

Author's Commentary on "Ethical Issues in International Educational Research"

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Ethical Issues in International Educational Research

This case raises a number of issues concerning the challenges of conducting research in an international setting where cultural factors have the potential to interfere with the requirements of ethical research as desired and required from the home country. I will comment on the issues of informed voluntary consent and respect for persons.

Informed voluntary consent is critical to conducting ethical research, and this case compromised informed voluntary consent due to inequality of power. The head teacher exercises considerable power over the teachers, and his insistence that the teachers participate interferes with their right to volunteer for the study or not. While there are three elements of consent, information, comprehension, and voluntary, the head teacher would like to bypass all three of these elements. When Dr. Sheridan attempts to share information that would provide teachers with information about the study, the head teacher lets her know this is not necessary at all since the all the teachers will be participating. The head teacher interferes with the teachers' rights to volunteer and also interferes with their right to comprehension. By not allowing a discussion of participation and just stating that they will all participate, Mr. Konadu hinders their ability to ask questions about the study so that they would be able to offer informed consent for participation. Mr. Konadu's actions also violate the element of voluntary participation, which means free of coercion and undue influence, by insisting they all participate.

In examining respect for persons, it is important to examine the nature of relationships in the research process. Due to the power and authority in the relationships in this case, respect for persons is challenged on multiple levels. While it is important to avoid coercion, the researcher is in an ethical quandary. The support offered by both the district director of education and the head teacher is

essential to the study, but this support stands to coerce participation in the study and compromise the study. Participants have the right to agree to participate or not agree to participate, and the strong armed support by administrators seeks to take this right to choose away from the participants. The power dynamic at work is a boss-employee relationship for the head teacher and the district director of education as well as for Mr. Konadu and the teachers. This not so subtle pressure from the district director of education has led to outright pressure by the head teacher to force the teachers to participate in the project.

Respect for persons clearly means that you cannot coerce participation. It also means that participants should not be unduly influenced by other people. This is the difficult part of this case. Although Dr. Sheridan is not coercing the participants, they have indeed been coerced into participating in the study. This is a challenge for Dr. Sheridan. Should she proceed with the study knowing that the participants were coerced into participating? What if the participants would have participated anyway?

Since the coercion seems to come from two levels, Dr. Sheridan may have to address these issues at the school level and at the district level. Due to cultural norms, it would not be appropriate for Dr. Sheridan to disagree with Mr. Konadu in front of the teachers. Since she is female, and he is male, she is expected to defer to him. It is at this point that she must excuse herself and have this conversation with Mr. Konadu in a delicate manner so that he can save face, and she can let him know of her institutional and ethical responsibilities. Perhaps in this smaller setting, she can assure him of her appreciation and willingness to have all of his teachers participate, but she can share the institutional paperwork which requires voluntary participation.

If Dr. Sheridan is unable to convince Mr. Konadu to allow the teachers to choose to participate, what should she do? She could leave the site and go to a different district where she also has permission to complete the study. What if she had no other areas to conduct the study? If she went ahead and completed the study at this site, she could speak with the teachers individually to gain consent, but it would be possible that some of the teachers would still be influenced by Mr. Konadu's insistence that they participate. Perhaps, she could continue the study, but she would need to document this coercion.

Dr. Sheridan would also need to meet with the district director of education to discuss his role in coercion of teachers to participate. She will need to meet with the

district director of education and convey her appreciation for his support of her work in the district while also describing the requirements for her study as outlined by her institution. During this discussion, Dr. Sheridan must explain the concepts of informed consent and voluntary participation as well as her ethical responsibility to these principles in her study. If the district director of education does not agree to inform the head teachers that the teachers do have a right to participate or not to participate, Dr. Sheridan's entire study will be compromised, and she will have to decide whether or not she should proceed with the study in this district.