

Ethics in practice

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The present article elaborates on a point left open in a previous article on the theme of ethics and research in the third world.¹ The main theme of that article was a diagnosis of the situation in which much social science research takes place, but it didn't draw practical consequences, as is the case with most discussions on this theme. This article aims to indicate how some of the practical and ethical problems may be solved by a careful organization of research projects. Our emphasis is on 'what can be done', not on 'what should not be done'. A summary of the main points from the previous article is presented as an introduction to a first attempt to draw these practical consequences.

Many a western sociologist — whether or not belonging to the non-western denomination — looks forward to the day he can leave his home country to carry out research in one of the less-developed countries. His motives for this kind of research can be widely divergent. It may be that the researcher is deeply concerned with the lot of the people of the poor countries and that he wants to contribute to its improvement; however, the opposite is also possible: his aim may be to collect those data which will make possible a better manipulation of the less-developed country by interested groups in the rich countries. His motives may no fit into either of the above mentioned categories: he may only be driven by 'pure-scientific' interests. One thing is sure however: his research in a developing country will take place in a neo-colonial situation. That is to say, in a situation that is characterised by a complex of dependency relations between poor and rich countries, especially, (but not exclusively) in the political and economic sphere, in which the rich countries possess a very dominant power position.

This fact has important implications for the circumstances under which a western scientist has to carry out his research, whatever his intentions may be. However much he strives to contribute — through his research — to an improvement of the lot of the poor, however unselfish or disinterested his attitude may be, it will not remedy the fact that his activities in the developing country are perceived in the perspective of the neo-colonial situation in which his research takes place.

It is possible to distinguish different aspects of this perception by those who have to do (directly or indirectly) with the western researcher in the developing country. They are important enough to be shortly mentioned.

1 — Perception with regard to the research object

'The aim of his research is to study (part of) the political system, or his study has definite political implications. The foreign researcher pokes his nose into the internal affairs of the country where the research takes place.'

¹ A. B. Droogleever Fortuijn & J. K. Brandsma, 'Sociaal-wetenschappelijk onderzoek in een neo-kolonialistische situatie', *Sociologische Gids* 18, 4 (1971), p. 318-329.

This perception may also exist regarding research that is not (directly) concerned with (a part of) the political system itself. For apparent nonpolitical objects of study may, even temporarily, become political issues. Many comprehensive studies may by their sheer range be perceived as intervening and politically dangerous.

2 — *Perceptions with regard to difference in research resources*

'There is a great difference in resources available to researchers from the rich countries and their colleagues in the less-developed countries. This leads to a monopolization of the field by the former'.

a — *financial aspect*: researchers from the rich countries have more funds available and thus have more possibilities to carry out research than their colleagues in the poor countries.

b — *time-aspects*: scientists in the developing countries belong to the usually scarce cadre. Therefore it is much harder for them to get leave from their daily duties in order to carry out prolonged scientific research. Compared with scientists from foreign (rich) countries they are thus in unfavourable position.

c — *knowledge - aspect*: scientists from the rich countries are regarded as better trained and more expert than their colleagues in the developing countries. This gives them a better chance to be commissioned for research projects.

3 — *Perceptions with regard to activities of scientists from (rich) foreign countries*

a — 'The mere presence of scientists from the foreign country is a humiliation for the own country'. It emphasizes the unequal distribution of resources which prevents the country to have the research carried out by its own scientists.

b — 'The foreign researcher acts in a paternalistic way: he considers himself to be an expert who knows exactly 'what's good for the country'.

c — 'The foreign researcher considers his host country as a guinea-pig for his scientific endeavors':

'He does not adhere carefully to generally accepted norms for scientific research'.

- a careless introduction of the research (requests for permission, informing the people what the research is about, etc.) creates an atmosphere of secrecy and distrust;

- insufficient safeguarding of the anonymity and privacy of the respondents and insufficient preservation of the confidential nature of the received information creates a breach of confidence and may be harmful to the informants

'He acts as if he has the natural right to unlimited access to all sources of information (without compensation)'.

4 — *Perceptions with regard to co-operation between foreign and domestic scientists*

In the case of a co-operation between foreign researchers with colleagues from the country where the research takes place, the latter occupies a subordinate position:

'the foreign scientists decide upon the object and the methods of research and leave the least creative tasks to their 'partners' in the less-developed countries. Moreover, the latter often receive less financial rewards'.

5 — *Perceptions with regard to the use of the results of the research*

'The country in which the research takes place has no say in what happens with the results of the study carried out'. This can be harmful to the interests of that country.

a — 'The scientific research functions as a cover for espionage or is intended to provide a better basis for the economic, political or military policy towards the researched nation'.

b — 'sufficient guarantees by the foreign researches against misuse of the results are totally absent'.

c — 'the foreign scientists, c.q. their principals, monopolize the research results'. The developing country does not benefit from the results of the study.

It is not likely that any research project carried out in the less-developed countries by scientists from the rich countries will lead to a perception by those concerned locally that contains all above-mentioned aspects. On the other hand, one can be sure that some symptoms of neo-colonialism will always be perceived when a western scientist descends upon a developing country. This perception is in many but not necessarily in all cases in accordance with the facts. Whether or not the perception is in accordance with the facts is, however, not relevant here. During his field work the foreign scientist will be confronted with and has to take account of the way his behavior and the effects thereof is *perceived* in his host country. The chance of being accused of contributing to the continuance of a neo-colonial situation may indeed be smaller as he is more conscious of the possible implications of his actions, but even the most bonafide scientist can not prevent such accusations. They are a direct consequence of the fact that he, as a scientist from a rich country, operates in a country that in the existing neo-colonial situation occupies a dependant and inferior position with regard to countries like the one the researcher comes from.

The above seems in particular to hold for the social sciences, since its object of study is human relations. This places a more or less large number of people in the position of the 'observed' which is experienced as subordinate. Let us assume that the social scientist does not in the least intend to sustain

the neo-colonial dependency relationship between poor and rich countries but, on the contrary, hopes through his research activities to contribute to the termination of this relationship.

In this case it is not enough that he is aware of the way his activities are perceived. He must also try as much as possible to remove beforehand the grounds on which his activities could be perceived as symptoms of neo-colonialism. In other words, he must strive towards a form of co-operation with colleagues in the less-developed country right from the beginning of his preparations for the research; a form which will provide an optimal chance for really equivalent input from both sides. One way in which this can be done is by expressing if possible right after stating the problem, the following rules in a letter of intent which will form the basis for a more detailed agreement.

General rules for a joint-venture agreement

1 — The form of co-operation between the parties concerned is that of a so-called 'joint-venture'. This implies that both partners participate on equal footing in consultation and decision-making concerning the design and the execution of the research project. The researchers participating in the research project form a team.

2 — The team is under dual leadership. The two parties that participate in the joint venture each choose one member of the team leadership. The team leaders act internally as co-ordinators, externally as the persons responsible for the project.

3 — All decisions concerning the research design and its implementation are in principle team-decisions. With regard to specific parts decisions can be delegated to the person(s) that is (are) assigned this task. A majority of votes decides in general in case of disagreement about procedural questions. In case of decisions that have important consequences for the further course of the research project each team member has a right to veto (e.g. changes in the research design, important changes in the spending of research funds, etc.).

4 — In case of a division of labour among the team-members efforts should be made to assign tasks to each team-member that are in accordance with his specific capabilities and interests. After a certain division has been agreed upon by all team-members, each member is responsible for the execution of his specific part (unimpeded his shared responsibility for the research project as a whole). The teamleaders are responsible for the necessary co-ordination.

5 — Each team member has free access to the research data of every other member.

6 — Both parties receive (if they so wish) a complete set of all research data, if possible in the original form (interview protocols, copies of questionnaires, etc.), but in any case the finished data (punch cards, computer output, interim

notes and reports etc.).

7 — The research data are confidential. Each team member carries the responsibility for the registration of these data in such a way that neither the name of the informant nor the information given by him are identifiable. The researcher is bound to safeguard the anonymity of his informants.

8 — Each team member must respect the privacy of the informants. No one may be pressed to give information to a team member against his wish.

9 — The team members are collectively and individually responsible for the proper use of the data and for the publication of the results of the research.

10 — Each team member has the right to publish on his specific subject after consultation with the other team members. A translation of each publication in an agreed on language must be sent to the other team members. The major libraries in the country where the research takes place will also receive a copy of each publication.

11 — The final report of the research project will be written under collective authorship of all team members. A condensed version hereof, containing the most important data and if possible policy recommendations, will be published in the official language of the host country. This condensed version must be written in a style which makes it accessible to interested laymen.

12 — Each foreign team member commits himself to devote part of his time (e.g. 14 %) to teaching and/or training students in the host country.

13 — The team is prepared to include specific problems in the research design if asked and if the team agrees that this contributes to the development of the country. The team, however, will not comply with external requests or pressure to change the research design if this in the opinion of the team will impair its research project.

14 — The team members must take care that future research (by scientists from the country itself or by foreign scientists) is not impeded by their behavior; they should be careful to act according to the accepted norms for social research.

The above rules should be regarded as a framework for a social agreement. In the agreement itself most rules will need to be elaborated, taking into account specific local circumstances.