

Author's Commentary on "Challenges in Obtaining Informed Consent: The Case of Forest Resources in Zigiwan"

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Social science researchers have an obligation to protect research participants. While most researchers hold this as a central tenet of their research, it is by no means a straightforward process. This case study highlights two aspects of conducting ethical research — obtaining informed voluntary consent and evaluating the costs and benefits of research. Both are challenging endeavors considering how social science research navigates a sea of multiple interests and meanings relating to both informed consent and cost/benefit analyses.

Dr. Clark, like many researchers, is affiliated with multiple institutions (e.g. IFSN, the university) and conducts research within many different cultural contexts. While her university's review board (IRB) may grant alternate informed consent considering her concerns, IFSN's consent process may have little to do with ethics. Indeed, IFSN's primary concern may involve issues of litigation rather than ethical considerations.

What if IFSN agrees to follow the decision of Dr. Clark's university IRB to grant an alternate form of consent (e.g. verbal)? How should Dr. Clark go about drafting this considering appropriate forms vary depending on different contexts? For example, it may be more appropriate to use verbal consent when literacy rates among participants are very low.

It also is important to evaluate the positionality (i.e. cultural viewpoint) of all people involved with the study. For example, how does Dr. Clark's positionality (e.g. status as a Ph.D. researcher, woman, etc.) affect how she evaluates and interprets what constitutes informed consent? How might this be different from how Zigiwaians conceptualize informed consent? How might positionality (e.g. social class, race, etc.) among Zigiwaians affect interpretations of informed consent? For example,

does an “educated” city dweller conceptualize consent different from a “non-educated” rural dweller? How should Dr. Clark approach informed consent considering these differences?

Whether or not Dr. Clark proceeds with signed consent or some other form of consent, she also will need to conduct a cost/benefit analysis. This includes evaluating the potential costs and benefits of her research on individual community members as well as the community as a whole. Unfortunately, this is not a clear-cut process. For example, how should Dr. Clark weigh costs and benefits between individuals and the community as a whole? Is it ethical potentially to compromise the safety of a few community members (e.g. by having signed consent forms and asking about illicit timber harvesting activities) for the potential benefit of the community as a whole?

Complicating the cost/benefit analysis further, there are many variables that cannot be clearly determined. For example, after conducting a cost/benefit analysis Dr. Clark may decide to move ahead with her research because she thinks its benefits outweigh the costs. In doing so, she is confident her research can strengthen IFSN's agro-forestry program. She cannot, however, guarantee that the results and recommendations derived from her research will be implemented or even considered. Should Dr. Clark take this into account when evaluating the costs and benefits of conducting the research considering these factors are out of her control?

While this case study highlights ethical considerations of informed consent in an international context, it illustrates ethical concerns that affect all social science research. Informed consent and cost/benefit analyses are central tenets of the research process, and we need to take them seriously. While there is no straightforward process of determining the best course of action, we can remain committed to protecting the rights of research participants by anticipating and evaluating as many factors as our faculties allow. Only then can we be assured that we are doing everything in our power to meet the needs of the very people social scientists are committed to helping.

References

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