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Researching Across Cultures: Issues of Ethics and Power

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Abstract: Cultural diversity manifests in all relationships, including research relationships. Academic investigators work across a broad range of cultures that goes beyond ethnicity. What implications are most important for academic researchers to consider when designing and implementing a project? A review of relevant literature suggests that ethical implications begin with the power aspects in the research relationship. Consent, research processes, research design, data ownership, and uses of data are also salient issues that arise.

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1. Introduction

A general goal of much social science research is improved health, and more specifically to empower people, from policy to local levels, with knowledge to make positive health changes and choices. Changes can result from knowledge, which as a science is based on sound research. This research also involves ethical dimensions. As members of a professional community, academics strive to meet the needs of government funders, the academy, and greater society. Ethical conduct is a component of any human interaction, and the need for it increases when a relationship occurs across cultures, where conceptions of ethics can differ greatly (SINGER, 1993). [1]

The ethical conduct of researchers who have worked across cultures worldwide has a lengthy history of being criticized (LOFF & BLACK, 2000; SHALALA, 2000). Issues such as exploitation, community damage, and inaccurate findings have been identified as major concerns with ethnic and minority participants (PONTEROTTO & CASAS, 1991). Psychoeducational research should reflect the needs and benefits of participants, as well as academic and applied interests. However, a dialectical opposition in worldview and belief can often exist between academics and cross-cultural research participants. Much western thinking is

characterized by individual and universal conceptualizations and informs academic research norms, whereas the worldviews of many cultural and ethnic groups encompass collectivist and specific norms (MCCORMICK, 1997; THOMASON, 1999). [2]

In the current context of post-structuralism, the ethics of contemporary academic research practices should be constantly evolving, and, despite theoretical limitations, should seek to break from traditional-colonial theorizing about cross-cultural samples. The research relationship is one of a co-constructed nature (PEAVY, 1995), but this nature often goes unrecognized because it is determined by the boundaries of current ethical research and design practices (PIQUEMAL, 2001). In this paper, we question some of the "taken-for-granted" conceptions and consider an alternative to the existence and practices of academics. Examples from several community based research projects are presented as illustrations. [3]

2. Rethinking the Taken-for-Granted Conceptions in Research

2.1 Power

Power is a central aspect to consider in cross-cultural research relationships. Research with cross-cultural participants, such as Aboriginal Canadians for example, has often reflected a power imbalance that is rooted in colonialism (PIQUEMAL, 2001). Poor people, gays and lesbians, youth, and members of other marginalized groups in western society have also been identified as lacking power in academic environments. [4]

CRIGGER, HOLCOMB and WEISS (2001) write that the notion of power may be less problematic for a community when researchers join the community rather than enter as experts or interlopers. Creating a partnership with research participants as both individuals and as a group may reduce the risk of unethical or unintentionally insensitive action or treatment. Additionally, research projects that are carried out using participatory methodologies may be more effective both in terms of ethical conduct and accurate research results. [5]

Concerns about power often centre on informed consent procedures and research design decisions such as research processes, methodology, data collection, and analysis. According to HART (1995), action research is marked by collaborative and agreed-upon decision-making processes that enable communities to hold power over the research. However, in terms of research ethics, the community may not always have the information or knowledge to make sound ethical decisions, which the academic researcher may be ethically bound to consider. For example, in one action research project, the co-researchers from the community formulated questions for a survey that the academic researcher questioned ethically:

> "The group asked questions that I would not have asked myself. I tried to revise or eliminate some of the more intrusive questions, but if the group felt the issue was

> important, I had no authority to delete items from the questionnaires ... I felt ethically justified in helping them to tabulate the answers and write the report." (JENNINGS, JENNINGS, SOMMER, & BURSTEIN, 1987, p.669) [6]

In this case, the researcher decided to respect the community-researchers' power in the process, yet remained aware of the ethical implications of data being collected in the research. [7]

As a dimension of power, *informed consent* means that prospective participants in the research are informed about the research and that their formal consent to participate is obtained (TUCKMAN, 1999). However, the source of consent for participants from cultural or ethnic groups must be more clearly and operationally defined than from more mainstream groups, such as undergraduate university class samples, and this must be done on a case-by-case basis. Each ethnic or cultural group has a self-created identity that is unique and may be quite different from the dominant culture's notions of self-identity (DAROU, KURTNESS, & HUM, 1993). For example, ethics, in terms of research with Aboriginal groups, requires a special definition, according to PIQUEMAL (2001); ethics, in such a context, is a fluid concept that requires constant re-examination and redefinition, within informed consent viewed and implemented as an ongoing process. Similarly, cross-cultural research ethics cannot be singly defined because each group has its own conception of ethics, based on its culture, which must be individually understood by researchers (HUDSON & TAYLOR-HENLEY, 2001). [8]

2.2 Control

The notion of *community control* in cross-cultural research demands that research processes empower the community by respecting cultural values and belief systems, which links to a basis of ensuring informed consent (HUDSON & TAYLOR-HENLEY, 2001). Integral to a group's control over research is authority over a project's agenda (its purpose and methodology), budget, and participant selection (PIQUEMAL, 2001). Also, the participants' community rather than the researchers should select community leaders who are to act as consultants throughout the research process (CHONEY, BERRYHILL-PAAPKE, & ROBBINS, 1995). However, HUDSON and TAYLOR-HENLEY (2001) caution that control is something that must be measured by degrees and that it is unrealistic to believe that a community can have complete control over a research project implemented by academics. Instead, the relationship should be viewed as a partnership agreement, but with major decisions ideally made by the participants' community. [9]

A deeper look into the theme of control suggests that if there is social or political dissent or problems within a community, deciding which members should be legitimate spokespersons might be difficult. PIQUEMAL (2001) writes of possible problems with identifying the legitimate authorities within an Aboriginal Nation to give informed consent. In some cases, tribal councils are distanced and mistrusted by part of the community itself. Thus, bearing in mind each community's unique social and political landscape is also important (HUDSON & TAYLOR-HENLEY, 2001). [10]

2.3 Research design

Research is a fluid practice that is capable of changing (PIQUEMAL, 2001). When conducting a scientific inquiry, researchers should employ a community-based, participatory, methodology, which by design ensures a more equitable relationship among parties through its partnership constructs (DAROU, KURTNESS, & HUM, 1993). Cross-cultural research design comes from an understanding of the culture within which the researcher will be working. Education and training in cross-cultural research is very important for academic researchers, which includes learning about the culture of the participants, their history, language, customs, expectations, and aspirations. [11]

Cross-culturally appropriate research affords a method that allows socially legitimate collective knowledge to be used as part of the methodological framework of the research (BRANDT-CASTELLANO, 1986). HOARE, LEVY and ROBINSON (1993) define participatory action research as an approach that relies on community member participation to examine social reality and the creation of local skill capacity for the express purpose of creating community autonomy through the process of praxis. According to PARLEE (1983), "knowledge would be dramatically changed if it were consistently developed through interaction with its 'subjects' and its intended audiences instead of being developed with professional colleagues in mind and 'given away'" (p.1). [12]

2.4 Data ownership

Data ownership has become increasingly articulated as a major concern for research participants, particularly participants from marginalized groups. DAROU, KURTNESS and HUM (1993) suggest that some ethical problems can be avoided by sharing data results and ownership with participants. Problems can be assuaged in this way because sharing data ownership ensures an ongoing process of informed consent by participants. [13]

SOMMER (1999) elaborates on the deficiencies of typical academic "dissemination" models of research in which researchers control data management, and suggests that service providers and the general public are not likely to be exposed to research results that are only published as articles in technical or academic journals. Further, if non-academics read a journal article, the implications for practice or change may not be clear to them. A "translation" from research context to the societal setting should be made in the form of community newsletter or presentation. However, if policy-makers, service providers, research participants, or the general public do read an article containing community data, understand its implications for change, and actually implement practice or policy change on the basis of the research, this might occur without the researcher's knowledge. This can create a lack of feedback to the researchers that reduces possibility for improving and refining effective and ethical research practice. Establishing and maintaining on-going and reciprocal research partnerships may help alleviate such dissemination difficulties. [14]

3. Implications

A benefit to the consideration of cross-cultural or multicultural research ethics is an ability to limit the moral power of principles if the principles do not fit the situation. However, this same benefit has the potential to delimit fairness or equality. According to CAMPBELL (1999), the only unethical behavior that comes from a multiculturalist perspective is the intolerance of cultural norms or values. A main challenge of multiculturalism is the relativistic nature of human beings and the high degree of tolerance that must be maintained. For example, radical actions could be defended by a culture that endorsed such acts. Democratic-style consensus does not necessarily underpin accepted cultural practices. For example, from a multiculturalist perspective, the mutilation of young boys during coming of age ceremonies or female circumcision (which has been practiced by African, Australian and Canadian Aboriginals) is ethically justified because the actions are culturally sanctioned (CRIGGER, HOLCOMB, & WEISS, 2001). [15]

It must be noted that cultural norms may not be as fluid as they appear. Some researchers believe that culturally shared values, which do vary within cultures, do not change rapidly (CHRISTAKIS, 1992; CHRISTAKIS & PANNER, 1991). The implication for researchers rests in not adhering to any universal ethic in designing and conducting research, while simultaneously attempting to respect the particular and contextual ethical norms of a given social or ethnic group. Flexibility on the part of the researcher may be one way to deal with such cultural norm differences. [16]

4. Summary

Conducting research across any cultural context requires intense attention to ethics. A cross-cultural research relationship inherently involves a dynamic of power. As members of colonial cultures, researchers have traditionally held power in forms of money, knowledge, and "expertise" over their human subjects. Cascading from this foundation of power, the research relationship spawns other ethical issues of informed consent, control, research design, and data ownership. A community-based partnership project incorporating an ongoing process of communication and consent offers an ethical solution that is mutually beneficial to both researcher and cultural group members. [17]

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