Ethics in Development Research: 'Doing No Harm' to Research Staff when Conducting Research in Low and Middle-Income Countries

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Motivation

- Demand for "rigorous" evidence (e.g. RCTs) leads to an increasing number of field research in low and middle-income countries

- Research projects are often based on a cooperation between international and local staff

- Due to relatively recent increase, lack of well-prepared and experienced researchers, institutions or ethics boards

- Ethical considerations have (if at all) only concerned study participants (special focus on "vulnerable" populations)

- However, the key principle of "doing no harm" should equally apply to the research staff (including local and international staff at all different hierarchical positions within a research project)

Potential Ethical Challenges

- Racial and cultural frictions among research staff

- Physical safety of research staff in fragile settings

- Unstable working conditions for local research staff including absence of appropriate insurances

- Socioeconomic inequality within internationally composed research teams (neo-colonial appeal)

- Exposure to participants' traumatic experiences makes researchers susceptible to secondary/ vicarious trauma, compassion fatigue, and job burnout

- Inadequate acknowledgement of local research contributors

Project Components

1 Systematic Literature Review

2 Qualitative Interviews

3 Quantitative Survey

4 Review of Guidelines

Systematic Literature Review

Aim

- Identifying existing research literature that documents the ethical challenges faced by research staff conducting field research in LMICs

- Identifying potential alleviation strategies based on this literature

Search strategy

- Bibliographic databases (e.g., 3ie Impact Evaluation Repository, Web of Sciences etc.) using a detailed search string

- Including published literature across social science disciplines

- Including quantitative, qualitative, theoretical, and normative work

- Including relevant unpublished papers based on key workshops and hand searches of reference lists

PROSPERO Study Registry

Systematic Literature Review

Preliminary Results: Included Studies

- 19,700 titles identified and 338 included for full text review

- Characteristics of included studies (based on the first 10%)

  - Disciplinary belonging: 36% in *global health,* 20% in *conflict/disaster studies* - only 5% in *development studies*

  - Subjects of ethical assessment: in almost 90% of studies researchers on higher hierarchical levels (i.e. PI/PhD)

  - Background empirical methods: strongly dominated by those researchers using participatory / qualitative research methods; no quantitative studies

Preliminary Results: Identified Ethical Challenges

- Physical safety of research staff, particularly in fragile and (post) conflict contexts

- Vicarious trauma and emotional distress (with potential negative effects on data quality)

- Feelings of guilt and helplessness

- Role conflicts between objective researcher and continuous relationship with study population

- Inadequate acknowledgement of local research contribution

- Inadequate remuneration of local research staff

Qualitative Interviews

Aim

- Adding to ethical challenges identified in systematic literature review (publication bias, selection bias (language, power structures) there is likely an underrepresentation of challenges experienced by certain countries and positions)

- Focus on ethical challenges before, during and after research

- Investigate best practices and suggestions for potential safeguards

Method and Sample

- Snowballing technique

- Personal or via phone/skype, some focus groups (particularly in LMIC)

- About 40 semi-structured interviews with research staff

  - Different positions, incl. PhD students, enumerators, translators, principal investigators, project managers

  - Different institutions, incl. lead institutions, research institutions, consulting firms, implementing agencies, funding agencies, survey companies

- Data transcription and coding (thematic analysis)

Qualitative Interviews

Preliminary Results: Frequent Ethical Challenges

- Working conditions in terms of breaks, overhours and payment
- Gender inequalities and sexual harrassment
- Physical integrity (traffic, conflict, diseases)
- Acknowledgement of research contributions
- Emotional distress (research with children, refugees etc.)
- Conflict between local identity and participation in an international research team
- International agencies often have limited understanding or interest of ethical challenges

Quantitative Survey

Aim

- Gaining a more differentiated (non-representative) picture of ethical challenges within a larger sample size

- Collecting quantifiable information (i.e. x% of research staff show anxiety, have experienced harassment)

- Determining who is most affected/most at risk: collecting information on respondents' sociodemographic background, country of origin, gender, age, and hierarchical position within the research project, information on funding body

Method & Sample

- For most part an online survey, distributed via mailing lists engaging participants of qualitative research as multipliers

- Sample is aimed to cover different positions, world regions, and individual characteristics

- To be implemented end 2019

Review of Guidelines

Aim

- Identify existing guidelines to judge whether challenges are addressed

- "Supply"-side information to compare to "demand"-side need (challenges identified in components 1-3)

Method

- Development of google search string

- Google-based search

- Hand-search of particular (lead) institutions identified across different world regions and working areas

- Analyse challenges addressed in guidelines and compare to those identified in components 1-3
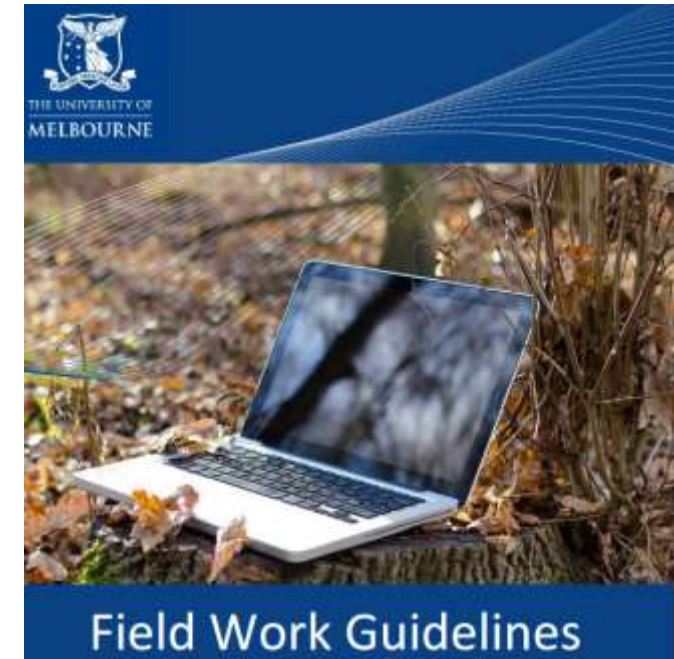
Source: University of Melbourne.

Preliminary Results: Guidelines' Content

- Overall very few existing guidelines that address ethical challenges for research staff

- Majority from anglosaxon countries and universities

- Strong focus on physical well-being (conflict, diseases, harassment)

- Some very recent initiatives (e.g. SAFEResearch, Swiss Academy of Sciences) that also focus on challenges for staff conducting research in low- and middle income settings) and aim at providing handbooks

Safety Guidelines for Field Researchers
Table of Contents

Thanks to Arizona State University, Environment, Health & Safety for allowing The University of Texas at Austin to adapt their safety guidelines.

Overarching Project Goals

- Compilation of ethical challenges mentioned in literature & qualitative/quantitative interviews

- Increasing understanding of the prevalence of these challenges across positions, institutions, and world regions

- Sensitizing the development studies (and beyond) research community to start thinking about and discussing potential ethical challenges before, during and after research in low and middle-income countries

- Flagging the existing gap between the ethical challenges experienced and those addressed in guidelines/safeguarding principles

- Developing principles that can be integrated into e.g. existing guidelines or curricula to improve the ethical conditions for research staff across the world

In case you are interested in sharing your experiences or would like to receive more information on the research project, feel free to contact us:

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https://www.die-gdi.de/en/research/description/details/ethics-in-development-research-doing-no-harm-when-conducting-research-in-the-global-south/