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CHAPTER IV

THE ETHICS OF RESEARCHING UNSTATED CONTEXTUAL KNOWLEDGE⁶

Kabini Sanga

The problem

The university research ethics enterprise from which all disciplines derive their research ethics regulations, conventions and instrumentations, is assumed to represent a grant theory of ethics. While not generally acknowledged, the university ethics enterprise, typically, represents a particular ethical system only⁷. In other words, the university research ethics enterprise is not based on a negotiated set of conventions that are derived from different ethical systems. Yet, university research ethics is often applied universally.

Consequentially, indigenous and non-western scholars who undertake certain kinds of research often find the research ethics processes to be culturally, professionally and personally painful. Moreover, indigenous communities who are often researched for *indigenous* knowledge, generally, get hurt by the cultural insensitivity of the university research ethics enterprise (see Nabobo-Baba, 2005; Smith, 1999).

In this chapter, I share three stories that demonstrate the *harm* caused to the researched in indigenous contexts when applying a research ethics enterprise which is assumed to be universal.⁸ These stories pose an

6 An earlier version of this chapter was delivered as a paper at the Global Forum on Bio-ethics in Research, Auckland, 2-5 December, 2008 by the author.

7 See Sanga (2010), where I discussed the underpinning foundational beliefs of Malaita ethical system.

8 Each of these stories is real. However, real names of people have not been used nor the names of the institutions have been disclosed.

immediate ethical challenge: How can we talk about research ethics and the unhappiness of the researched, all in the same breath? In exploring this immediate challenge, I propose a number of probing arguments to understand the nature of the *harm*, particularly, when unstated contextual knowledge is researched. I use the notion of university research ethics enterprise liberally to refer to the conceptualization, regulation and application of ethics in research.

Story 1: A Pacific Student's Contextual Knowledge

Sione is a scholarship student from a Pacific Islands country but is studying at a New Zealand university. For his research proposal, he proposed a study to be undertaken in his context, i.e., Pacific Islands. In his draft interview guide, while writing in English, Sione used metaphorical language and wrote in indirect and passive sentences, as he would speak within his cultural context where he planned to do his fieldwork.

In considering the research proposal, the university ethics committee did not agree with how Sione prepared his interview guide. The committee's response was expressed in the form of questions: *What are you talking about? Didn't you take the research methods course? Have you obtained advice from your supervisor?* Moreover, the committee advised: *Ask your interview questions directly. Learn to write in English in an academic setting.* The final outcome: The committee rejected Sione's research ethics application.

The university committee's feedback was devastating for the student. Sione was made to feel stupid. He was made to think that he did not have what it took to do quality research. He felt the weight of the committee's rejection of his cultural ways of communication. He was made to think that his indigenous knowledge was not valid at the university. After receiving the committee's response, Sione kept away. In fact, he deliberately *disappeared* from the campus. Little did the committee members know of the impact of their decision on the student.

Upon reflecting on the story above, I note that this was not a case wherein members of a university faculty were being socially insensitive to an international student. In my view, this was a more serious situation. This situation was a reflection of the university's inability to capture the social context of certain kinds of research knowledge.

Properly captured, appropriate contextual insights would have emerged from these considerations. Sione knew the knowledge holders in their tribal and community settings. As an indigenous researcher, he knew his position within the communities and relationships with the people he was to study. He was mindful of the protocols of communication and the contours of influence he had to account for, if he was to capture the knowledge he sought to investigate. These variables - the people, their relationships, the contours of influence and more, are what I call *unstated knowledge*. The university ethics committee had focussed entirely on Sione's proposal write-up. The committee had erred on a bias; an imbalanced scrutiny of the *stated knowledge* without any regard for its accompanying implicit, contextual *unstated knowledge*.

Story 2: Silence in Pacific Contexts

In a recent Pacific regional workshop, thirty-five or so senior public officers were participating from a number of countries. Among the group were men and women of societal status in their tribal and national contexts. For instance, there was a Fijian Ratu (chief), an Adi (Fijian chiefly lady), two Samoan Matai (chief), and a few Big men (equivalent of chiefs) from Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu. Within the specific public sectors contexts in their home country, all thirty-five were individuals of considerable societal standing and importance.

In one of the workshop sessions, a non-indigenous university researcher was making a presentation on a topic based on his consultancy work in a Pacific country. Soon after introducing his topic, the researcher organized a group task, requiring the participants to gather in their country groupings. He, then, gave the groups a number of questions and worksheets on which to record answers. After a given time, the groups were made to report on their discussions. At the end of reporting, the researcher then asked, *"Can I collect all worksheets please?"* There was complete silence; no response was offered by the participants. Five seconds later, the researcher proceeded with the instruction: *I will now collect all worksheets.* Again, there was silence - deafening silence. The researcher went on and picked up the worksheets. As he was doing so, some of the participants started to leave the room, in protest.

In this story, the *silence*, the deafening silence, is what I call *unstated knowledge*. Even with his scholarly knowledge and considerable experience, the researcher seemed unable to deal ethically with the silence. In the cultures of Pacific peoples, silence can mean anything from agreement to disagreement and to absolute disgust. Often, it is relational variables which, when mediated, will affect the particular meanings of silence at certain points in time. In this particular story, I was present and could tell that the silence was a message of absolute disgust.

Story 3: People and Relationships

In my home district in Malaita Island in the Solomon Islands, some present-day tensions and frictions between family and tribal groups over resources are due to a report which was written by an external university researcher based on the fieldwork that he had undertaken. The anthropologist researcher undertook the research about twenty years ago. Today, he is a senior university professor in his home country. In the meantime, villagers in my district are fighting with each other over questions of headship of certain resources. I had recently examined the report and noted with disgust that the researcher's respondents were all members of the same extended family. Little wonder, the researcher had incorrectly placed the headship of certain resources with this one extended family.

Again, in this particular story, the *unstated knowledge* is the people and their relationships. Whatever ethical procedures were used by the learned researcher seemed unable to capture the appropriate *unstated knowledge* in this case. Consequently, the negative resultant effects of the research report have continued as a source of conflict and strife for these tribal people in Malaita.

Questions

What is going on? Why is a university-derived conventional research ethics unable to be ethically applied when researching Pacific peoples? Moreover, how might *unstated knowledge* of Pacific peoples be ethically researched?

Arguments

In considering these questions, I explore four arguments, as follows⁹:

Firstly, as a human institution, the university (epitomized in New Zealand as Auckland or in Australia as ANU)¹⁰ seems to be the most powerful of all human institutions. It is from the university that research ideas, practices and protocols are obtained. All leaders of contemporary societies are educated in universities.¹¹ All researchers are university trained or influenced. The list goes on, but even with these few examples, the power of the university institution in modern society seems rather overwhelming.

From a "truth" perspective, however, the university is but a microcosm of human society. In Pacific contexts, other microcosms include the family, the church and indigenous cultures. Sadly, it is the lens of the university that has been emphasized in the search and research for truth. Particularly, in this day of Performance Based Research Funding (PBRF), the New Zealand university seems to be more about researching for money rather than searching for truth. Whatever the emphasis, the fact remains that over several hundred years, the university has been favoured; resulting in the neglect of a more encompassing macrocosm of human society.

Secondly, it then follows that conventional research ethics which takes its life from the university institution has failed in its ordering of knowledge and, consequently, of truth as embedded in the ordered knowledge. University research ethics normally highlights certain values (of informed consent, confidentiality, individual autonomy); casting these as universal value priorities when, in fact, these are merely products and priorities of particular communities. University ethics committees also err in their decisions in treating research procedures and practices as primary, particularly within diverse contexts, when these may actually be secondary matters.

9 None of these arguments are new. I have, however, reflected some of those put forward by Malik (1982).

10 The mentioned universities are as examples only and do not represent official rankings.

11 For instance, in Solomon Islands, five of the eight Prime Ministers the country has had to date, received their education in New Zealand universities. It is generally common for modern Pacific leaders to be educated in metropolitan universities.

Thirdly, the conventional research ethics enterprise does not commensurate with the *unstated knowledge* of Pacific and indigenous peoples. In its current framing, research ethics is unlikely to mutually embrace unstated or implicit knowledge. This is because the resultant incongruence is paradigmatic. I will make two quick comments to support this argument.

First, *unstated knowledge* is subjective, contextual and experienced. In interpreting silence, for instance, what does silence mean in particular contexts? How might an outsider researcher interpret silence in a Fiji situation where, according to Unaisi Nabobo-Baba, there exist nineteen different types of silences in Fijian culture (see Nabobo-Baba, 2006)? The point is this: Subjective knowledge cannot be ethically investigated through a research enterprise which assumes knowledge as paradigmatically objective (see Burrell & Morgan, 1972).¹²

Second, *unstated knowledge* is relational and social. In Malaita¹³, Solomon Islands, when a Kwaio person responds to a question with the word, 'amoe' or 'no' such an audible linguistic response is not the only meaning being communicated. Nor is the linguistic meaning the answer that is accorded prominence at a particular point in time. For Kwaio tribal people, it is the social relationships and contextual considerations that determine the precise meaning of 'amoe' or 'no' at a particular point in time. In fact, when used, 'amoe', it might mean 'yes', 'may be', 'not now' or 'who are you to dare ask me'. A point to make here is that 'yes' and 'no' are not the only answers to certain important knowledge questions. Instead, social relationships and social processes easily determine certain knowledge and how to access these ethically.

To restate, I argue that conventional research ethics does not commensurate with *unstated contextual knowledge* because of the paradigmatic inconsistencies between the ethics and *unstated knowledge* sought.

12 These authors conceptualized paradigms as distinct philosophical entities with competing assumptions.

13 My paternal heritage is Kwaio, one of the people groupings on the Island of Malaita in the Solomon Islands. I am, therefore, writing from my understandings as a member of this cultural group.

Fourthly, I shall take the argument further by suggesting that the conventional research ethics enterprise has been party to causing ontological murder of Pacific and indigenous peoples' knowledge systems. By applying an ethics enterprise which systematically marginalizes and ignores peoples' knowledge systems, research has contributed towards nullifying the realities of these peoples, albeit unintentionally. I call this, ontological murder.

I, therefore, ask: What enterprise is ethical if it is actually killing a group of people's ontology? From a truth perspective, the issue of ontological murder is gravely serious because when a community's ontology ceases to explicitly and legitimately exist, the community is denied of its epistemology. Consequently, without accepted valid knowledge, no research can be undertaken and no truth is there to be discovered.

Having painted a picture of an overwhelming challenge, facing those of us who are concerned about the ethical nature of research, it will be remiss of me to just stop here. I shall, therefore, attempt to suggest some way forward.

A Way Forward

It appears that Pacific and other indigenous communities are faced with a dilemma. On one hand, these communities can capture the conventional research ethics enterprise and work within and under its terms. On the other hand, Pacific and indigenous communities can compete with the conventional research ethics enterprise.

In relation to the first option, some positive actions are taking place, as ways of capturing the research enterprise. Some examples include the following: Pacific, indigenous and marginalized peoples are making incremental difference for themselves within the universities. Pacific and indigenous scholars are coming through universities, successfully as scholars. A cohort of Pacific and indigenous scholars are theorizing, using indigenous ideas, thereby, applying more appropriate research tools. With my own Pacific colleagues, we are involved in the development of Pacific frameworks for researching within Pacific contexts, including developing ways of undertaking research ethically within Pacific communities.

As promising as these actions might be, the issue at stake is much bigger. In other words, the strategy of capturing the research ethics enterprise is a short-term one which will only provide short term improvements. Much more is needed.

The second option is the one competing with the conventional research enterprise. In relation to this option, our own Pacific universities, such as the University of the South Pacific, or national universities such as University of Papua New Guinea or National University of Samoa, are caught flat-footed and are in no way to compete. In Aotearoa New Zealand, there are positive signs of the indigenous Maori *wananga*¹⁴ or universities, responding to Maori needs using ways that are consistent with Maori ontology and epistemology. Globally, there are indigenous and private universities and research institutions that have emerged with promise, along the lines of the Maori *wananga* university system in New Zealand.

The progress of the *wananga* and indigenous universities must be acknowledged and supported. However, the challenge of 'going one's own way' separately from the conventional university is much bigger. It is also probable that the global army of scholars will not allow the *wananga*-like universities of indigenous peoples to compete quietly with the conventional university. The strategy of 'going one's own' is potentially constraining. We, therefore, pick our fights and do so smartly.

14 In Aotearoa New Zealand, there are three successful Indigenous Maori universities, called *wananga*, which were initiated by Maori, for Maori, but are open to all the others.

Conclusion

As ethics is the subject of this discussion, I now turn to ethics in order to suggest a strategy for the future.

There are two aspects of ethics¹⁵. First, ethics involves a discernment of right from wrong, good from evil and the ethical from the unethical. Second, ethics requires a commitment and courage to do what is right, good and virtuous and to refrain from doing wrong, being bad and being unethical.

In Pacific societies, there is no lack of discernment. Instead, there are many people who know what is right, wrong or unethical. The priority need in Pacific societies is for commitment and courage by Pacific Islanders to do the ethical thing.

As an opportunity for demonstrating courage, I make this suggestion as a long term strategy for dealing with the issues raised in my discussion. My recommended strategy is for people and research institutions to combine forces with each other and establish a working but workable committee, comprising mainly of indigenous scholars, to examine closely the issues raised. This committee can also be tasked with suggesting ways of dealing with the issues so that in future, all research ethics are ethically executed for the happiness of Pacific and indigenous peoples.

15 Based on Professor Keith Walker's teaching notes from 1995.

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