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Stop centring Western academic ethics: deidentification in social science research – Anna Denejkina

Posted by Admin in Human Research Ethics on May 24, 2018 / 0 Comments / Keywords: Australia, Beneficence, Consent, Culture, Ethical review, Good practice, HREC, International, Methodology, Outputs, Participant protection, Privacy, Research Ethics Committees, Researcher responsibilities, Respect for persons, Social Science, social science research ethics, Vulnerable groups

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This blog will provide a discussion of issues present in deidentifying marginalised research participants, or research participants who request to be identified, in the publication of qualitative research. As my research is mixed-method (quantitative and multi-method qualitative) it included several data collection techniques and analyses. For this discussion, I will specifically focus on the face-to-face and Skype interviews I conducted with participants in Russia and the United States.

My PhD study investigates intergenerational transmission of combat-related trauma from parent to child, focusing on the Soviet–Afghan war, 1979–89. This research includes interviews with Soviet veterans and family members of veterans; it was these interviews that raised questions of participant erasure and agency. From 12 face-to-face and Skype interview participants, one participant requested complete deidentification; one requested that their real name not be used but their location and other identifying details remain; two participants requested that only their first names be used and their location and other identifying details remain; the eight remaining participants requested that they be fully identified, with some participants sending me photographs of them and their families for inclusion in research publications. Given the social and political sensitivity that persists in Eastern Europe around the discussion of the Soviet invasion into Afghanistan, I had to consider and discuss with participants that requested they be identified the issue of their safety.

My research participants are marginalized participants by virtue of the topic of my research, the Soviet–Afghan war, and the ongoing silencing treatment they've received during and following the war by the state:

> To take just two examples: in the hope of obscuring the true impact of the war, some local authorities refused to allow special areas in cemeteries to be set apart for the graves of soldiers killed in Afghanistan; while others forbade the cause and place of death to be stated on gravestones or memorial shields. (Aleksievich, Whitby & Whitby 1992, p.5–6)

Given academic broad-stroke standards of deidentifying research participants, we must review the ethics of this practice as it can promote and perpetuate erasure of marginalised participants and the silencing of their voices. Some textbooks on the topic of ethics in the social sciences approach anonymity and deidentification of participants from the angle that anonymity is part of the basic expectations of a research participant, without elaborating that anonymity is not always desirable nor

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the vital assurances researchers must give to their participants to keep within their duty of care (that is, that researchers have at least some obligation to care for their research participants).

This approach to research ethics negates participant agency, particularly those participants that request they be identified in research. Furthermore, forced anonymity can be an act of disrespecting participants (Mattingly 2005, p.455–456) who may have already experienced invisibility and who are then further erased through anonymity by researchers (Scarth & Schafer 2016, p.86); for example, "in some Australian and, in particular, some Indigenous cultures, failing to name sources is both a mark of disrespect and a sign of poor research practice" (Israel, Allen & Thomson 2016, p.296).

As researchers, we must also question if presenting this approach as a vital tenet of social research can become a damaging rule-of-thumb for new researchers who might, therefore, not question the potential undermining of participant agency, and use deidentification unethically as a sweeping regulation within their research without consideration for the individual situations of their research participants. This is part of the issue created by applying a medical model of ethics assessment processes to the social sciences, in which the prevailing interpretation is that deidentification is also required within social research, whereas the reality is that specific agreements between the researcher and the research participant must be honoured.

The ethical dilemma, therefore is: can researchers ethically deidentify participants at the expense of the participants' agency, potentially perpetuating the historical and symbolic erasure of their voices and experiences? I argue that, based on research design and data collection methods, this decision-making process is an 'ethics in practice' and must be approached in context, individually for each study, and for each individual participant.

As scholars, we want to minimise or eradicate harm that might come to our participants through our research. While we think "in advance about how to protect those who are brought into the study" (Tolich 2016, p.30) this must be a continual process throughout our project, in which we "work out the meaning of what constitutes ethical research and human rights in a particular context" (Breckenridge, James & Jops 2016, p.169; also see Ntseane 2009). This is important to note, because protection does not only refer to participants but also to others connected to them. For example, the use of a real name at the request of a participant may expose their family member(s) who were not part of the research.

Consequentialist approaches to ethics suggest that "an action can be considered morally right or obligatory if it will produce the greater possible balance of good over evil" (Israel, 2015: 10; also see Reynolds, 1979). This is an approach we could take to issues around deidentification; however, this also means that researchers must know what is good or bad. In studies like mine, this would mean knowing (or making an attempt, or an assumption to know) what is good or bad for my research participants. This action is infantilising, and places the researcher above the research participant by making the final call ourselves, which is to remove participant agency – if we can assume participants are autonomous during the research consent process, we must also assume that they are autonomous in making decisions with respect to their identification (Said 2016, p.212). Additionally, this action may be culturally insensitive given that Western human research ethics committees follow Western cultural guidelines, centring the dominance of Western academia.

The ethical issues I faced during my PhD research highlight why researchers cannot take a sweeping approach to deidentification in qualitative research – not even for a single study. 'Ethics in practice' means that each participant's situation is analysed individually, and issues around erasure, safety, and their agency weighed against each other to reach a conclusion. I propose that if this conclusion is at odds with the preference of the participant, that it must then be taken back to the participant for further discussion. Not implementing this aspect of 'ethics in practice' goes against social science ethics, that we must avoid doing long-term and systemic harm, both of which come through erasure and silencing. We must also remember that "any research project has the potential to further disenfranchise vulnerable groups" (Breckenridge, James & Jops 2016, p.169), and ignoring the wishes of participants regarding their identification due to a Western model of ethics can cause further damage to these groups.

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Statement of interest
No interests to declare.

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