Ethical Guidelines for Research into Disaster Interventions and Humanitarian Aid

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Introduction

Values are principles that are shared by people and reflect their belief systems. Ethics are regulatory codes or contextualised principles that guide behaviour, and hence are both locality-specific and culturally relevant. By codifying principles, ethical codes turn values into norms that are used to judge behaviour. While all countries have guidelines about what constitutes acceptable behaviour in general in their societies, not all countries have codified their values and principles into ethical codes that underpin professional behaviour. This holds for research in many countries, and ethical codes covering researchers are lacking. It is crucial to ascertain the situation that applies wherever you have chosen to do research or work with people. Ethical principles become codified into a code of ethics that identifies acceptable behaviour, outlines the procedures used to deal with allegations of misconduct, and specifies the sanctions that will apply in the event of a proven breach. Codes of ethics are, therefore, regulatory mechanisms.

Many professional codes of ethics are applicable within countries rather than between them. One profession which tried to develop more general guidelines that could travel across country borders is social work, and available on the websites of the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) (www.iassw-aiets.org) and the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) (www.ifsw.org) which agreed a joint ethics document in 2004. Professional ethics are regularly reviewed and amended. IASSW and IFSW are currently reviewing their ethics document.

Ethical dilemmas arise when one principle contradicts another, making it difficult to decide priorities and the appropriate course of action. Researchers may be required publicly to justify the decisions made, including in a court of law, so the basis on which the decisions were made should be clear and defensible. For example, the principle of 'causing no harm' may contradict that of 'confidentiality' if a researcher uncovers information that exposes a source that could potentially cause harm in the future or has done so in the past and the researcher has to weigh the facts and decide what to do. A conflict of interest occurs when an individual has information and/or resources that give them an unfair advantage in a particular situation or might affect the impartiality of their judgment so that decisions are taken in a way that would favour themselves or people they know.

Principles for Acting Ethically in Research

If you are involved in a situation that does not have an existing code of ethics, you may find the following principles and questions helpful in ensuring that you act ethically.

Causing no harm. This principle aims to ensure fairness, safety and empowerment. It lies at the heart of professional behaviour and seeks to contain the potential that the researcher has to disadvantage, upset and/or endanger those involved in the research process at whatever point. It is also holistic because it situates the person in their socio-economic, political, cultural and physical environments. Understanding how power relations are enacted in research is important to ensuring that participants are empowered and fully engaged in what happens. Social work research has the added dimension of being committed to enhancing people's well-being and improving the quality of life and the services that people receive. They are required by their professional code of ethics to report anyone who has caused or is likely to cause harm to themselves or others in the future.

Are your actions harming any person or the environment? What information should you pass on to other people including the participants about the research project if you are to avoid panic? Who should decide this issue? Who would you go to for advice in solving ethical dilemmas that might arise?

Treating people with respect and dignity. Being respectful is not simply about saying the correct words. It is about the nature of the relationship that you establish with people and how you interact with them. This raises important process issues including the recognition of the agency of the person(s) you are working with, and their right to information. It includes acting with integrity and honesty, and requires that you maintain people's rights and uphold social justice. Anonymity is essential in protecting people who have given you information and so removing personal identifiers from the data collected is an important part of the research process and is part of treating the person and the information they provide with respect.

Are you abusing your power? Are you taking advantage of other people's vulnerabilities? Who benefits from your work? If it is primarily for your benefit and not that of the people you are working with, you should ask yourself what you are doing even being there.

Acting ethically. Having a code of ethics can help you guide your work. For social work researchers and practitioners, these have a moral component. These codes are also varied and differ according to country. For example, there is no national ethical code for social workers India, but each large city has one. In the UK, social workers generally use the ethical code formulated by the British Association of Social Workers (BASW) and that of the regulatory authority. The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) in the USA has developed the regulatory code for social work followed in that country. Observing the rights of the people you are working with and the law that applies is an important element in ethical behaviour. Such considerations are particularly important when exercising your professional discretion. This includes that of determining at what point to involve service users/local residents in the research. Ideally, they should be involved from the beginning of the process – when the research questions and design are being formulated; to the end including the analysis, writing up and dissemination of the findings.

Are you behaving according to the code of professional ethics that applies to you and any additional ones that are relevant to the specific locality? What criteria did you use to determine who should be trained to engage fully in research activities? How did you demonstrate that you valued the time research participants spent in the research including the data collection process?

Maintaining confidentiality. Confidentiality is important to maintain, and the limits to which this confidentiality exists should be clarified at the outset, e.g., before beginning an interview. This makes it *contingent* confidentiality. If a practitioner, you will have to report a threat of harm to oneself or others. Thus, it is crucial that you inform research participants about this and know to whom you should refer such individuals if this situation were to arise.

What are the limits to confidentiality? Have you explained these to the people you are researching and/or working with? How will you ensure anonymity, especially if the sample is small, or the research site is one where people know each other quite well? How will the data be collected and stored to ensure that anonymity and confidentiality are always maintained?

Informed consent. Getting people to volunteer when they have been fully informed about the research and the consequences that follow from it – its motives and rationale; data collection methods; use of the data; and safe storage of the data, is an important dimension in the research process. It is crucial that obtaining informed consent is not seen as a one-off process, but one that is constantly being affirmed throughout the research process. Research participants should also be assured that there is no penalty incurred if they decide to withdraw their consent and that they may do so at any point in the research process.

Have you explained the proposed research and given the potential participant the opportunity to ask questions to ensure that they are fully informed? Have you checked that the research participant wishes to continue with their involvement on a regular basis? If they withdraw, have you assured them that it does not matter and they will not be penalised for doing so? Have you checked whether you can use any of the data they provided collected to the point of withdrawal?

Actively listening. Active listening is crucial to bringing marginalised voices into the centre of the research, policy and practice processes.

Do you become drawn into hearing endlessly repeated and detailed minutiae of a particular victim-survivor's experience? When does rehearsing this over and over again reach the point at which repetition can become unhelpful to the recovery process? How can you control such a situation without causing the person to feel hurt or rejected? Have you remained focused on the research questions without becoming insensitive or coming across as bureaucratic and indifferent?

Defining those affected as survivors not victims. Language reflects power relations that are already embedded in the terminology utilised to describe people and situations. Language is also important in configuring people in particular ways. In disaster situations, defining the people who survived as victim-survivors is important in facilitating the process of moving on.

Do you consider people as survivors, not victims? Can you help them to look for their strengths and reflect upon how they can use local resources to help themselves? Self-help and community resilience are particularly important after you leave. It also requires you to consider how to promote both individual and collective well-being.

Using strengths-based approaches. Ensuring that those you work with feel empowered and able to take decisions for themselves draws on people's existing strengths and the valuing of their contributions. In disaster situations, building on existing strengths facilitates resilience and growth and can promote self-help. The research process can help identity and build on these.

Can you focus on strengths-based approaches that begin by considering the certainties that people already have in the midst of uncertainty and hardship? Can you help build up their confidence from that basis? Will the data that you gather enable them to move forward?

Accountability. This requires you to be held responsible for your behaviour and your work. Included in this principle is the issue of not damaging the reputation of the profession, your agency or your employer. Another important dimension here is acknowledging the roles played and contributions made by all participants in the research process. Reaching agreement about intellectual property rights including publications is an important part of this consideration. In some countries, data protection legislation adds further layers of accountability and procedures in handling personal data, e.g., the Data Protection Act 1998 in the UK. Transferring personal data across national borders from this country could become problematic if no equivalent protection exists in the other one.

To whom are you accountable? What procedures are in place so that you can be questioned by local residents? Who do you tell when things go wrong? How can people challenge your work as a researcher throughout the research process? Are there clearly articulated, transparent and well-known complaints procedures?

Working in partnerships with local agencies and people. Reciprocity, mutuality and solidarity are important in the disaster research context and important in co-producing solutions to problems. Empowering practice in disaster-affected communities is translated into effective working in partnership with local agencies and people. If chosen well, these partners and their contacts will facilitate community engagement, promote the development of trust in the relevance of the research, and enhance the external agency's capacity to address cultural and linguistic issues more readily. The external partner will also be able to bring in expertise and access to resources that the local community might not have otherwise been aware of. Maintaining mutuality in the interactions between local and external players facilitates the formation of empowering working relationships.

Who will you work with in the locality? How will you ensure that their involvement is valued and their contributions embedded in the research?

Devising locality specific, culturally relevant and appropriate responses. Being well-informed about the locality, its cultural traditions and governance structures is crucial to ensuring that the research progresses smoothly. The population is likely to be differentiated according to gender, age, ethnicity, religion, class/caste, social status, ability, and other social divisions that are relevant to that locality. Learn about this differentiation because it is likely to have implications for what work you can undertake and how you can carry it out.

Do you have a thorough grounding in and understanding of the local culture, including the religion(s) and language(s) of the people in the locality in which you are situated? Do you understand the local governance structures and the people who carry responsibilities within them?

Identifying relevant issues. There are a number of issues that need to be addressed. These include understanding the locality, the key actors in the area, the relationships between the diverse members that compose the community, the power relations between them and the resources that are available. Their inclusion or exclusion could become important later and impact upon the work you can do. Action and inaction both carry consequences, some of which will not always be easily foreseen.

Are you aware of these issues? Have you make contact with the relevant national and local players? Who has been included and who has been left out?

Ensuring safety. Disaster survivors will feel vulnerable, unsafe, and uncertain. Safety is a key issue for women and children, including those in camps or making their way to one because they are subjected to sexual harassment and assaults. In some situations, rape and sexually motivated murders become weapons to gain advantage in conflicts. Such attacks are devastating not only for those directly involved, but also for their families and communities that have to deal with the ensuing stigma and shame that follows. Sometimes, the effects of such attacks can last for years and require both individual and collective attention. Social workers have to address both elements – the physical safety of people including their own; and enabling individuals, families and communities to deal with the hurt, shame and loss of face that accompanies these; and engage people in research feeling confident that they will not be embarrassed or endangered by the act of doing so. The emotionality of research becomes a serious issue in such situations and the researcher has to prepare him/herself as well as the participants if they are to deal with their emotions effectively.

Are you able to deal with people experiencing uncertainty and emotions associated with fear and danger in places that ought to be safe? How can you encourage people to consider the elements which enable them to feel safe? Can you help them feel safe by addressing the issue one step at a time? How can you hold perpetrators accountable for the fear they instil? Can you do this without endangering yourself? How will you deal with your own fears?

Accessing resources. Ensuring that a needs assessment is accurate and that resources are delivered to those needing them on the basis of well-known and transparent criteria are amongst the most important data collection activities in a disaster situation.

Can you identify what resources are needed by simply asking people what their needs are? Do you know what resources are available locally? What resources have to be brought in from outside the locality? Who will help obtain these? Who will receive them? Who will distribute them?

Caring for Oneself. Looking after your health and sanity is crucial in avoiding 'burnout' and particularly important in difficult disaster situations when it is difficult to maintain 'controlled emotional involvement'.

Do you have a support network that you can use to 'debrief' yourself either in your locality or in your home-base? Do you have access to good supervision?

Liability. Being competent and capable of undertaking the research and having the appropriate skills, training and supervision is important to producing high quality, reliable research. You should also have insurance coverage in the event of accusations of causing harm. An informal complaint process whereby issues might be resolved without litigation is also advisable. Anonymised data collected should be archived and publications should be peer reviewed to ensure high standards of research are maintained.

What complaints procedures are in place? Do you have the relevant insurance details? Is your training sufficient and up-to-date? Do you need a criminal records bureau (CRB) check (essential if researching vulnerable groups like children and older people with dementia, for example)?