

Queensland Human Research Ethics Training Conference
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‘Nothing About Us Without Us’

**Assessing human research ethics applications involving cross-cultural research: A Lay Person’s
Perspective**

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With thanks to all who have guided me on this journey

Guiding Principles

"Who is Wise? One who learns from all people. Who is honoured? One who honours everyone." -Ben Zoma, Pirke Avot 4:1



Diwali icon symbolizing unity in diversity

What I aim to cover

- Setting the scene:
 - The what, who, how and why of cross-cultural research
 - What do we have to guide us
- Suggested considerations for assessing cross-cultural research applications.
- These suggestions are from the perspective of my being one of the lay persons on UQ's HREC 'A'.

The what and who of cross-cultural research

- Cross-cultural researchers examine differences **and** similarities between different groups, within their own societies or across societies.
- Contemporary cross-cultural research is done by (among others):
 - Epidemiologists
 - Social scientists
 - Natural scientists
 - Humanity scholars
 - Market researchers

The how and why of cross-cultural research

- The methods used depend on the discipline and the aim of the research. Typically, cross-cultural (worldwide comparative) researchers ask three kinds of questions.
 1. The first is descriptive and deals with the prevalence or frequency of a trait or pattern of behaviour in diverse groups
 2. A second kind of question considers the causes of a trait or pattern of behaviour
 3. The third kind of question explores the consequences or effects of a particular trait or pattern of behaviour.
- There is potential for bias in all three, but particularly in the second.
- The reasons for engaging in cross-cultural research include:
 - academic interest in understanding the attitudes and behaviour of diverse groups
 - improving interventions and service delivery for diverse groups
 - making workplaces more inclusive and productive
 - improving ways of doing business and expanding markets for goods and services

What do I have to guide me?

- *The National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research*
 - *Values and principles of ethical conduct*
 - *People in other countries (under review)*
- *Ethical conduct in research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and communities: Guidelines for researchers and stakeholders 2018*
- Academic discourses on difference
- Policy papers and reports from government and nongovernment agencies
- Information from lay people (anecdotal information).

Considerations for assessing applications

Research merit and integrity

- How does the researcher define culture? Is it limited to a few elements or does the researcher acknowledge culture is the total way of life of a group comprising:
 - Language
 - Religions
 - Food, clothing
 - Art, architecture, literature, sport and music
 - Legal system
 - Political systems/Government
 - Education
 - Economic system/s
- Does the researcher acknowledge everyone has at least one cultural and ethnic affiliation? It is incorrect to label specific groups as 'ethnic' or 'cultural groups'.
- It is the **society** which is multicultural not specific groups.
- Does the researcher acknowledge cultures are not static? Studies proposed for a point in time may need to consider the historical context of whatever is the subject of the research.

Considerations for assessing applications

Research merit and integrity

Conceptual frameworks

- How does the researcher conceptualize difference?
- Historically, many cross-cultural researchers used a binary model based on simple oppositions (e.g. First World/Third World, Western/Eastern, developed/developing, modern/traditional, individualistic/collectivist) to illustrate differences
- The binary model has been critiqued on the grounds that it:
 - Narrows our ability to determine the scope of a problem and locks us into one perspective
 - Leads us to believe societies/communities are homogenous
 - Blinds us to complexities and contradictions within communities and societies
 - Can lead to false comparisons/false dichotomies
 - Entrenches the status quo and posits one group is inferior to another (deficit model) and
 - Creates barriers between groups of people (culture conflict model).
- Does the researcher propose any alternatives?

Considerations for assessing applications

Research merit and integrity

Terminology

- What's the terminology used to define and distinguish different groups?
 - Openly pejorative e.g. First World/Third World
 - Potentially pejorative e.g. Modern/Traditional, ethnic/cultural groups
 - Socially constructed categories presented as biological reality e.g. black and white
 - Confusing or too broad: culturally and linguistically diverse, Western
- Acceptable exemptions: when used to study political movements, e.g. 'Black lives matter'.

Considerations for assessing applications

Research merit and integrity

- **Methodology:** how are differences in language and cultural constructions of reality to be resolved?
 - Use of family members and/or friends as interpreters: not ethical unless totally unavoidable
 - Use of generic interpreters and translators: is it always sufficient?
 - Google Translate is OK for a few phrases but not for longer and more complex documents.
- **Research team:** who's in it and what's their role?
 - Cultural appropriation: who speaks for whom?
 - Are researchers who are not from the dominant culture tagged as professionals or cultural expert or both?
- **Literature review:** how well does it reflect different views, particularly those which contest dominant culture views?
- **Dissemination:** what's the plan when the language of the researcher/s differs from the language/s of the subjects of research?

Considerations for assessing applications

Justice and beneficence

- Recruitment of participants:
 - Is reluctance to participate due to 'culture' or other factors?
- Exploitation of participants from low socio-economic backgrounds:

'Globalization has further aggravated poor people's vulnerability by exposing them to international markets. Since the developing countries are [the] abode of higher population of the poor they have become the unholy mines of this human ore for researchers...in view of the poor's inherent and extreme vulnerability and the failure of ethical pronouncements to protect them from misuse and exploitation, they should be excluded from being enrolled as research subjects.' (Kishore, 2006)
- Exclusion may lead to them missing out on various fronts. A good system of checks and balances is better.

Considerations for assessing applications

Respect

We need to consider:

- Cultural relativism: how do we treat practices that are inconsistent with human rights and the prevalent legal systems:
 - Within Australia
 - In other countries
- Cultural reductionism: when 'culture' is used to obscure systemic barriers
- Privacy and confidentiality: different legislation, different values
- Decision making ability: what do we do when there are language or other differences?

Resolution not retribution

'An eye for an eye would leave the whole world blind' Mahatma Gandhi

Some suggestions:

- Active participation: Nothing about us without us
- Use collective names preferred by participants(e.g. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders/Indigenous/Fourth World/First Nations)
- Be specific: instead of using a generalised term like 'developing/developed', 'Global South/ Global North', name the country or countries
- Don't use terms like traditional and modern which lend to stereotypes
- Use frameworks that capture complexity and constructive approaches:
 - Strengths-based rather than deficit: this is not a Pollyanna approach but highlights strengths that may be drawn on to address issues that violate human rights or other issues
 - Cultural negotiation rather than culture conflict
- Respect culture-specific data collection methods, e.g. yarning in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander research.

Questions?



Photo by Emily Morter on Unsplash

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