field of public health that the application of the broad principles of ethics of public health lags far behind those of the ethics of the individual, and is not sufficiently addressed by existing guidelines' (2002, 116). Or, as Benetar puts it: 'it is vital now for

the ethics debate to include the best interests of whole populations, the ethics of how institutions should function, and the ethics of international relations' (Benetar 2002, 1132).

As noted by the Nuffield Council (2002), this focus on the individual also has practical implications for researchers when seeking informed consent from individuals located in highly deferential communities:

'... participants in research may feel much more able to discuss research and ask questions within a meeting of the local community than on a one-to-one basis with researchers. In some regions, individuals may feel unable to refuse to participate in research that their elders, family members or community have assented to [p6]... In many developing countries, concepts of respect for family and community are equally as important as, or more important than, concepts of individual autonomy and rights' (p43).

The lack of the concept of the individual in East Asian cultures - and hence the difficulty of individual consent procedures as we know them in the west, and the idea of debate and discussion around this issue - is discussed in terms of culture and systems of thought by Nisbett et al (2001).

Cordoba (2004) argues that the ethics of professions also contributes to tension between ethical and collective ethics. With the growth in interdisciplinary research, the ethics of different professions and their impact on developing countries should be recognised. This recognition then translates to the question: whose ethics prevail? Researchers doing research in the developing world need to pay attention to the possibility of adapting the 'universal ethics' of their own disciplines (medicine, biotechnology etc.) to local social conditions in such a way that those 'being researched' understand, respect and agree with the ethical decisions made throughout the research process.

6.4 Ultimately, most resolutions to these kinds of tensions follow some form of deliberative work directed towards negotiation and bargaining, or what Holm calls a 'negotiated universalism' (2003: 10). Here, moral pluralism does not necessarily imply a form of nihilistic cultural relativism, but instead opens the door to reflection between different ethical frames of reference but without reducing the debate to normative absolutes. The way forward, according to Crigger et al (2001) is unavoidably difficult, but necessary, as stakeholders become involved in a philosophically hybrid process of 'ethical multiculturalism'.

## **7. Institutional Development**

*Institutional forms of governance in such contexts rarely parallel those in the countries providing the largest share of funds for SSR.*

7.1 Without doubt there is now a growing awareness of the requirement to put in place institutional arrangements that advance both the benefits of research whilst respecting the particular difficulties of developing countries and other highly stressed research contexts. Whereas this is now somewhat advanced in the context of health related research (Slowther et al 2001), it is far less so the case for social science research more generally (Crosby et al 2002; Pievskaya 2000; Simek et al 2000). Literature that deals explicitly with the ethics of SSR in developing countries is sparse and many of the emerging institutional arrangements remain poorly developed.

7.3 There have been a number of reviews, largely pertaining to medical research ethics, undertaken recently that explore the formation of institutional ethics developments in specific regions:

- o Eastern Europe Cipi 2000; Javashvili 2000; Maric et al 2000; Pievskaya 2000; Simek et al 2000; Taghiyeva 2000; Tikk et al 2002; Yaskevich 2000)

- Asia (De Castro 2002; Macer 2002; Mason 1987)
- South America (Diniz 1999; Luna 2002)
- South Africa (de Gruchy et al 2001)
- West Indies (Macpherson 2001a, 2001b)

Most of these reviews raise the point, mentioned above, about the difficulties of reconciling the need for local flexibility in the interpretation and institutionalisation of ethics and, as Macpherson (2001) asks, '... whether deviations from Western norms are justifiable'? Indeed, these kinds of considerations problematise entirely what we mean by whether or not ethical standards and structures are 'developed' or not, given that we need also to avoid using 'western' standards as the normative benchmark for good practice.

7.4 Just as importantly are the practical issues of what kinds of administrative procedures are going to work and under whose jurisdiction? We have already noted how ethical review for SSR in developed countries may be attuned to administrative procedures that may be entirely different in non-western contexts.

7.5 Many of the institutional developments relating to ethical oversight are covered in Discussion Paper 2, where we examine the impact of international institutional developments on UK social scientists. What we have tried to do in this paper is explore the kinds of issues that are likely to arise for UK social scientists working in, and collaborating with, colleagues in developing countries.

7.6 One criticism of an approach that seeks to impose institutional ethics procedures is that ignores alternative, 'local' methodologies. There may be ethical considerations already in place but not visible to those trying to define institutional forms of governance. Accordingly, the validation of research needs to search out and consider more local forms of governance as the first step towards the institutionalisation of ethics (Cordoba 2004).

## **8. General Conclusions: the ethics of social science research in developing countries**

We would like to conclude with a number of key observations and questions which will be of relevance for those whose work is likely to include or impact upon research subjects in potentially disadvantaged regions of the world:

- 8.1 Explicit enquiries need to be made regarding existing ethical and institutional arrangements in the locations where research is to be conducted – those conducting the fieldwork should be formally obliged to observe professional standards that are (*at least*) comparable with those in the UK, and understood and agreed by research partners and collaborators in the developing world.
- 8.2 Consent documentation, in respect to language and literacy, should be as inclusive as possible with strategies in place to deal with questions of cross-cultural communication.
- 8.3 The increasingly globalised focus of research exposes those in developing countries to new levels of 'research scrutiny'. These tendencies are often not sufficiently accompanied by parallel developments in research ethics, either institutionally or culturally. Researchers also need to be especially attentive to the ways in which such scrutiny carries an analytical and methodological baggage that might well work against the local interests of the researched.

- 8.4 Without overstating the differences, the way in which social scientists engage with research ethics in developing countries will very probably be on a very unfamiliar basis to that in more developed contexts. For instance, it is probably the case that far more energy and resources will need to be channelled into securing an ethical basis for research than would normally be the case. This has resource and time implications since project leaders should be prepared for much more sustained engagement with research subjects and local (or collaborating) institutions.
- 8.5 The basis of research ethics, in these circumstances, is far more likely to be the result of deliberative negotiation and dialogue than might normally be the case where standard principles and procedures have already been embedded in research culture and practice.
- 8.6 Routes of accountability with which Western university sector researchers are normally familiar are likely to be different in non-western contexts. This might require the greater involvement of local civic authorities, party officials, community and religious leaders. Failure to both understand and acknowledge structures of authority exposes researchers to accusations of negligence, and more seriously, can have disastrous consequences for research subjects whose involvement may be viewed negatively.
- 8.7 More scrutiny and accountability is needed regarding the roles that researchers from developed countries play in the research effort, and the long-term consequences of the research in terms of sustainability and implications for different groups, once researchers leave the developing country setting.
- 8.8 Consent issues might well have to be addressed at the level of the community as a whole and make much greater use of public fora, where the merits or otherwise of the research can be publicly debated. In China for instance, most villages below township level operate as self governing councils where research is more likely to be seen as a matter for village-wide debate rather than individual or personal consent (Pieke 1996).
- 8.9 Research ethics training research for collaborators in developing countries should be a requirement for those bodies sponsoring overseas research, even at individual project level.
- 8.10 Planning needs to pay much greater attention to questions of how researchers represent themselves and, indeed, are likely to be represented amongst research subjects. In any context, the presence of researchers can be disruptive, but in highly stressed and sometimes impoverished contexts, researchers may find themselves at the centre of highly charged tensions over resources, etc.
- 8.11 An effort should be made to explore and include local forms of research governance and problematisation about ethics in the design of research processes and structures or mechanisms for governance.
- 8.12 Finally, there is a need for researchers' own employing organisations to ensure that research in unstable countries does not put the researchers themselves at significant risk. Often, this may lead to arrangements where local third party research teams are used to undertake potentially hazardous fieldwork. While this solution might resolve the problem of the rights of the researcher to minimal risk, it can abrogate responsibility for the proper conduct of field research to agencies that are not subject to proper forms of research governance.

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