Providing Ethical Guidance for Collaborative Research in Developing Countries

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Abstract

Experience has shown that the application of ethical guidelines developed for research in developed countries to research in developing countries is impractical and raises a number of contentious issues. Various attempts have been made to provide guidelines more appropriate to the developing world context; however, to date these efforts have been dominated by the fields of bioscience, medical research and nutrition. There is very little advice available for those seeking to undertake collaborative social science or natural science research in developing countries and what is there tends to be held within disparate sources. Charting the development of a set of ethics documentation for future use by the ESPA research community, this paper outlines past and present attitudes towards ethics procedures amongst this community and highlights the ways in which ethics procedures might be made more attractive to researchers working in this area.

Keywords

Ethics form, guidance notes, collaborative, developing countries

Ethics is one of the 'buzzwords' of the twenty-first century and, in the last decade, ethical issues have attained greater significance than ever before (Schroeder and Pisupati, 2010). The ethical issues arising from collaborative research in developing countries have received particular attention, especially when the collaboration involves a developed country and a developing country (Tan-Torres Edejer, 1999; Caballero, 2002; Sugarman et al, 2007; McIntosh et al, 2008). These include the risk of exploitation as a result of inequalities (e.g. financial, access to resources) that might exist between the collaborators (European Union 2010), and the impact that misunderstandings can have when the developed partner and/or sponsor of the research is unfamiliar with the cultural (and environmental) traditions of the country in which the research is being conducted (Nuffield Council on Bioethics, 2002). Experience has shown that the application of ethical guidelines developed for research in developed countries to research in developing countries is impractical (e.g. written consent may not be appropriate in areas of high illiteracy) and raises a number of contentious issues (e.g. individual informed consent may not be conceptually appropriate for cultures that give pre-eminence to the group be it tribe, clan, or family) (Caballero, 2002; Creed-Kanashiro et al, 2005; Choudhury, 2007; Sultana, 2007; Mollet, 2011; Araali, 2011). This, added to the fact that properly functioning Research Ethics Committees (REC) simply do not exist in many developing countries and where they do they tend to be ineffective or under-resourced (Nuffield Council on Bioethics, 2002; Choudhury 2007), has prompted numerous attempts by both academics and sponsor organisations to suggest guidelines more appropriate to the developing world context. Generally agreed principles include the importance of prior ethical review, minimisation of risk to research participants, adherence to a reasonable risk-benefit ratio, the inclusion of adequate plans for care and compensation for participants (where appropriate), individual informed consent, equal respect for all participants (e.g. individual autonomy, privacy and confidentiality), equitable distribution of the burden and benefits of the research, an awareness of the local cultural context, doing research which is relevant to national and community priorities, the participation of local people in all stages of research (where possible), and providing feedback to the local community (Velho and Velho, 1996; Caballero, 2002; Creed-Kanashiro et al, 2005; Choudhury, 2007).

The direction derived from these sets of guidelines is useful because of the stress placed on the need for those working in privileged positions and in wealthier countries to reflect not only on their own framework of thinking, but also on the implications of the very different mindsets and environments in which their research projects will be carried out (Benatar, 2002). As the Swiss Commission for Research Partnership with Developing Countries (1998) has noted, it is crucial that collaborative projects between developed and developing countries strive to achieve the best

possible division of tasks and responsibilities, based on the different strengths of the partners, in order to produce the best 'synergic effects' and to enable all those involved to benefit from the research activities. Yet, these guidelines also have their limits; work in this area is dominated by the fields of bioscience, medical research and nutrition and, whilst they have done much to advance understanding of and sensitivity to issues such as informed consent, there is very little advice available for those seeking to undertake collaborative social science or natural science research in developing countries. As Molony and Hammett (2007) attest, searching academic databases for guidance on the ethics of employing local research assistants, and advice on the additional difficulties frequently experienced when researching in the developing world, is a frustrating experience. The physical scientist searching for guidance on sampling rare or endangered taxa/species and then transporting these samples out of the host country would find a similar dearth of material. Guidance from sponsor organisations is also scant and researchers wishing to undertake research in these areas are forced to obtain advice from a number of disparate sources (e.g. professional Codes of Conduct in related disciplines, national and international legislation, international treaties, etc.).

In 2012, the Ecosystem Services for Poverty Alleviation (ESPA) Directorate (see ESPA 2013) commissioned the author to produce an ethics form and accompanying guidance notes for future use by the ESPA research community. The ethics documents had to be accessible, relevant to both natural and social scientists, and cover all pertinent issues including health and safety. To date, the named Principal Investigators (PIs) on the grants awarded by the ESPA research programme have, with only a few exceptions, been based in UK institutions (although this does not necessarily mean that the UK is their country of origin). The work funded by ESPA has, however, involved collaborations between academic colleagues in a diverse range of disciplines, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), government institutions, and other stakeholders in countries across Africa, Asia, Australia, Europe, North America, and South America. The aim was not to provide an iron-clad formula for 'ethical' research; rather, it was hoped that the new ethics procedure would foster discussion, offer a framework for making decisions for both social and natural science researchers, encourage PIs and their Co-Investigators (Co-Is) design culturally sensitive and appropriate studies, make intelligent choices before, during and after their time in the field and, as a result of undertaking ethically aware research, develop relevant capacities in the host countries (Sultana, 2007).

The paper begins with a brief explanation of how the ethics documents were developed and the work done to engage members of the ESPA research community in this process. I then outline the extent to which the members of this community had (or had not) engaged with ethics procedures in the past and their attitudes towards ethics review procedures focusing, in particular, on their responses to questions regarding the communication of ethical protocols, host-country review, monitoring and evaluation, IPR, and partner relationships. Finally, I discuss the three most important design characteristics identified by the respondents when asked to comment on a set of draft ethics documents. In so doing, the paper considers a neglected aspect in the literature on ethical review procedures, namely the ways in which the design of ethics documentation can influence the consideration of ethics in projects involving collaborative research in developing countries.

The Design Process

The design process incorporated four key phases. Phase One comprised (i) a desk-based literature and Code of Practice review in order to highlight pertinent issues and collate examples of best practice from research in a range of disciplines relevant to the work funded by ESPA, and (ii) the creation of draft documents (using the University of Edinburgh School of GeoSciences ethics procedure as a template) which were then published on the ESPA website for comment (these included an ethics form, Self-Assessment Guidance Notes, and Full Assessment Guidance Notes for those undertaking research on vulnerable human subjects or sensitive topics, using invasive procedures, and certain types of biophysical research, e.g. sampling rare/endangered or harmful taxa/species). Phase Two involved the distribution of a questionnaire to past and present ESPA grant holders and, to broaden out the response, recipients of the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) - Department for International Development (DFID) Joint Scheme for Research on

International Development (Poverty Alleviation) Phase 1 and Phase 2 awards (for the advantages of this approach see Sax et al, 2003; Kaplowitz et al, 2004; Denscombe, 2009). Split into two sections, the anonymised questionnaire canvassed the recipients' views on the need for, and value of, research ethics, asked questions relating to the 'doing' of collaborative research with particular reference to their ESPA or ESRC-DIFD award, and solicited their feedback on the draft documents. 146 questionnaires were distributed via email to project PIs who were asked to forward a copy of the questionnaire to their Co-Investigators (Co-Is); the responses show that some PIs did comply with this request, however, it is impossible to determine how many Co-Is actually received the survey. Only 26 completed questionnaires were returned despite email reminders. Eight of the emails sent to the ESRC-DFID PIs were returned as 'undeliverable', five elicited an 'out of office' response, and one ESPA PI responded to say their project had not yet started. In Phase Three, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with self-selecting questionnaire respondents in order to gain a deeper insight into their views on research ethics and current procedures, to follow up specific responses, and to discuss how the draft form and guidance notes might be modified to increase their relevancy and make them more user-friendly. Nine interviews were conducted including one PI who did not complete the questionnaire but agreed to be interviewed, and one with an expert in the field of development research ethics recommended by a respondent. All but two of the interviews were conducted via Skype, the exceptions being conducted in person at the individual's place of work. Finally, a revised form and guidance notes were produced incorporating feedback from Phases Two and Three.

Attitudes Towards Ethics Procedures and Associated Documentation

At least half of the respondents confirmed that they had been involved in a research project in a developing country in the last eight years which had not been ethically reviewed (this date was chosen because the first ESRC Framework for Research Ethics was introduced in 2006). The reasons for this were diverse with interviewees citing the lack of a perceived need due to the nature of their research (e.g. data processing, no human subjects), lack of demand on the part of the funding body, and the absence of an institutional REC (a particular problem for those based in developing countries, although not exclusively). Particularly interesting was the tendency of those involved in natural science research and/or who used data modelling or secondary data to associate research ethics primarily with work involving human subjects or animals. As one interviewee commented;

> most of our projects are environmental projects. So we're trying to improve [environmental] quality or [resource] availability, you know, the general eco-system. So ethically, you know, we're not using humans as test subjects, we're not using animals. So it's always been something that we're used to preparing for any proposal, but it's always just kind of like the last paragraph you prepare because usually there's no major ethics considerations, and that maybe because I'm a scientist and I may not be understanding what ethics are. But as far as I'm concerned it's, you know, there's usually not very many…we're not doing medical science, so there's no ethics. There's a lower ethics […] let's say. […] ours is more of a regional approach for working with politicians and decision makers, and it's not, you know, we're just […] filling in the knowledge gap, so there's not much of an ethics dilemma there (Interviewee 4).

The interviewee data suggests that when research ethics are considered by these groups it is a reactive rather than proactive process, often at the specific request of the funding body or the home institution and done at the last minute leaving little time for in-depth consideration of the relevant issues or 'dilemmas'. These groups were also more likely to express ambivalence towards, or view the procedural aspects of, ethics review as an inconvenience in the life-course of a research project.

Just under a third of the respondents said they had, in the past, been involved in research in a developing country which had caused them ethical concern. The most common causes for concern being the research participants' exposure to risk (e.g. through the absence of adequate compensation mechanisms, ineffective communication, inadequate risk/benefit assessment, ineffective project management, the absence of formal contractual agreements for local field assistants, lack of or ineffective project monitoring and evaluation, and lack of informed consent)

and the inequitable distribution of intellectual property rights (IPR) (including instances of academic imperialism, ineffective dissemination, and failure to ensure fair distribution of potential benefits).

All the respondents said they felt that it was important to consider research ethics and the majority were confident that they knew where to find information relating to, and were knowledgeable about, ethics in their subject area. When asked if relevant Codes of Conduct and/or ethical guidelines had been, or would be, communicated to all members of the project team (including translators and/or local field assistants), only a fifth said no. The interview data suggested, however, that the channels of communication were stronger in some projects than others. For example, examples of communication ranged from discussing ethical issues on an ad hoc basis as they arose through to providing specific research training for translators and/or local field assistants;

> it's exactly not a conscious decision but more, yeah, but we'd never really thought about it […] and indeed much of it, of that is because we know each other pretty well as a team and, yeah, solve problems when they come and [there] probably might be some practical issues of having to translate things [into the local language] I guess (Interviewee 3).

> Well we had several meetings, we had the workshops that were run in […] country and, so at the beginning, what we did is, if I remember, we had a document with, which had a number of sections, so one was impact, measuring impact, the other one was, I, I don't know whether you call them ethical guidance or whatever, but anonymity and all these sort of aspects […] to the research, so that was spelt out at the beginning, […] I don't know how exhaustive they were, but at least there were (sic) some mention of it (Interviewee 8).

> basically the training […] has involved sitting down beforehand and explaining what it is that we want to explain about the project. So how this project is working, how it is using [different techniques] so as to provide information and tools that can allow people at grass roots to negotiate with policy makers, allow policy makers hopefully to make better decisions. So it was really going through that with research assistants and talking about it beforehand (Interviewee 1).

One respondent who answered 'yes' to this question clarified that all partners involved in undertaking the fieldwork were sent the ethics application and the comments of the REC, however, it was left up to them which elements of this they passed on to their field assistants and the respondent would not know until the final field study report was delivered what training was provided and to whom.

Just over three quarters of the respondents concurred that ethics guidelines could be useful in heightening researchers' sensitivity to ethical issues. Although one respondent felt very strongly that the type of 'universal guidelines' that ESPA were trying to create were a waste of time (because, in their opinion, they tend to apply western notions to societies in which attitudes and practices are very different); the interviewees tended to disagree noting that the guidance could potentially raise issues that the researchers may not have been aware of or may have ignored in the past (e.g. their privileged position and relative wealth), or because some ethical issues would be the same regardless of where the research took place.

Just under three-quarters of the respondents confirmed that their ESPA or ESRC-DFID project(s) had been ethically reviewed, however, at least one of the interviewees appeared to have misunderstood the function of the JES System assuming that ethical review was part of the post-submission vetting process;

> we write a proposal with, on what is the Joint [Electronic] Submission system […] and then of course it goes…so we fill everything in then, […] it goes to the university administration and then what basically happens is that I know it goes through various checks and whatever and so it might be that one of the checks is not for review committee but to be honest, well, yeah, it's probably the nature of scientists trying to not...or yeah, as long as it goes through and it gets to the funding agents then we're happy and basically the rest did not really occur to me ever that I would have to actively look for an ethical committee, I always thought that and other requirements or whatever would be taken [care] of by the, yeah, the […] grants managing entity in [my university] or the other universities (Interviewee 3).

The interviewees who had not had their project, or were unsure if it had been, reviewed confessed that they were unsure of their institutional ethics procedure and had either neglected to think about ethics at the time of the application or had assumed/hoped that someone else (either another member of the research team or someone in their institution) would take care of, or assume responsibility for, this on their behalf.

Only five respondents confirmed that their project had been reviewed by a REC in the host country. One respondent advocated that all research handling personal data should be subject to ethical review first in-country (if the data was being collected outside the PI's country) before being reviewed by the PI's institutional review board - if the local partners had no ethical review board, they should be supported to establish one. When the interviewees were asked to respond to this suggestion they all felt it was unfeasible. The key prohibiting factors being the relatively short duration of the projects, funding limitations, and the amount of institutional support RECs require to make them credible (e.g. independent ethical review boards were seen as being venal). As Interviewee 1 commented;

> I really don't think it's feasible because, you know, basically the developing countries that I've worked in, any sort of regulation is minimal, is easily corrupted, is easily bent and I think that while it would be admirable to put resources to that we've already talked about the difficulty of carving up the resources and working in these places and I just, to be honest I just don't see that, but I do think that, you know, we try and work by example and we have growing numbers of colleagues who've maybe been through the UK system or similar systems with ethics training and who take that very seriously and who, if you like, apply those practices in their own works so I think that being realistic about it that's about as good as you can get and being quite clear that you don't get involved in project where there's going to be contravention. That maybe slightly too pragmatic and not sufficiently idealistic a response but I can't begin to envisage […] to set up an ethics committee. I can envisage having those discussions with people at every opportunity and raising it as an issue and expecting the best standards from people and encouraging the best standards.

In general, although in-country review would be the ideal, the interviewees felt that for the time being it would be sufficient for ESPA to insist that all projects to go through some form of approved institutional ethical review (regardless of where this took place) on the understanding that collaborators would discuss the ethics of their research at every opportunity.

Of the 18 respondents who answered the question, just under half said that the relationship between the collaborating partners on their grant had been, or was, subject to monitoring and evaluation. These monitoring and evaluation strategies tended to be based on established institutional codes of conduct or working agreements (e.g. consultancy contracts) or had been developed organically to suit the needs of the research programme and the collaborating partners. As Interviewee 2 explained;

> we decided to design a fairly very simple […] [two-strand] strategy, that […] helps to track implementation and execution of the project, as was designed or as we designed it, […] one of them is to monitor the quality of work we do, another one is to monitor collaboration [and this] looks at the honour and the respect that is given to intellectual property and the contribution of business.

The interviewees stressed, however, that this type of agreement requires commitment and sustained input from all parties to be successful and of mutual benefit. Several of those whose projects did not have a formal monitoring and evaluation strategy argued that it was often impractical or unfeasible to expect individuals to work to strict deadlines (which they associated with such procedures), that it would add undue pressure to an already pressurised working situation, that it would add another level of 'complication' to the project, that there was not enough time to do this given the short duration of many of the projects (the average was 28 months) and the seemingly endless amount of reporting that researchers were expected to do during the life-course of a research project, and that it was unnecessarily bureaucratic. As Interviewee 4 noted;

> There is no formal monitoring process [in our project] where we evaluate the participation of each partner. It's an informal process where, you know, if you participate…the more you

> contribute, the more you appear in scientific publications, […] what you put in is what you get out, more or less. But, you know, it isn't…it probably wouldn't be a bad idea to come up with a formal monitoring programme of partner activities, but it's…it would complicate things. It's a two year project so there's very little, you know, not a lot of time to do the actual work and there's already so many forms […] that we don't want to complicate things any further.

Several interviewees questioned why the success of a project could not be judged simply on its deliverables, for without good working relationships no outputs would ever be produced.

Formal IPR agreements covering data and results, publications, and authorship were relatively scarce and only one-third of the respondents confirmed that their project had this type of accord in place. These tended to be based on the rules of the Vancouver Protocol sometimes with additional clauses covering the inclusion of collaborators from the host country in the publication of the research findings. Those interviewees without a formal agreement cited, by way of explanation, the lack of a perceived demand from the funders, lack of time, a desire to avoid additional bureaucracy, a lack of interest among non-academic partners in peer-reviewed publications, the presence of already well-established collaborative relationships and/or non-project-specific blanket ethics clearance agreements. One interviewee noted that they were

> not very keen [on IPR agreements] because it's a lot of bureaucracy. […] So if not really necessarily, I try to avoid as much as I can, because [it's] bureaucracy for me, for them, and in general so far it has worked very well. Also because they have, the other partners they're typically, at least those that I work with have less interest in really peer-review publications, it's of course nice and it's great for the CV, but it's not going to change their life, particularly the NGOs. On the other hand, they are much more concerned with outreach publications and so I…and then of course I do collaborate with them on writing outreach publications and I probably have more than a typical scientist, because I believe that it's important just for the type of stuff we're doing and because it's a great way to get our research into policy of course, but we have, somehow we are flexible about that, yeah, and I admit being guilty of having put strategic co-authors on papers sometimes just, just, yeah, well, but try to find a balance between those, but yeah, I've never really felt the need (Interviewee 3).

This is not to say, however, that agreements regarding IPR were always absent. Several interviewees spoke of tacit agreements with their collaborating partners regarding who was entitled to have their name attributed to which publications. In general, these informal arrangements were said to work well but what was less clear was how they were policed, how decisions were made regarding author order, how and to whom grievances might be aired, or whether some individuals (particularly those who were not named on the funding application) might find this type of working arrangement more pressured or stressful than if a formal agreement had been in place from the outset.

On the whole there appears to be a high degree of collaboration amongst the project partners at all stages of the research design and implementation across the projects surveyed. Only 15 respondents answered when asked if there had been, or were, any tensions in the relationship(s) between the collaborating partners on their project. The six who said yes identified budget allocation (e.g. informal approach to accounting on the part of one partner, the practical allocation of funds), commitment to deadlines (e.g. some partners' unwillingness to prioritise the project above other projects they were involved in, partners failing to make the inputs they promised at the proposal stage), and differing work practices (e.g. different approaches to field research in different disciplines, division of labour, timing of inputs) as the main sources of tension. The quotes below highlight two different scenarios;

> the tensions were partly around, we were working with […] an advocacy group, and so they're an NGO and they had their own rules and regulations and of course what we were doing was providing them with the money to allow them to employ the researchers, the associates on our project but they saw them as part of their team, so they, […] were actually expected to go on team building weeks and, you know, they had to work towards a, reporting procedures and so on within the organisation, which has sometimes cut across

> what we wanted them to do. […] because they were then members of the [NGO] team, they had to follow the rules about expenses and travelling allowances and […] we were prepared to say, I mean, because these funds are trivial in our terms, you know, […] if you can't get a, if you can't come by train, for God's sake, buy an air ticket and, and go you know, it's, it's within the budget, but then the rules [of that] organisation said, that if these people are allowed to do that, then we have to do it for everybody else, and we can't have that (Interviewee 7).

> we thought that it would be appropriate to have [a] partner organisation [in Country A] which specialises in [this particular skill] and that's what we've done and broadly speaking that works but it is the first time that I've worked with this particular group and they were actually recommended to me by the other partners who have worked with them in the past. […] these people are actually not research partners nor are they specialists in the area that we're dealing with, they're specialists in [this skill] […] but because of the way that the project was structured […] we ended up with a situation where the three research institutes got the lion's share of the overheads. That was very upsetting to the [skilled] group and partly because of the timeline and partly because of the fact that sort of doing this over Skype and email that we just didn't really get to a point where they were completely happy with…I found as many ways as I could to make it work for them but essentially I think that they felt that they were marginalised by that process. You could say they were (Interviewee 1).

It was acknowledged that a number of these issues could have been dealt with more effectively by the management of expectations; however, as acknowledged by the interviewee above, the lack of regular face-to-face contact (which is common feature of research of this type due to the geographical distribution of the research teams) can hinder the successful resolution of problems.

The Design of Ethics Documents

All the interviewees stressed that context is crucial in this type of research and that any ethics procedure must be flexible enough to facilitate rather than inhibit the work of the researchers allowing them to take different customs into account (e.g. age at which one becomes an adult, nature of consent) and adjust to local circumstances without the need for a revised ethics assessment. As Interviewee 7 argued;

> I think some of the ethics literature is not very helpful at all. It's, kind of, dancing on the point of a needle to make fine, fine judgements about things, which you can't make fine judgements about in practice, particularly not in developing country settings. […] there are real potentials for making ethics make research impossible, and they have to be fought I think, very forcefully, so, well, I mean, two examples really, one is the idea that, you know, you set it all out in advance, and if you change it, if you go back to the risk, to the ethics committee, to, to get, you know, approval of anything, any change…well, ethnographic field work is always adjusting to local circumstances and you can't go back, you can't say, well this moved enough now to feel that we need to go back and get further approval, because, you know, […] it takes six months out of, you know, a year's field work time…you've lost it...you've just completely lost the project. […] the other thing is that, and this, we had [this] is that the local ethical review board starts saying, 'oh we don't think much of this project, you ought to be doing this instead', and we think, 'well we just got funded to do this', you know, how many times are we going to go forwards and backwards with people who say, 'we don't think you can do the research because it's not ethically viable because it's not scientifically viable or valid', and then you have to go back to the funders and say 'we're having to change the programme', you know, and then you come and go, again, for six months before you're allowed to start. And it's, it's usually trivial.

The identification of procedures which both meet the ethical demands of the research sponsor(s) and are appropriate to the context within which the research is to be carried out is a familiar problem for those involved international research (Sultana, 2007; Ajuwon and Adegbite, 2008; Rowson, 2010). This problem is amplified if (and this is more likely to be the case than not) the presiding REC is unfamiliar with the social, political and cultural circumstances of the host country

(Mollet, 2011; Smith, 2012) or if it lacks the resources to undertake independent assessment of the risks associated with the research they review (European Union 2010). Researchers complain that rigid 'western cultural value-laden regulations' (Araali, 2011) circumscribe their ability to make their own decisions about ethical issues relating to their specific projects and frequently promote a 'formulaic approach' to research ethics wherein researchers go through the motions of ticking what they presume to be the 'right boxes', rather than to think through ethical principles themselves (Mollet, 2011).

Following on from this, the respondents felt that the guidance would need to be more sensitive with regards to specific issues such as the disruption of social norms (which the draft guidance stipulated should be avoided). Although one interviewee noted that the whole ethos of their discipline was to cause as little disruption as possible, the majority felt that an element of disruption was inevitable given the nature of the projects that ESPA funds (e.g. engaging with local communities, knowledge exchange, development), that this would happen regardless of where the researcher was from and that it was not necessarily always a bad thing. For example;

> Well I guess there…it's a kind of a utilitarian perspective somewhat, which is the social norms, are they in the good of society as whole? So if it's a social norm, for example, that women have no control over certain household assets or livestock, it maybe, in the short term, it may be something which is useful for the men, but in the long term, its not useful for the society as a whole. So I think that you shouldn't do…disrupt social norms just for the sake of it, or if harm could result, but if, if…sometimes social norms have to change in order for development to happen. So, basically, its something we should be careful about, think it through, but certainly not a blanket, you know. I mean female circumcision is a social norm (Interviewee 5).

A clear distinction was made, however, between positive and negative disruption; whilst any social interaction is disruptive, the consensus was that it is important to ensure that it is supportive and encouraging rather than aggressive and unpleasant. The overall sense was that no set of guidance notes would ever be able (or should indeed try) to take all eventualities into account, however, researchers must be aware of their potential impact on the situations they found themselves in and the people they come into contact with, and realise that this might be a lasting impact that remains long after the research is complete. Where possible ethics documents should encourage researchers to consult local people (e.g. local leaders) particularly when they fear their work or presence may have adverse consequences, and serious consideration should be given to ways in which the researcher might mitigate any disruption (e.g. by going back once the research is complete, providing feedback, maintaining channels of communication where possible).

The second point of consensus was that the form and guidance notes both needed to be shorter. At seven, ten, and seven pages respectively, it was felt that the Ethics Form, Self-Assessment Guidance Notes, and Full Ethics Assessment Guidance Notes were too long, too intrusive, and too detailed; one respondent wrote that they read 'more like an exercise in avoiding any liability suit than as something aimed at helping researchers achieve good ethical standards in their research'. This is a trait recognised by Araali (2011), who notes that Western ethics procedures frequently seem designed to protect the researcher against potential legal action in their home countries rather than the interests of the research participants. Several respondents suggested that an electronic version of the form with pop-up guidance would make filling in the form a more streamlined, helpful, interactive and user-friendly process. If the ethics documents were too long ESPA would run the risk of people ignoring them because they would not have time or perhaps the energy to read them regardless of how useful they might be. At least one interviewee admitted to having previously ticked the box which asked them if their research had gone or would undergo ethical review without giving much thought to what this might mean because the small print was too long;

> things are streamlined with those submission systems etc., […] there is a need at some point and a box to tick that says […] did you review the ethical guidelines and that tends to lead to […], you know, it's very tempting to just tick the box the same as with software you download or whatever, all those thirty-seven pages of small print, just click 'I agree' whatever, so I do tend to skim through it […] particularly at the moment that you're stressed

> to get the proposal in so there's not a time do you think I've got to print it all out and go and sit on my couch and go and…So, yes, streamlining I guess I can definitely support that (Interviewee 3).

In making the form and guidance shorter the intention would not be to liberate researchers from accountability in relation to research ethics (Araali, 2011), but to try and engage users beyond the bare minimum of PIs and Co-Is, to stimulate them to want to engage with research ethics rather than 'going underground' (Cote 2012), to make them think very carefully about the practices they engage in, and help them avoid intellectual arrogance.

Finally, the respondents agreed that if ESPA were to have an ethics procedure it needed to avoid duplicating any data protection, health and safety, risk assessment, and ethics procedures that might be in place at the PI's institution. Stewart (2010) and Mollet (2011) support this desire for a one-track approach highlighting the increased level of detail and amount of documentation now required by many RECs, the increasing number and complexity of the rules to which researchers are expected to adhere, and the ever growing raft of university and government regulations that are being put in place to regulate research conduct. In general, the respondents agreed that bodies such as ESPA were right to require the research they fund to have undergone ethical review but they need to be careful that this does not add another layer of accountability and bureaucracy to an already complex process; this would not improve ethical review but weaken it.

Conclusions

The principle aim of this project was to produce an ethics form and accompanying guidance notes for the ESPA research community which would sensitise members to issues which can arise when undertaking collaborative research in developing countries. Despite the relatively small sample size, the results of the survey and interview data suggest that the participants do accept the importance of, and need for, ethical review when undertaking collaborative work in developing countries; however, negative perceptions of what this entails (e.g. time, effort, bureaucracy, relevance) can sometimes mean that ethical assessment is not taken seriously and or is avoided if possible. There is a particular need to raise awareness of the relevance and potential benefits of ethical review amongst natural science researchers and/or those using modelling or secondary data, although steps could be taken to make the procedural aspects of ethical review more attractive to all researchers wishing to undertake work in this area. Electronic formatting and a visibly streamlined process for obtaining REC approval would be one step towards achieving this. There is also a need to raise awareness of the mutual benefits and reassurances that can be derived from formal agreements (e.g. in relation to IPR, collaborative relationships with non-academic partners, monitoring and evaluation procedures). There is a real danger, for example, that long-standing collaborative relationships or blanket ethics clearance agreements between institutions may lead to complacency and prevent new projects from being ethically assessed on a case by case basis.

The overall sense was that ESPA's initiative was not misguided *per se* as it would go some way towards ensuring that proper respect was shown to the people with whom, and environments that, ESPA funded researchers came into contact with. In this sense, the ethics guidance notes would not be asking the researchers to do anything different from what they should be doing anyway; rather they would encourage the researchers to think about the ethical issues involved in their research in more depth and ensure that they had ethical clearance from the right authorities/people. That said, it was recommended that if the PI is based in the UK (or in an institution outside the UK which has a robust REC) the research should be ethically reviewed by their institution REC *or* ESPA, *not by both*. A Confirmation of External Review Form could be used to document this. Where the research is to be reviewed by the PI's institution, ESPA could request that all applicants use the ESPA guidance notes alongside those provided by their institution not only to ensure that the necessary issues are considered but also to help the researchers justify their decision-making if the REC in question lacks experience in this area. In time, the hope would be that all ESPA grant recipients would make every effort to get all, or at least part of, their proposed research reviewed by a robust REC in the host country, however, it is recognised that this may not be possible in some countries for a long time to come. A Confirmation of External Review Form could again be used to document this and a record of relevant RECs could be posted

on the ESPA ethics web pages as and when they are identified by the grant recipients. Grant recipients could provide documentary evidence of their efforts to find a relevant REC if the search proves fruitless. Finally, depending on the length of the project, ESPA may wish to request that grant recipients, or at least a sample, undertake a mid-project ethics review in order to acknowledge the changing and unpredictable nature of research of this type. This need not be an onerous task; it could simply require the PI to submit a one-page review of work undertaken so far, any changes made or planned, and any ethical issues arising from this. A key determinant of the above of course is time; grant recipients must be encouraged and enabled to build time into their projects to think about the practicalities of ethical research and share this information with their collaborating partners.

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