ETHICAL REFLEXIVITY AND RESEARCH GOVERNANCE: NAVIGATING THE TENSIONS

This is a paper version of the online module offered to SOAS staff and students through the BLE platform as part of the Research Office training essentials.

A paper version is made available open access to be of wider benefit to UK-based and international researchers. The online module has been designed to be dynamic and the developers commit to incorporating comments and feedback from users to improve and to enhance it. Please be aware that this paper version may not reflect the latest version online.

Module Summary

This module explores tensions that exist between the commitment to take ethical approaches in global research and to abide by UK/EU-based research governance standards. The course considers how researchers can meet these evolving funder guidelines realistically without compromising their research objectives and their relationships with local partners and communities. It provides academics, doctoral students and research development staff with a platform to reflect on these issues and with tools to constructively navigate them.

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1. Introduction: Rationale and aims of the module

Ethical issues in research are now commonly acknowledged and comprise an integral part of research bid development in higher education institutions. They cannot be perceived as a burdensome precondition that researchers need to meet to further their projects. There is also heightened reflexivity about the colonial/racialised underpinnings of research that researchers must be aware not to amplify through their research activities.

In parallel, EU/UK funding bodies have become more focused on issues of due diligence and data-sharing and protection, which reflects both EU-wide legislation that national governments implement and more global developments that have fuelled the drive for more regulation relating to data privacy. With the growth of internet commerce and social media, data protection regulations are becoming more global. Funders are seeking to ensure not only value for money but also that any research financed by them is not at odds with any legal or ethical requirements they must also abide by.

The heightened ethical reflexivity and decolonial perspectives on research appears to lead to some tensions with the increasingly rigid governance framework in the UK/EU. Many academics currently challenge what is perceived to be an increasingly bureaucratic and rules-based system within European/UK research funding that dictates and governs research development. Others perceive that there is an expectation for overseas/non-European partners to follow policies and guidelines that emanate from or cohere better with European or UK legal frameworks and societal developments, which can be patronising and counter-productive to decolonising research practice cross-culturally. These tensions need to be navigated in order for researchers to be able to achieve reflexive research approaches outside of Euro-America, especially when working in post-colonial contexts.

This module acknowledges these tensions and aims to engage directly with the current research governance framework in order to explore ethical approaches to international research. The types of ethical issues that emerge in research whether domestically or within non-UK settings are innumerable, especially if a decolonial perspective is applied to every aspect of the research process. For the sake of achieving an effective course, this module explores only some of the most salient issues that SOAS is currently dealing with to motivate more in-depth reflection and to build researchers' preparedness.

These issues include:

- Working with research participants in ways that follow proper consent processes within diverse research contexts;
- Dealing with data in line with domestic data protection regulations, while simultaneously appreciating emergent local legislation and community norms and interests;
- Hiring local research or other assistants and ensuring transparency, accountability and appropriate recognition;
- Working with local research partners in ways that translate funder expectations for egalitarian partnerships into practice and even exceed those.

The module has been structured according to these themes, which cross-cut all stages of research design, implementation and dissemination and need to be considered reiteratively throughout the research cycle. Each unit provides first a descriptive discussion of key issues followed by a Case Study informed by the experiences of PhD students and academics at SOAS, which can serve as material for further reflection.

▷ VIDEO: Introduction

2. What does applying a decolonial lens to research mean?

A decolonial approach to research and the project lifecycle is relevant to all research contexts (including inside the UK/EU), but especially in low- and middle-income societies and post-colonial contexts that have been historically misrepresented within mainstream Anglophone knowledge production and development practice. For the purposes of this module, a decolonial perspective means:

•To acknowledge the epistemological system from which research proceeds and to avoid ethnocentric assumptions about the topic investigated in research contexts that researchers are not native to or deeply familiar with;

•To be sensitive to the identity and worldview that informs both the researcher's approach and the research participants' understandings and experiences;

•To overcome self-centred tendencies that ignore the interests, well-being and dignity of research communities and participants, whether in the UK or in the global context;

•To recognise asymmetries in the power held by the researcher vis-à-vis the research participants and between principal investigators and other research personnel, especially when the latter are local;

•To think reflexively about the composition and modus operandi of a research team to ensure that members of different intersectional characteristics (gender, ethnicity, economic status, age, career level, religious beliefs, etc.) are provided with fair opportunities for growth within the team and are properly credited for their work.

In brief, a decolonial perspective ties very well with an ethical perspective and approach in research, as it will become evident in the following sections.

▷ VIDEO: Applying a Decolonial Lens to Research

3. Working with research participants

Obtaining informed consent has become an increasingly prominent area in funder ethics guidelines as well as SOAS institutional policies. For example, the European Commission in its Horizon 2020 ethics guidelines specifies that researchers must provide a requisite level of evidence for having undertaken all the necessary processes to obtain informed consent from their research participants. Researchers should be able to evidence the content of the permissions that were obtained and the information that was given to the research participants. This should include an explicit description of the research project and its objectives and methodology, the basis of selecting/recruiting research participants, how the data shared will be stored and used, terms of confidentiality/anonymity, public dissemination of the research and other data-related implications that research participants should consider before they agree to participate in the study.

Informed consent needs to be obtained in a transparent and ethical way and in a manner that meets funder compliance expectations. For some researchers or contexts, the rigid policies around obtaining informed consent as stipulated by funders, and which SOAS has aligned its policies to, can be considered challenging to achieve, or even, inappropriate. Researchers working in difficult, insecure or environments affected by conflict may argue that research participants do not always wish to provide written consent because of security fears, political or other reasons. Anthropologists, on the other hand, may retort that it can be particularly challenging to obtain consent a priori in an ethnographic context, especially if the researcher is an 'outsider' who strives to build trust with their informants/interlocutors.

While these challenges are acknowledged, it is still possible to demonstrate compliance with funder guidelines and expectations when asked to do so during or after the completion of their research. Funders do allow for exceptions, such as situations in which written consent may not be reasonable given the circumstances. The EU Horizon 2020 scheme, for instance, provides a "Guidance note on Research on refugees, asylum seekers & migrants", which explicitly refers to the case where written consent cannot be obtained for very good reasons, providing alternative strategies. Moreover, many funders appear to recognise the necessity for culturally and context-sensitive approaches to obtaining consent, although this is not usually elaborated further.

Where signatures cannot be obtained, a verbal (recorded) consent can suffice. While recording consent has other challenges, it is possible to make small adaptations in how consent is requested in different contexts using a recorder to capture the consent-giving properly and switching it off thereafter. In the case where neither written nor voice-recorded consent is feasible, keeping a thorough and detailed account of the interviews (participant, content, setting) and how data confidentiality was preserved is essential. However, it is important that the institutional ethics committee be a priori informed and approve of such alternative courses of action in exceptional cases that may require it.

From an ethical and decolonial standpoint it is equally important for researchers to ensure that they obtain consent from participants in ways that are understandable to them. Researchers may need to use local languages or other appropriate mediums to communicate this information. While asking for consent in local languages may not always be explicitly stipulated in all funding guidelines, the definition of informed consent is such that no informed consent can be considered valid if participants do not comprehend the language or the terminology (e.g. when using too much legal jargon). It is important to provide clear and simple explanations alongside concepts and regulations, especially if these are specific to the UK/EU context and which local research participants are not expected to be aware of. In other words, the manner and delivery itself will always need to be clear, readily understandable and free from terminology that may have the propensity to confuse.

▷ VIDEO: Working with research participants

Case Study 1

You are a PhD student at SOAS and you have just returned from your fieldwork. Your research was funded by a UK-based funder who has detailed explicit expectations about participant consent. However, you did not pay attention to these guidelines before leaving for fieldwork. In the field, you used a consent form that did not explain well how you would manage the data collected from the research participants, future dissemination and issues of attribution of published output. However, you explained these matters nonetheless because you found out that your participants expected you to cover these issues. In effect, you followed the funder guidelines, but you have no reasonable way of demonstrating this because you did not include this in your consent form and you did not record the interviews and you asking consent from your participants. What do you do?

Suggestions

Such cases are not uncommon and more students and researchers may find themselves in such difficult situations as funders become more rigid with their guidelines. The example shows that it is important to read carefully all funding and institutional requirements and ensure that proactive steps are undertaken to meet those. In this case, the student should have prepared a more complete consent form and could have taken additional steps to record their interactions with the research participants. The consent form template suggested by SOAS is a useful resource to use for anyone undertaking research with a SOAS affiliation (page 18 in the SOAS Code of Practice for SOAS staff and students: Using Personal Data in Research).

Additional resources

ESRC Core Ethical Principles in Research
ESRC Research with vulnerable people
ESRC Working with disabled young people
ESRC Anonymity and consent in research with asylum seekers

4. Dealing with data

If an area of research is not deemed ethical or legal domestically, this does not mean that it can occur elsewhere. Many of the current data regulations, such as the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) in the UK, revolve around the collection, use and attribution of data shared by research participants. Moreover, transferring data back to the UK/Europe is subject to legal requirements about data management in this governance framework.

In the process of obtaining consent, researchers are required by funders to provide their research participants with a full understanding of how data will be used, stored, managed and disseminated. SOAS policies and procedural frameworks for dealing with personal data in research have been generally aligned to these regulations and priorities, and it is important for SOAS students and researchers to familiarise themselves well with these guidelines.

Questions that need to be considered:

- Who will have ownership of the data?
- How will the data be stored and secured?
- Where and how will the data/research be presented and disseminated?
- Is there any expectation that local informants will be acknowledged in any written/produced material?
- How can data be made available so that other researchers can benefit from it?
- How can the data or main research findings/insights be communicated to local communities, where this is desirable and helpful?
- What are the implications for sharing data with the local community?

There is no doubt that the attention given to data management in recent years reflects the UK/EU regulatory climate and lessons learned from failures to protect data effectively in these contexts. However, data privacy regulations are not a strictly European phenomenon. India, Brazil and Nigeria are some of the countries that have set their own data protection laws/regulations, which in some ways resemble UK/EU regulations, but are also different and context-specific. A researcher operating in these and other foreign countries must be proactive at the level of research design to ensure that data collected in fieldwork will be in line with local provisions. They also need to ascertain that data can be transferred out of their jurisdiction and to know what the lawful local procedures may be to achieve this.

Being reflexive and decolonial in research requires suspending patronising views that foreign societies do not have laws or that their laws are looser than the UK's. It is also important not to think that one is exempt from local laws only because one is from the UK or another European country. There have been cases with UK-based researchers who faced legal trouble with local governments for failing to abide by local laws.

Researchers also need to carefully consider the implications of dealing with special category data and how these can be protected or managed during and after the research has been completed. Additionally, many researchers propose to establish, for example, websites through which they will be disseminating their research progress, key findings or other materials. They may propose to establish these websites under the aegis of SOAS. This requires, however, serious consideration of how the online dissemination of data complies with the requirements of current data protection regulations. From a funder perspective, researchers need to consider the following:

- Where the hosting of the website is;
- Having an up-to-date and data protection compliant privacy notice;
- Ensuring that any research data utilised via this medium accords with the informed consent procedures and documentation.

Oftentimes researchers wish to share data and documentation collected in fieldwork for which consent was not obtained (e.g. photos of landscapes that include, however, unsuspected human individuals), but it is important to consider the ethical issues behind the use and dissemination of such material. Has the researcher thought of possible repercussions that sharing images of people could have for them? It is important to consider that even when the intention is not to objectify or endanger participants, colonial hierarchies in scientific knowledge production and the safety risks that online exposure entails can result in unintended consequences.

▷ VIDEO: Working with Data

Case Study 2

You are a researcher based at a UK institution. You are conducting research on security narratives in Sudan in partnership with researchers in Khartoum. You have managed to obtain access to some data from the African Union on security news in Sudan over the period you study. The African Union representative shares the data with you because you have established relations of trust, but when you decide to publish the data set, you realise that they do not take ownership of the data and direct you to one of the UN bodies to seek formal permission. The UN body is not very helpful either and you end up in a stalemate where you cannot proceed with research publication. What do you do?

Suggestions

This is a tricky situation, especially since this is sensitive security-related data that could impact on the local population in predictable or unpredictable ways. You need to obtain permission to distribute any data you are given that does not belong to you. If you exhaust all the means you have and find that nobody claims the data, you may consider making the data available on the basis of an appropriate copyright agreement that specifies how these may be used in consideration of safety concerns. Your university could mediate that process. Regardless of the actions you take, it is important to take all the necessary steps to ensure that you have permission to distribute or a rationale as to why permission is impossible to obtain.

Additional resources

ESRC Enabling data deposit
ESRC Data sharing and informants' safety
ESRC Ensuring data confidentiality
ESRC Difficulties in depositing data
NCRM Managing anonymity and confidentiality in social research: the case of visual data in community research
The Sheffield Institute for International Development: Research Ethics

5. Hiring research assistants and other research personnel

Researchers working in foreign contexts will often need to hire local research assistants (RAs) to support them in some tasks, such as translators, transcribers or minute-takers. However, hiring and engaging with local research personnel can raise numerous ethical and practical issues that need to be considered proactively.

Funders have increasingly stressed transparent and collaborative partnerships between UK-based principal investigators and co-investigators in international research. However, less emphasis has been placed on research assistants and personnel in consideration to the informal structures and norms that have typically governed relationships between foreign researchers and local research assistants. UK-based researchers need to consider carefully how they engage with assistants at all stages, recognising the asymmetries and lack of transparency that often governs these relationships.

In some cases, researchers may not treat local research assistants with the same courtesy and acknowledgment that they would give peers in their own universities. For example, RAs may not be properly recognised for their work or may not be paid at the standard fees. On the other hand, hiring RAs can come with challenges that researchers need to be able to respond to. An RA may fail to fulfil the expectations of the role as agreed with the researcher, may not deliver according to expectations, or may even create problems for researchers due to uncooperativeness. More importantly, they might intentionally or unintentionally act as a 'gatekeeper', directing and biasing the research if the principal investigators who hire them do not consider carefully the assistants' position/identity in the local society, their relationship to the community of research and their understanding of the research and its objectives. Some RAs may even feel that the research does not make sense in the local context, failing to be supportive in the ways that is anticipated.

UK-based researchers who conduct fieldwork abroad need to follow good practices when hiring research personnel. They need to be transparent with assistants and to communicate to them the research project and the terms of the employment explicitly. Such agreements need to cover attribution of work, payments, deadlines and other such important issues. In order to determine appropriate payment rates, researchers are advised to consult with their local partners, local universities or partners they affiliate with and other researchers at SOAS who have research experience in the same context. Agreements made with RAs should be recorded in some form, such as by writing down a summary of the conversation and sharing this by email, ensuring that the other party endorses it.

From a decolonial perspective, it is also important to consider proactively the identities of the research personnel and to hire appropriately. Whether researchers are locals or foreigners will beget different strengths and limitations for the research. For instance, if all team members are UK-based, research may not be accepted locally. On the other hand, an RA recruited locally may be known to research participants and may be perceived antagonistically as a result of their tribal, kin, caste or other affiliations within local power hierarchies, resulting in research participants refusing to participate, giving misguided information or not divulging their genuine opinions. For instance, a foreign, but culturally-sensitive female researcher may be able to gain more trust with local women, contrary to a local female researcher if the latter happens to be affiliated with an ethnic, political or other group that is perceived suspiciously by local women. In any case, the information given to each will differ and this needs to be accounted in any evaluation of data collected.

Hiring early-career researchers in research projects

There are instances where academics at SOAS receive funding to cover a new PhD or postdoctoral role, which can raise similar ethical issues. Researchers should discuss transparently the expectations for the role and how much flexibility there is with the topic, how their contribution will be acknowledged and whether they will have an opportunity to publish peer-reviewed papers or other outputs (e.g. a book chapter). Often, PhD students and postdoctoral researchers may support the editing or writing of journal articles and other working papers, but their contribution may not be acknowledged as such or in full. It is advisable for senior researchers to specify ab initio the terms of the role, the outputs and the potential of career growth for the candidate. These expectations should be part of the contractual agreement.

VIDEO: Woking with local research assistants

Case Study 3

You are a senior academic at SOAS and you have just recruited for a PhD role as part of a large-scale research project. Your PhD student has played a key role in the preparation of a monograph resulting from the research project and you have agreed to acknowledge them as co-authors of the book. However, when you send the book proposal to a relevant publisher, they have doubts about the credentials of the PhD student and fear that the book will not be marketable. They suggest that you find another co-author. What do you do?

Suggestions

It is only ethical to keep one’s agreements, including those that are made with PhD students. It would be academic dishonesty to not acknowledge their work if they have contributed, but it would also propagate existing hierarchies between established and early-career researchers and the more informal norms that discourage egalitarian partnerships between the two. In this case, the researcher in question should negotiate with the publisher and help them to see that they are bound to acknowledge their PhD student because this is the right thing to do by academics committed to ethical research in line with funder expectations (citing their emphasis on equitable collaboration and transparency).

Additional resources

The Role of Research Assistants in Qualitative and Cross-Cultural Social Science Research by Sara Stevano and Kevin Deane

6. Working with local partners

Most funders nowadays recognise the existence of power hierarchies between researchers and local research partners and the possible implications for the research, especially when the researcher is from Euro-America but works in post-colonial contexts. For example, the GCRF and Newton Fund make explicit stipulations that funded research projects should promote and be governed by egalitarian partnerships. Very little attention though has been given to what this means practically and how UK-based researchers can achieve such egalitarian partnerships, especially where differences in infrastructure and capacity as well as post-colonial power dynamics tend to favour the UK-based PI.

For many of these calls, eligibility criteria stipulate that PIs need to be based at a UK institution or organisation (marked exceptions exist, such as the GCRF Global Engagement calls) with partners from low- and middle-income countries receiving fewer opportunities to lead collaborative projects. As a result of these structural factors, it is often the case that the UK-based PI has most of the decision-making power regarding the project design and its implementation and receives most of the credit for the work achieved, even when the contribution of the local partner is as important or crucial. The material power that the lead has can trickle down to other aspects of the collaborative research, such as Intellectual Property (IP) rights for outputs produced or publication rights.

Figure 1: Systemic barriers to egalitarian partnerships

Source: UKRI, ‘Promoting Equitable and Fair Research Partnerships’, p. 8. (courtesy of UKRI)

SOAS researchers are encouraged to communicate the expectations and the parameters of their research project to their research partners in a timely and transparent fashion and to provide local partners with the opportunities to co-design the research. In their commitment to be inclusive and thoughtful toward their partners, some researchers may need/want to translate contracts for partners in local societies. Partners may become defensive and suspicious if such a translation is not provided. However, funders do not generally cover expenses incurred at the stage of project development, which would include facilitating communication and collaboration between different partners. In that case, SOAS researchers will need to invest money and time for translating contracts.

Researchers will have to consider:

- How to fund this translation;
- Incorporate in the project development timeline the time spent on translation;
- Identify who could do this work credibly so that it would be accepted by partners.

Moreover, funders increasingly expect that researchers ascertain their local partners' adherence to standards of due diligence and policies regarding engagement with human research participants, working with personal data, etc. SOAS researchers will have to think how they can monitor and demonstrate that their international partners are reflexive and ethical about their research practices. This can beget challenges in view of UK-based researchers' sensitive position in foreign societies. Local partners may argue that they know better the local context and insist on going through informal norms/ways, which may be a more culture-sensitive manner but not necessarily how the funders expect things to be done. SOAS researchers will need to be prepared to navigate this complex field and respond reasonably and humbly, without abandoning their commitments to both funders and their local partners.

▷ VIDEO: Working with local partners

Case Study 4

You just found out about a possible collaborative grant and you would like to involve partners from three different countries in Africa. You decide to approach the prospective partners, who all find the idea good and are supportive. You proceed to develop a proposal and you develop a budget according to what you think can be justified, following funder guidelines. You confirm quickly with partners by sharing the proposal (including the budget), asking if they have any objections. None raises objections. The proposal is successful, you begin project activities soon after, but you find out that some partners do not agree with the salaries you have allocated to them. What do you do?

Suggestions

This is a situation that can arise in collaborative projects even if PIs are transparent about their project proposal with partners. Since many proposals are finalised within short periods of time (which should be avoided as a practice), local partners may not be given sufficient time to engage with the proposal. It is important that budget details be brought to their attention and that specific rates and time commitments be discussed thoroughly. While researchers may need to negotiate at this stage, being proactive in this manner will avoid issues at a later stage. From a funder's perspective, salaries for partners abroad need to be justified according to local standards (e.g. what national research councils would normally pay researchers). While this can be difficult to establish where equivalent funding infrastructure is not in place, there are other valid ways to demonstrate locally appropriate salaries (e.g. asking to see a typical academic contract for the level of expertise hired into the project).

Additional resources

ESRC International co-investigator policy guidance
UKRI Promoting Fair and Equitable Research Partnerships to Respond to Global Challenges
UKCDS Building Partnerships of Equals: The role of funders in equitable and effective international development collaborations

7. Concluding remarks

Reconciling local particularities with funding and institutional guidelines

SOAS researchers should always be mindful of funder guidelines and terms if they wish to obtain research funding successfully and to avoid facing compliance or other issues during or after the completion of the project. Failure to adhere to these guidelines may cause contractual disputes to arise or, at worst, lead to funding being terminated. However, it is worth observing that funder guidelines remain grounded in an industrialised society framework that they are most immediately affected by, which will not generally capture the particularities of societies and contexts beyond their remit. As the previous sections suggested, funders generally recognise these differences and commit to the promotion of egalitarian research partnerships that consider local contexts, which means that there is some flexibility to navigate these tensions and achieving compliance in ways that are culture-specific. To a large extent, demonstrating this will depend on the researchers' ability to ground the presentation of the research project in an intimate understanding of the local context that effectively communicates to the funder why the approaches suggested are the most or only suitable for the given context.

Treating ethical reflection as a process

As outlined in the previous sections, showing ethical reflexivity in research is crucial and this should be practised throughout the entire process of project development, administration, implementation and publication. Ethical reflection should not be a one-off event, but a reiterative and dynamic process, inspired by a commitment to be humble, respectful and helpful in ways that make sense to local partners and communities, especially when this research takes place in post-colonial contexts. Conceptualising ethical reflexivity as an attitude that needs to be cultivated constantly is a starting point for researchers to achieve a more effective, locally grounded and engaging research practice. It will help to avoid and to minimise proactively issues that may arise in the research, as well as demonstrate to funders the researcher's substantive commitment to ethical research.

▷ VIDEO: Concluding remarks