ETHICAL ETHOS IN CROSS-NATIONAL SOCIAL RESEARCH: GHANAIAN RESEARCHERS' REFLECTIONS

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Abstract

In conducting cross-national research emphasis is often put on the concept being studied and the design of the research. By contrast, the relevance of the ethical ethos of the research within the different countries is least discussed. This paper reflects on three levels of ethical requirements in a comparative study undertaken in United Kingdom and Ghana by discussing the differences in the negotiation for ethical approval for a study in a developed and developing country. It also reveals that whereas an introduction of formality, signed consent forms, in a voluntary process in the United Kingdom is taken as part of the research process; in Ghana, it was rather off putting. Consideration of the ethical ethos at the planning stage within the different countries being studied is suggested as an important element to ensure success in cross-national research. The reflection by the authors contributes to the literature on conducting cross-national research thus impacting on research design in developing and developed countries.

Key words: Ghana, cross-national research, ethics, ethos, qualitative research

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Introduction

Any research undertaken which involves interacting with people will require that the ethical implications are considered, cross-national research is not an exception. There is no arguing that empirical studies of international agendas in different countries enhance our understanding of global issues. As such, studying how concepts or issues are experienced in different countries is very much woven into research for a wide range of interest groups. Specifically, from global institutions, such as the United Nations and World Bank, who collate information on member states to inform their debates and recommendations, to individuals who seek a better understanding of issues in different contexts. Comparative analysis of social policy of different countries expands knowledge on how human services address the wellbeing of people within different social, cultural, economic and political contexts. Following ethical standards in the different types of research is one of the requirements any research has to meet, and the principles are universally acknowledged (Thompson et al., 2006).

The design of cross-national research involves using similar research tools in each respective country involved in the study (Kennett, 2001), including meeting similar ethical requirements. However, country specific ethical ethos could prove problematic in meeting similar requirements, yet literature is limited on how to overcome this issue. Against this backdrop, the paper sought to specifically tease out how issues of ethics matter in cross-national research. This paper draws on the experience of conducting doctoral research by the researchers in the United Kingdom and Ghana. Both doctoral researches adopted a qualitative comparative research approach which 'offers the bottom up, open-ended, flexible and explorative formulae for understanding phenomena in different environments' (Mangen, 2004:307). The researchers realised that the whole research enterprise carved out in a developed country, may not necessarily be in consonance with the immediate and pressing issues in a developing country. Nagar (2002) similarly observed that there are tensions between North-based scholars and their institutions because of the demands on them to create quality theoretical works for publication in international journals.Although, both researchers were working on entirely different research areas, what became striking is that,both researchers were confronted with similar challenges because of their affiliationsto Universities in the UK and their customs relating to issues of ethics. Indeed, the plethora ofresearch by African social scientists studying in developed countries especially in Europe and North America, have been silence over how issues of ethics

change relevance across borders, and its overall influence onthe research enterprise.Consequently, this paper seeks to bring to the fore some of the challenges underpinning a research project initiated from a developed country and how that spurns out in a developing country. Specifically, this paper reflects on the dilemmas faced in conducting qualitative comparative research in the United Kingdom, where ethical principles are of relatively high importance in social research; and in Ghana where social research ethical issues are hardly discussed nor considered as relevant.

Ethics in Research

Ethics is derived from the ancient Greek word ethos meaning moral character, thus issues of ethics should invariably include responsible representations and issues of giving back.Addressing the ethical requirements for any research involving humans is one of the yardsticks in measuring good research projects. To ensure that the ethical standards are met, committees, regulatory bodies and groups have been set up in universities, national and international organisations (Jacob & Riles, 2007). Ethical review has been described as an audit culture similar to accounting procedures where actions taken are reviewed against laid down regulations (Brenneis, 2005). Further, Christians (2008) argues that the codes of ethics in research are the conventional format for moral principles within a research project. Thus, ethical issues have become important in the research process for researchers and those who have responsibility of regulating research. The increasing importance of ethics in social research has been justified on the grounds that 'the more guidance we give field workers, the less likely they will be to harm or wrong those studied' (Cassell, 1982: 155). The three major scientific norms that guide all social research are; informed and voluntary consent; confidentiality of information shared and anonymity of research participants; and avoidance of harm to participants (Halai, 2006; see also The Belmont Report, 1979). Yet, these ethical principles are not without challenges especially within philosophical and methodological perspectives. Also, there are arguments about the extent to which the ethical principles are applicable within different research groups and disciplines (Gallagher et al., 1995; Boden et al., 2009).

International Standards for Research Ethics

The principles for ethical research are not the preserve of few countries but are an accepted international requirement in all research involving humans. Historically, research ethics are a response to abuses within biomedical research during World War II. The first international standard established was the Nuremberg Code, which in 1947 set standards of ethical medical behaviour after World War II. The Nuremberg Code set out requirements which physicians must conform to when carrying out experiments using humans as subjects (World Medical Organisation, 1996). The code had 10 principles including the requirement of voluntary informed consent from all human subjects, and avoidance of unnecessary pain and injury to human participants. A broader version, the Declaration of Helsinki, was developed by the World Medical Association in 1964; it sets out guidelines for physicians and other participants in medical research (World Medical Organisation, 1996). The guidelines have been described as the cornerstone and widely recognised source of ethical guidance for biomedical research (Carlson et al., 2004).

The Helsinki Declarationhas been revised seven times in recognition of the changing biomedical research and requirements of other regulatory bodies; the recent revision was in October 2013. Yet, there have been challenges to the acceptance of the guidelines with each revision, specifically regarding the extent of their application. One of the criticisms of the relevance of the Declaration in the 21st century is that the basis of the guidelines was framed in response to past abuses, to protect human subjects in research (Goodyear et al., 2007). Eckenwiler et al. (2008) also criticise the Declaration for being too paternalistic and failing to address the full scope of ethically responsible research to protect human subjects. Further, Rid and Schmidt (2010) argue that the status of the Declaration as the primary set of minimal ethical standards to be upheld by all national and international ethical, legal or regulatory requirement is problematic, since a Declaration is not legally binding.

Nevertheless, the biomedical research ethics have also influenced social science research. Social science researchers internationally are obliged to undergo formal ethical review in both developed and developing countries (Van den Hoonaard, 2002). Thus, the springing up of Research Ethical Review Committees in social science research, where social researchers have varying levels of compliance regulated by legal, government and/ or organisational systems of ethical review (Mertens& Ginsberg, 2009). However, one criticism of these ethical review

committees is their over reliance on biomedical codes and experts in the evaluating of social research (Murphy &Dingwall, 2007). This notwithstanding, research ethics have been made international, where both biomedical and social researchers have to comply with international standards.In theory, applying the principles in different countries should not result in any challenges.Yet, for social researchers this ethical principle presents methodological and practical dilemmas.

Influence of Ethical Guidelines on Research

Three main ethical principles serve as guidelines in all scientific research: respect for persons; beneficence/non-malfeasance; and distributive justice (Beauchamp & Childress, 2001). Although there are variations in the ethical guidelines according to academic disciplines or professional practices, the major norms that govern all research are: voluntary participation, informed consent, no risk of harm to participants, participants' confidentiality and anonymity (Bryman, 2004). As a result, ethical review committees in both academic and non-academic institutions are to ensure that researchers have critically taken into consideration all ethical issues in their research plans. The goal of the ethical review committees in sum is to protect the public and facilitate useful research (Ashcroft &Pfeffer, 2001). Therefore, the design of research projects is influenced by its compliant to ethical conduct approved by ethical review committees and the methods of the discipline within which the research is being conducted.

Freed-Taylor (1994) concludes that ethical guidelines can be broadly divided into two closely interrelated groups; externally imposed factors such as legislation, contractual arrangements and sanctions; and internally imposed factors such as educational programmes and the development of codes of professional conduct. She states that externally imposed standards can be associated with data protection legislation and obtaining approval from ethics review boards. By contrast, internally imposed standards are those set by the research team including awareness of the different relevant legislation pertaining to research both in the home country research and in cross-national research (Freed-Taylor, 1994). She further argues that the internally imposed measures can produce good ethical research. However, this is dependent on the knowledge and training the researcher has acquired and its influence on the research process. Therefore in an ethical research, there is the need to consider external factors such as the legislation and the requirements of review committees, and ethical criteria pertaining to a particular discipline.

Hence, in cross-national research, there is a need to consider all the external and internal factors in relation to selected countries for the research.

Obtaining Ethical Approval

As the studies were cross-national, researchers sought to meet universal, local and individual ethical requirements. In addition theysought to adhere to both external and internal factors in relation to ethics in both studies. In one of the studies, firstly approval had to be obtained from the Queen's University Belfast, specifically the Research Ethics Committee School of Sociology, Social Policy and Social Work. The approval meant academically the research design met all the necessary ethical requirements for conducting cross-national research, the basic standards for conducting research in different countries. In the UK, it is a requirement for a researcher to obtain approval from an institutional Research Committee before health professionals and professionals involved in social care can participate in any research (DHSS, 2006). Therefore, for the fieldwork in the UK, the researcher had to obtain from the Office for Research Committees in Northern Ireland (ORECNI) an approval for professionals who came under their jurisdiction to participate in the study. Ghana, on the other hand has no similar ethical institution for professionals in social care or non-clinical research. Thus, to conduct the research a less formal approval from participating institutions was obtained. However, the process of obtaining ethical approval within the local context revealed major differences between the two countries. In obtaining the ethical approval from the University Research Committee, the research met externally imposed ethical standards for conducting the study. The approval of the ORECNI, another externally imposed factor, was the national context-specific ethical requirement. There was no equivalent requirement in Ghana. Within the context of cross-national research in countries such as Ghana with no legislation governing social research ethics, abiding by the ethical guidelines designed in the 'home' country of the research, serves as an internally imposed factor. The implication is that ethical requirements could be ensured in conducting comparative research in developed and developing countries, whereas research focusing only on developing countries may mean that social researchers would not be held accountable for their research.

Similarly, the second researcher also had to consider the three stages in the ethical process. The researcher had to fill ethics formsthat categorically stressed on the need for ensuring that the research brings no harm to the participants. This research focused on tourism sites based on

national parks in the UK and Ghana. In this the researcher had to obtain further approval from the Wildlife Division, which details the area of the research and stress on the management of the respective national parks and sanctuaries to offer the necessary assistance. Yet, in practice once the researcher provides a letter from a developed country it suffices as an attestation for their intention to embark on a research, albeit with less attention to the repercussions of the research on the participants and their communities. Chilisa (2005) argues that social research must always seek to protect the 'researched' from burdens such as physical and psychological harm.Thus, there a need for these to be ensured in all studies.

Gallagher et al. (1995) in their study of the long term effects of physical abuse of children's mental and physical development were confronted with two main ethical dilemmas in relation to informed consent. The dilemma of informing research participants of the nature of the research and obtaining consent to access their social work records made the researchers anxious that such requests could rekindle painful memories or family conflict. Thus, seeking consent on these issues might cause harm and fail to meet the responsibility concerning the wellbeing of participants. Participants in their study were informed of the study but no reference was made on sensitive subjects of either abuse or social work interventions. Although, such a decision enabled them to conduct the research it could be criticised as an example of unethical research as the participants were not informed about some of the study's objectives. It is also likely that abuse would not be mentioned by participants, thus defeating the purpose of the research to some extent. Another dilemma is when to obtain consent to participation.Obtaining consent at the outset of a longitudinal research project could also be problematic, as policies and systems could change over the period of the research. Murphy et al. (2011) in a study about the futures of young people with moderate-profound intellectual disabilities had to involve young people, their parents, social workers and health care providers, their managers and supervisors. They were able to negotiate initial consent to the study, but over the two year period of the research, the team had to renegotiate consent due to the introduction of new policies and change of participants involved in the study.

Nevertheless, the dilemmas in implementing ethical guidelines in a comparative study are more complicated. The experience of social problems is not unique to one country, yet countries have different approaches to social issues which are embedded in culture, values, history, social structure, economies, and politics (Cooper et al., 1995). However, a comparative approach

provides an opportunity to develop a critical way of viewing one's country with another. Yet, in conducting cross-national research, Kennett (2004) also notes that it is important for the researcher to use a concept that has standardised meaning and definition. Thus, the design is made appropriate for all the selected countries, including the ethical requirements. However, approval for the research is usually granted in the 'home' country of the research (where the research is designed) as they do not have jurisdiction over other committees in the participating 'host' countries. The onus is on the research team, to ensure that the research meets ethical standards in the respective 'host' countries. This could be done by obtaining ethical approvals from Ethical Review Committees in all participating countries in the study. There are two possibilities; in countries where social research is regulated, the research team has to follow the external factors such as the legislations governing research and obtain ethical approval. In the absence of ethical review committees, the researchers are obliged to adhere to ethical guidelines of the study and their knowledge of ethical principles. Thus, in countries where there are no ethical review committees researchers will have to rely more on their internally imposed factors within the study. This ensures that participants have informed consent, are assured of anonymity and will not be harmed by participating in the study.

Consenting to the Research

A researcher needs the informed consent of research participants. Firstly, it involves researchers having the full willingness of participants. Secondly, researchers must make known to the researched the purposes of the research, their identity and institution affiliation. One of the ethical requirements for both studies was to prove that all research participants had consented to the research by signing a consent form. Signed consent, although highly valued in bio medical research, can impact negatively in social research particularly in developing a comfortable and open relationship with participants; a relationship which can be important to gathering honest information (Molyneux et al., 2009).For example, professionals who volunteered to participate in both studies were given an information sheet about the study and a consent form. The consent form asked research participants to respond and consent to five questions namely: that they have read and understood the information provided and have had an opportunity to ask questions; that participation is voluntary and they are free to withdraw anytime without providing any reason; consent to the interview being audio taped; sections of the interview will be used on the

condition that it is anonymous and agree to take part in the study. They were invited to sign the consent form after they had read the information sheet and agreed to participate.

The insistence to produce formal consent forms for research participants to sign is to ensure that there is no coercion and all safety concerns have been addressed. However, in some instances, the consent form appeared to damage the trust between the researcher and research participants, a challenge faced in the Ghana fieldwork. Miller and Bell (2008) encountered similar reactions in researching aspects of domestic violence, access to research participants may be difficult and it is based on the trust of the individual researcher.A requirement of formal consent would challenge such relationships (see also Domestic Violence Research Group, 2004).Hence, signing a consent form arguable creates an artificial and culturally inappropriate bureaucratic process in social research (Israel, 2004).Although, research participants in Ghana were not at risk, research practice in the country is still based on trust. The requirement for signed consent forms instantly changed the relationship and the purpose of the research was questioned by participants. Many politely refused to sign the form after reading the questions and agreed verbally to participate.Therefore, in Ghana one can conclude that there is lack of rigour in the ethical review in social science research as compared to the UK. It also reveals that all the procedures for the research were designed in accordance with the UK legislation in conducting cross-nationalsocial research. Nevertheless, ethical issues were still observed in the Ghanaian field work, the difference was in the approach.

The primary concern of participants in Ghana was that once they had given their verbal approval to the interview session to be audio recorded, it is an evidence of consent. The consent form was regarded by the Ghanaian interviewees more as a checklist to ensure they had an understanding of what their participation in the study entails but not as a means for protection. Their refusal to sign the consent forms revealed three issues: firstly, verbal consent is enough proof for consent in Ghana; secondly, signing a form is interpreted as legally binding thus the issue of anonymity rendered untenable and thirdly, the possibility of a breakdown of trust in the researcher.The challenge of obtaining informed consent in non-western countries is well documented (Marshall, 2007; Andoh, 2009; Molyneux et al., 2009). However these authors' arguments were based on clinical research with vulnerable research participants in poor communities. Participants in this study were not vulnerable, they were educated and well placed in their respective professions, yet were not comfortable with signing a consent form. A contrary attitude was noted in the UK,

where participants regarded the consent form as part of the process and all accepted the procedures as a requirement to protect themselves and the researcher.

The two different perceptions on the consent forms are one example that when conducting cross-national research, one has to also consider the ethical ethos of the participating countries. If the opinion held by participants in Ghana had been ignored and researchers had been inflexible in the research design, the studies might not have been successfully completed. Hence, to overcome thechallenge, the research design was slightly changed; participants in Ghana were required to provide only verbal consent to the research. Whereas in the UK, the approach of obtaining consent fell in line with the externally imposed guidelines of the research ethic committees, in Ghana internally imposed factors, ensuring that all participants were provided appropriate information on the study and their rights in the research process, influenced the application of ethical guidelines. Therefore, participants in Ghana were given the same information as those in the UK, but the difference was that they could verbally consent to participate, which was the accepted ethos. This shows that ethical requirements would have to be adapted to suit the national contexts of the respective countries involved in the research project. This should not be viewed as an abuse of ethical standards but rather an issue to be considered in the early stages of the research design. An early consideration of the ethical ethos may save valuable time in conducting research in other host countries. Researchers' behaviour also revealed that irrespective of the existence of international ethical codes each respective country has different approaches to ethical conduct.

Conclusions

Although, it is important to be conversant with the social contexts being studied in cross-national research, practical issues of acceptable research procedures also contribute to the timely and successful completion of research in different countries. This paper provides an example where ethical guidelines designed in a developed country might not be easily replicated in a developing country especially where the ethical procedures or regulations for research are not well established. Itaddressed three ethical levels: universal, national and individual levels. The universal ethical requirement was met by the granting of approval from the University's Research Review Committee. As such, the study met the ethos and methods of the discipline. The second level was the national context, which revealed that in the UKan additional ethical

approval has to be obtained to enable professionals in the social sectors to participate in the study. A requirement that was not applicable in Ghana. Thirdly, the individual level addressed three issues; consent, empathy and privacy and information sharing issues also revealed that signing a consent form was not appreciated in Ghana whilst in the UK it was regarded as part of the process.Therefore, in cross-national research, the different ethical levels in all participating countries need to be considered in the design stage of the research project.

Further, it also revealed that in cross-national research, researchers have to be flexible in the application of ethical requirements to ensure that ethical guidelines are followed. Also, they must also respect the ethos in the respective countries. Although, signed consent forms are intended to protect the researcher from possible accusations from study participants (Coomber, 2002); this proved to be a challenge in both studies. The request for a signature was regarded as a formal process by the Ghanaian participants. The reaction by interviewees on the issue of signed consent forms highlights differences in approaches to participating in research; whereas an introduction of formality in a voluntary process in in the UK is taken as part of the research process, in Ghana it was rather off-putting.

Hence, in a cross-national research study, the ethical requirements and the different approaches to ethical conduct are important. Further, if a cross-national research is going to be conducted by the same research team, funding of research ethics training in both 'home' and 'hosts' countries must be included in the budget of the research. In addition, this paper highlights the need for more comprehensive social studies of informed consent in developing countries. Such studies may assist social researchers in understanding, identifying, and addressing specific areas of misconception and thereby improve the informed consent process in developing countries. To understand global policy impacts, cross-national research cannot be ignored; therefore regulations of ethical standards for social research need to be enhanced in both developed and developing countries to ensure the success of international research.

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