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Negotiating Research Ethics in Volatile Contexts

Editorial

Andrea Fleschenberg, Rosa Cordillera A. Castillo

Research ethics is integral to the entire process of knowledge production: from conceptualising and designing a research project and gathering, analysing and managing data, to writing and other forms of representation and engagement. Yet, there is often a lack of attention given to research ethics pedagogy and praxis in various academic institutions. This problem is compounded by contestations as to what constitutes research ethics in the qualitative social sciences, particularly since the dominant research ethics paradigm is largely based on the biomedical model. Relatedly, questions are raised with regard to how research ethics can be made compatible with the epistemology and methodology of specific disciplines and of inter- and transdisciplinary approaches (see Castillo and Dilger in this issue, part one). Ethical practice goes beyond the clearance-based scholar-centred approach of most ethics review boards and the placement of research projects, with an ethics checklist, into tidy containers of academic research practice before “entering the field” (cf. Katz 1994). Navigating research ethics in praxis is instead messy and entangled with various layers and shifting loops of contentiousness (see Sökefeld et al. this issue, part one) and relations (see Castillo et al. in this issue, part two). Cultivating ethical behaviour and decision-making is thus an ongoing negotiation and continuous process of thinking, acting and reflecting on our research and professional conduct.

Our guest editorial team, composed of Abida Bano, Rosa Castillo, Sarah Holz and Andrea Fleschenberg, came together through a shared concern for establishing a sustained critical research ethics pedagogy, praxis and responsive review process that decentres dominant frameworks and practices of research

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ethics (see Castillo 2018). Guided by indigenous, decolonial and feminist perspectives, we conceive of research ethics not only as a set of guidelines on research methodology and conduct but also as deeply intertwined with the power and the politics of knowledge production. We thus draw attention to the ways in which the coloniality of knowledge, being and power, as well as heteropatriarchy, shape research and knowledge production, and are thus relevant to research ethics. We are conscious, too, of how research and knowledge production have been and can be exploitative, extractive, racist and unequal, particularly between the Global North and the Global South. Among our efforts in line with this are the formation of the “Negotiating Research Ethics Initiative” at Humboldt University of Berlin; the institutionalisation of research ethics in university curriculums and graduate school training programmes; the insertion of research ethics as a central agenda into research networks/cooperations; and the provision of safe working group-based exchange and mentoring spaces for knowledge producers in Europe and Asia who are at various stages of their academic careers and with diverse positionalities and epistemological, methodological and (inter-/trans-)disciplinary approaches.

When preparing for this special issue, we discussed in various rounds, platforms and configurations a number of critical acts and incidents that reinforced and further guided our concerns on research ethics in volatile contexts in Asia through a decentred, decolonial praxis. One such incident took place within the field of academia itself, at an international Area Studies conference, as discussed in detail by Rosa Castillo in her debating input with additional reflections by Anthony Pattathu and June Rubis, in terms of lived realities of decolonial research ethical praxis (this issue, part two). Another surfaced in 2021, when a controversy emerged among South Asian Studies academics on the challenges of academic knowledge production, particularly in the case of US-based Indian medical anthropologist Saiba Varma’s work on militarism and care in Indian-administered Kashmir. This case highlights issues on positionalities and fieldwork practices as well as navigations of disclosure, representation and consent with marginalised and vulnerable communities in contexts marked by conflict, occupation and/or repressive governmentalities.¹

Framing research ethics as a decolonial, decentred and feminist praxis furthermore entails a more critical take on issues of engaging with refusal in academic praxis and knowledge production (Chatterjee 2020, Siam 2022, Tuck / Yang 2014), which leads us to the third critical juncture: the COVID-19 pandemic. Writing at the end of 2022, many of us are experiencing a long-term sense of exhaustion and a kind of pandemic fatigue as well as adjustment vis-à-vis anxieties and uncertainties linked with our academic research practices across various

1 See The Wire 2021; and Siam 2022 for the case of Canada-based Pakistani Anam Zakaria’s oral history work on Pakistan-administered Kashmir.

fields and arenas. While contributions to this special issue are not predominantly focused on research ethical practices in (post-)pandemic times or centring pandemic-related challenges of navigating research ethics in volatile contexts, for example due to specific pandemic governmentalities, we would like to take this editorial space to reflect on the nexus of pandemic-related challenges and research ethics for a number of reasons.

The COVID-19 pandemic served as a kind of magnifying glass for research ethical challenges and concerns, leading to increasingly prominent calls for an ethics of care amid a pandemic “kaleidoscope in terms of change and patterns” (Hussain 2020) within academic mainstream discussions on research practices and the ethics thereof. As we have argued elsewhere (Fleschenberg / Holz 2021), pandemic-related academic debates early on centred on concerns with inequalities, injustices and divides. Scholars from a variety of (inter-)disciplinary approaches called for a different praxis of research ethics and knowledge production, including with regard to Global North and Global South interactions and asymmetries in knowledge production, research collaboration and academic publishing.

The widespread lockdown left many Global North-based researchers involuntarily immobile, disconnected from the physical field and with “new” ethical and methodological challenges caused by pandemic disruptions and remote research (see also Suarez in this issue, part two). But we need to draw a carefully calibrated picture here. Dunia et al. (2020) critique a certain “Northern naval gazing”. The praxis of remote research and contracting researchers is not novel, given that in pre-pandemic times security concerns already meant that many Global North-based researchers limited themselves to safer (often urban) settings and commissioned local researchers for more risky data collection, thus exposing the latter to “exploitative and unequal research relationships and partnerships instead of nurturing the coproduction of knowledge” (Dunia et al. 2020).

One key article that was repeatedly debated, contested and referred to in our working group “Researching Asia in Pandemic Times”, as well as in our university classes and training-and-exchange workshops, was written by Aymar Neyenyezi Bisoka (2020), who critiques the “colonial relationship that has plagued social sciences for the last four centuries, which has often made invisible the work of local researchers from the Global South”. Challenging the notion of pandemic-induced transformations and opportunities to rethink power relations in research designs and practices, which were prevalent in academic writings and blog entries from 2020 to 2022 surrounding notions of “ethics of care” and “justice” and “solidarity”, Bisoka (2020) instead points to the need for the “decolonisation of knowledge”, given the compounded precarities and vulnerabilities of Global South researchers who partake in Global North-centred research projects, a relic of the colonial momentum and its continued racialised legacies in academic research (see the contributions to the current debate by

Castillo et al. and Kamal et al. in this special issue). The COVID-19 pandemic thus presents us with a certain momentum and raises severe epistemological, political and (research) ethical questions that tackle the coloniality of the academic research practices of researchers based both in the Global North and Global South.²

Furthermore, the body of pandemic-related (re-)thinking regarding a transformed research ethical praxis highlights a number of challenges and concerns: 1) newly emerging or shifting ethical challenges due to pandemic settings;³ 2) the relationship between research assistants (or “facilitating researchers”) and “contracting researchers”, or – as Dunia et al. (2020) have called them – “Northern ‘research capitalists’ and Southern ‘research proletariat’”;⁴ 3) the need to navigate research via digital means, new technologies and spaces while remaining mindful of communication, connectivity, resources and agency divides;⁵ 4) the need to revisit notions of care, reciprocity and relatedness in research ethics to counter extractive research practices and gazing;⁶ and 5) questions of integrity and the need for (novel) research in pandemic times.⁷

Calls for more inclusive, diversity-oriented and caring practices – be it for conventional research methods and contexts or for re-devised remote, digital methods and (post-)pandemic contexts – have become increasingly audible, even if this might mean ending a research project in order not to overburden research participants or exacerbate pandemic-related emergencies among already marginalised groups (see also contributions by Thajib as well as by Sakti / Taek in this special issue). Far greater attention has been focused on decentring research design practices and revisiting the weighing of perspectives to determine what kind of knowledge is important and relevant as well as how phenomena are conceptualised (Pacheco / Zaimağaoğlu 2020). As Pakistan-based Rahat Batool (2021) painfully asks, what knowledge is needed and for what purpose when confronted with risky and precarious research settings in already impoverished, marginalised communities within a context of compounded volatilities and vulnerabilities?

The push for digitisation within academia and the wider society has exacerbated the digital divide, and with it come complex ethical challenges, for instance in relation to marginalised groups or for particularly exposed groups like front-line workers, as well as in terms of data security, digital access, digital literacy or substitute data sets and sample populations.⁸ Helen Kara and Su-ming Khoo

2 Mwambari et al. 2021, Bisoka 2020; see also Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2020.

3 Batool et al. 2021, Zuberi 2021, Garthwaite 2020.

4 See also Bisoka 2020, Mwambari et al. 2021.

5 Hensen et al. 2021, Howlett 2021, Kalia 2021, Kara / Khoo 2020, Khan 2021, Tiidenberg 2021, Zuberi 2021.

6 Corbera et al. 2020, Shankar 2020.

7 Carayannis / Bolin 2020, Garthwaite 2020, Pacheco / Zaimağaoğlu 2020.

8 See Suarez this issue as well as Batool et al. 2021 and Khan 2021.

(2020) point towards shifting power relations and a reconsideration of who is vulnerable and how vulnerable they are in pandemic research settings, thus calling into question entire research enquiries and their necessity.

The notion of care, however, applies not only to research participants and collaborators. It extends to researchers themselves, whose privilege and power in research settings were more often than not challenged and reversed in pandemic settings along gendered and racialised cleavages (see Bano / Holz in this issue).⁹ Having said that, the need to negotiate one's positionality and ethical responsibility – as well as enacting self-care and doing no harm to oneself or those near and dear in the face of traumatic or stressful encounters – has been a daunting journey and a burden for many critical and engaged scholars. Experiences of powerlessness, of not being able to do enough beyond (or despite) metric-oriented, competitive academic work, of not being able to “give back” sufficiently, or even tokenism or researcher-centred face-saving have been known to lead to feelings such as fatigue, numbing, cynicism, hyper-vigilance, guilt and disassociation, among others.¹⁰

Questions of researchers' mental health and coping strategies for emotional stress, pain and trauma have been discussed by many, particularly when working in the Global South in volatile contexts or when working from a critical approach, where contexts of multi-layered, compounded crises, volatilities, inequalities and uncertainties are the everyday normal matrix within which they must operate and not just an exceptional, temporary crisis – as, for instance, many in the Global North regarded the COVID-19 pandemic.¹¹

Linked to the multi-dimensional and multi-directional notion of care are renewed calls for slow research, questioning the timing, pace and rigid sequencing of research steps in times of a pandemic crisis and its long aftermath, but not only.¹² Emma Louise Backe's (2021) notion of an “ethics of crisis” renews the urgent call for slow, decentred research and a “practice of pragmatic solidarity”,

through a locally situated and grounded ethics of concern that is attentive to the particular temporalities and extractive logics of academic research. In these cases, research is oriented not by the “tyranny of the urgent” or the neoliberal demands of the academy, but rather by the priorities and needs of the community participating in the research.¹³

9 See also Kamal in this issue, part two; Batoool et al. 2021, Kalia 2021, Khan 2021, Zubeiri 2021.

10 See Ansoms 2020, Lunn 2014, Selim 2021.

11 See Günel et al. 2020 and Selim 2021.

12 See in particular the contribution of Thajib in this special issue, part one, as well as Ansoms 2020, Das 2020.

13 Zahra Hussain (2020) argues that slow science “calls for unsettling the stable typologies drawn from structures of theory and knowledge we are trained in [...], in order to enter the unknown territories” in this “project of academic self-regulation” of pandemic research. Similarly, Corbera et al. (2020: 192) opine that “academic praxis should value forms of performance and productivity that enhance wellbeing and care together with solidarity and pluralism”. See also Ackerley / True 2010, Chilisa 2012, Günel et al. 2020, Smith 2021.

Referring to “ethical responsibilities toward those on whose lives and through whose labor we build our careers and enjoy professional success”, Dunia et al. (2020) furthermore call for a rethinking of authorship along with remaking compensation, remuneration and insurance practices for local research counterparts. Revisiting notions of reciprocity, trust, power, vulnerability and inequality in research relationships in light of the pandemic-instigated “ethics of disruption” for social sciences worldwide, Gina Crivello and Marta Favara (2020: 1) argue that:

It feels as though we have entered a new ethical landscape, one that is compelling social researchers to re-examine previously held assumptions about what is appropriate, possible, valuable and relevant for their research, and the nature of ethical responsibilities to all those enmeshed in the research relationship during this time [...].

But how strong has the impact of this pandemic-related (re-)thinking of a transformed research ethical praxis been within mainstream academia in the long term, be it in terms of institutional architectures and institutions of research ethics or in terms of individual practices and decisions taken? Or, in other words, how do we deal with a longing for “back to normal” or a post-pandemic “new normal” in the social sciences? How far do the concerns sketched out above lead to a rethinking and transformation of epistemological and methodological approaches and entangled research ethical practices, which we understand as a fundamentally decolonial-feminist, thus decentred, praxis? What new architectures, spaces, teaching pedagogies and materials need to be set up? Or is there potential for reform?

Within this special issue, we have opted for a number of writing formats and a wide range of contributing authors in terms of their (inter-)disciplinary approaches and research fields, their positionalities, academic biographies and career stages. These diverse contributors and formats provide material for further debate and reflective discussions on experiences and practices of navigating and negotiating research ethics in volatile contexts across Asia and beyond.

Volatile contexts, such as the pandemic, are those contexts marked by unpredictability and uncertainty, by ongoing processes of transformation and thus (potentially) rapidly changing dynamics, as well as disruptions with regard to key parameters within the field. Volatile contexts are further characterised by ambiguity and variegated constraints in addition to a particular set of ethical challenges. The vulnerabilities of all research partners involved, the potential risks and the social, economic and political stakes are heightened, necessitating particularly complex and fraught considerations on how to conduct research ethically. Subsequently, such contexts demand from researchers a high degree of preparedness, reflexivity, flexibility, alertness and openness in light of a need for constant (re-)negotiation, (re-)adaptation and creative coping strategies. These impact, in specific and myriad ways, a researcher’s toolbox in terms of episte-

mology, theorising, research design and methods, ethics, data gathering, dissemination and engagements.

With a focus on research ethics in volatile contexts, this special issue thus aims to provide various perspectives on research ethics from scholars positioned within a particular discipline, such as anthropology, political science, history, sociology and area studies, among others, as well as those with an inter- or transdisciplinary perspective. Drawing from concrete research experiences and how they have dealt with ethical dilemmas as well as critical reflection and framing of research ethics, the contributors offer ways to think through the relationships between research ethics, power, violence, inequalities, institutions and pedagogy in various volatile research contexts and institutional frameworks.

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