

Running Head: REFLECTIONS ON CONDUCT OF RESEARCH

Reflections on the Conduct of Research with Human Subjects Across Two Cultures

Spring 2009

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Abstract

This study examined the potential benefits, challenges, and barriers faced by university students and research colleagues who were involved in international partnerships for cross-cultural research projects between the USA and Russia. In scholarly investigations in the USA, research subjects must be informed of the precautions that will be taken to protect their safety and their privacy (Amdur & Bankfert, 2002). Particularly in Russia, there are no corresponding policies for working with human subjects that compare to the procedures followed by American university Institutional Review Boards. Furthermore, international partnerships have faced new challenges as a result of the restructuring of American security since the events of September 11, 2001. This study focused on trust in international partnerships, challenges of funding and institutional support, reliability of data, and the affects of outside influences on research processes. Researchers used grounded theory and auto ethnography to code and inductively analyze data from semi-structured interviews and personal experiences in the field.

Introduction

Partnerships, according to The American Heritage® Dictionary Online of the English Language (2009), can be defined as “relationship between individuals or groups that is characterized by mutual cooperation and responsibility, as for the achievement of a specified goal.” This study contributed to understandings about partnerships in the context of international research. Can international research partnerships mean the same thing as they do in the dictionary? Are international research partnerships characterized by mutual cooperation and responsibility? If the word “partnerships” holds a cross-cultural meaning, is there mutual cooperation and responsibility in the international partnerships? If there is mutual cooperation and responsibility, what are the barriers and benefits to the attainment of this cooperation? It is important to study the dynamics that surround cross-cultural collaborations, in order to understand who is benefited from them, who has the responsibility in managing them, and how successful partnerships are achieved.

This researcher was interested in comparison of research ethics practices in the United States of America (USA) and in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). Particularly, the investigators in this research aimed to understand why dynamics and establishments of ethic review boards vary internationally; especially between the USA and Russia. In order to study this dynamic, a larger focus was placed upon the difficulties and benefits of conducting international research and cross cultural collaborations.

In scholarly investigations in the USA, research subjects must be informed of the precautions that will be taken in order to protect their safety and privacy (Amdur & Bankfert, 2002). In other countries, there are variations in ethical practices. With international research partnerships, it is important to consider the barriers, benefits, and cultural disparities in order to

find ways to protect the safety and privacy of respondents in joint research. It is also important to consider these factors when trying to determine effective ways to manage and maintain international partnerships.

This paper is organized as follows. First, the authors present a review of literature to compare ethical practices in Russia and other CIS countries. This provides a background for the present study. The next section presents the design and methods for this study, along with the sampling and analytical procedures. The findings include comments about the barriers and benefits that may be gained in conducting such work. Finally, the authors provide some discussion about possible reasons for the differences between ethics policies and procedures in the USA and Russia. Finally, there are some conclusions and suggestions for further research to enhance both international collaborations and the research that is conducted in international contexts.

Literature Review

Supervision of International Research by IRBs in the USA

Borasky (2002) reported on how Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) supervise research in international settings. Specifically, he noted that a lot of new international research occurs in less developed countries. This research is often conducted by principal investigators who may have limited experience with the concepts of ethical research. Some of this research receives “much criticism within the research community and among IRBs” (Borasky 2002). This leads to controversy over whether the research should be conducted at all. Borasky concludes that, because of this criticism, IRBs must be aware and alert when reviewing international research.

Borasky explains that the US Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) requires that international collaborators collect local knowledge about the amount of risk present in the

research project. If there is minimal risk to those being studied, an IRB (Institutional Review Board) needs to be able to show that it has collected information about the research context through discussions, consultations, or written materials. When the risk increases, the IRB may consult with someone who is familiar with the area and or may send board members to visit the area frequently to assess it.

Ethics Review Boards in the Commonwealth of Independent States

Recently, there has been progress at creating ethics review boards for research within the CIS: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Russia, Tajikistan, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan. Academic colleagues have come together to start the formation of ethical regulation within biomedicine. Kubar, O.I., Have, H. T., Vladimirova, E.Y., Yudin, B.G., Nikitina, A.E., & Tishchenko, P.D. (2007) discussed how current scientific trends and standards require established ethical values and practices for the rights and protection of human subjects. Since multiple global and national factors may affect ethics, researchers acknowledge that it is important to understand these perspectives. Even among CIS member countries, there are differing social and economic standards.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has contributed to training in ethical standards in order to foster cooperative access to information and intellectual exchange, to implement ethical practices in the protection of human rights to counsel and educate investigators among key social spheres, and to develop training programs on ethics and how they relate to education (Kubar, O.I., Have, H. T., Vladimirova, E.Y., Yudin, B.G., Nikitina, A.E., & Tishchenko, P.D. (2007). By establishing common understandings and practices for the protection of human rights, international partnerships will operate more smoothly and consistently.

Access to Information and Data in Russia

Mossman (1993) explains, that it was not until the “August 1991 coup and Boris Yeltsin’s subsequent decree placing communist party and KGB archives under the Russian government’s control that terms of access for all scholars” was redefined for Russia (1993, 87). Before this happened, access to information, such as the Russian Archives, was limited and required negotiation with government-officials. Even though access has been redefined, there still remain problems, mainly political, toward trying to access important archives about the state of the country, such as those of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The Russian Archives have lost sources of funding that worked toward protecting them. Due to this and the lack of organization; there could be the potential of corruption to the archives and their authenticity (Mossman, 1993, 87). There may also be corruption toward who has control over the archives, when different factions are willing to pay different amounts and compete with one another for the purchase of them.

In 1991, participants in the Social Science Research Council workshop at the University of Toronto proposed guidelines for fair and equal access to the Russian Archives by the academic community (Mossman, 1993, 88). The initiative pushed for collaboration among the scholarly community and for free access to archives of the former USSR as their Russian counterparts had been given in the west. The Toronto Initiative brought about a focus on how data can be obtained fairly and without going against the law. With limited financial funds available to preserve former Soviet documents and with potential corruption or bureaucratic obstruction for the access and control of these documents, it is still a challenge to be able to conduct research in Russia.

Design

Sample Process

This study sought to learn from the experience of professionals who had organized and participated in international research partnerships with colleagues in Russia. Therefore the study used a convenience sample and a snowball sample of respondents with research experience. The student investigator then searched various universities and businesses for faculty members and professionals who would meet these criteria.

The student investigator located several potential respondents through an internet search and through professional networking. She sent informative electronic communications to these individuals to invite them to participate or to recommend others who may be interested. Some of the respondents were located through this process of convenience sampling, while others were located through snowball sampling from the suggestions of their colleagues. The student investigator also used professional networking at two conferences to find potential respondents: the 2008 Conference on Challenges and Tensions in International Research Collaborations in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and the 2008 Annual Conference of American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Participants:

Table 1 describes the characteristics of the six individuals who were interviewed. The respondents consisted of three professors, two professional managers of an organization, and one administrator of an Institutional Review Board. All respondents were American descent, were Caucasian, and were of at least twenty years or older. Five of the respondents were female and one was male. Home states of the respondents are Wisconsin, Minnesota, Arizona, Missouri, and California.

Table 1: Characteristics of Respondents

Bibliographic Data of Respondents				
Respondent	Sex	Age	Profession	Location
Lynn	F	20-50	Oversight of Research Administration at her College	California
Elliot	M	50-60	Professor and Collaborator with a Russian Science Academy	Missouri
Ann	F	40-50	Manager; partners with former USSR republics	Wisconsin
Bell	F	30-40	Assistant Manager; partners with former USSR republics	Wisconsin
Tara	F	40-50	Professor and Collaborator with Russian and Georgia	Arizona
Kaelee	F	50-60	Professor, Collaborator in Russia	Minnesota

Procedures:

The interviews were constructed based upon grounded theory. Grounded theory is the idea that the research is built from the ground up. In grounded theory, “the researcher constructs theory from the data that is lived experience of the research participants” (Charmaz, 1990).

Four out of the five interviews were conducted with one respondent at a time, while one interview was conducted in a style similar to that of a focus group, with two respondents being interviewed at one time. Four of these interviews were conducted on site and one was conducted via telephone.

After the data was transcribed, it was coded to create categories and impose order upon it. Coding was also used to organize the relationships of ideas and patterns and to differentiate the significant concepts from those that were less significant. Loftland and Loftland (2006) suggested using memos to clarify codes by revising them and fine-tuning methodological issues apparent in the data. Memos were used by the author to record the general ideas found through coding the text into specific categories. The author used the categories to place order upon the different types and conditions of ideas.

Findings

The respondents provided a rich variety of comments. Analysis of the comments and experiences led the student researcher to several insights about the informed consent process, as well as about barriers and benefits of international research partnerships. There seemed to be multiple factors that lead to the success or failure of any specific project.

Goodnow (2006) explained it is first important to remember to “consider a collaboration, of any kind, as always between people. It is not ‘between cultures.’” There are different norms and values for each culture and society, but it is people who make or break collaborations.

Informed Consent:

Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) are the American version of what may be called ethic review boards or ethic committees in other countries. IRBs are to protect and serve both research investigators and human respondents. IRBs work to make sure that research is conducted ethically and morally and that subjects are not forced into research. However, there are factors that may stand as barriers between investigators and their ability to successfully conduct research.

IRBS and ethic review boards commonly require informed consent. An informed consent form is a document that states the nature of the research, who is conducting the research, the purpose of the research, and the potential risks of the project. Investigators are required to create, to read and to inform respondents of this document. When the document has been read, respondents are often required to sign or agree to the document. By signing or giving their assent, research subjects are stating that they both agree to the terms of the project and understand the potential risks of participating in the project.

When individuals sign an informed consent document, they may actually be placing themselves at risk for being linked to the study. Lynn, a middle aged female that oversees an Institutional Review Board and Animal Care and Use Committee, explained that the informed consent “document with [a respondent’s] signature is the only thing that links them to the study. And that is the only thing about the study that puts them at risk.” Often, a practice in research is to use pseudonyms or code numbers in professional writing rather than the original name documented on the informed consent form. It is because an individual puts down their name on the document and it is the only document that contains their name, that their information could potentially be used against them.

There may be different cultural expectations about the meaning of one’s signature. An example of this might be how a person from a rural community might feel differently about giving their signature as opposed to someone from an urban community. Elliot, a fifty to sixty year old professor who works in rural settings in Russia, commented that he did not “wanna get people to sign stuff” because he believes that it is “asking too much” and he did not want to “raise suspicion about that.” He was genuinely concerned that people would be “threatened by these sorts of things.” In this example, he was concerned about using signatures on the informed consent form because signatures may cause suspicion in the rural area where he conducted research. Therefore, research documents that were originally constructed in one language may not be understood or accepted well in the other language.

Tara, a forty to fifty year old professor and collaborator, explained that while a signature may not be the best type of consent to be used when “talking to rural subsistence farmers somewhere,” it very well could be in another circumstance.” There are different types of consent, such as oral, video, and written, and each type of consent may be used differently and most

appropriately in different contexts and situations based upon the research population, resources, and topic at hand.

If an Institutional Review Board has insufficient knowledge of a local context, consultants are needed to create a strong IRB and to review consent documents that are conducted in multiple languages. Reviewing international research may become more difficult in an international setting. It is important for investigators to be trained on the importance of research ethics and for them to communicate closely with IRB board members.

Barriers in International Research:

Research as part of international collaborations is not always cut and dry. Rather, collaborations themselves contain aspects which are complicated and at times complex. Some of these aspects are: expense, language, and lack of frequent contact. All of these aspects stand as barriers to the success of international projects, while there are different benefits of such projects, including: positive professional experiences, educational gains, and the ability to expand one's network with an international focus.

Expense

Conducting research with international partners is not cheap. Rather, the expenses can be quite large to cover the costs of travel, communication, technology, and time. In order for a collaboration to be successful, there needs to be mutual cooperation and agreement within that collaboration. Part of this mutual cooperation is about who will pay for just what part of the project.

The national tax structure in each country may present. For example, while there is a huge demand for western automobiles in Russia, these cars are often twice as expensive for them because of the taxes placed upon the vehicle once it makes it within the country. Tax structures

can cause inflation of project expenses. Project funding may be inadequate for actual expenses. This creates further tension over who will fund the difference and whether or not the project will be completed.

Recently, the economy in the USA has not fared very well. This has affected the global economy, and the economy in Russia has slowed down as well. This creates an unstable context in which to acquire grants and other resources that would be useful to funding the projects.

Language

Language itself is another common barrier to international research. Knowing the native language of colleagues and participants in research projects is extremely important, because language provides a bridge to successful communication. This creates effective collaboration.

The respondents of this research varied in their concerns over language. While Elliot, the only male subject of this project, believed that learning some Russian and having partners who could communicate in English was helpful, Ann, a fifty year old manager of a Russian partnership service, believed that it was not necessarily important for her as an individual to learn Russian. She was told by her partners that they needed to learn and practice English more than she needed to learn their language. While Ann and Bell directed time and energy on program development rather than learning the language, the concern remains whether or not being able to know the language can be useful and perhaps even obligatory as part of international collaborations.

Lack of clarity in language may result in mistranslation and incorrect wording in documents that are essential to the partnership, such as the initial contract or informed consent forms. Tara explained that there was a problem over compensation in some of her partnerships. She explained that some colleagues wanted to be paid upon the salary scales common in the

USA. This made things complicated because of the differences in economies between the two countries. Those in the USA may get paid more than those in Russia or Georgia.

Kaelee, a fifty to sixty year old professor and collaborator with Russia, gave some examples about when colleagues in one culture may not understand what those in the other culture meant. She shared her own experience in how the word “kindergarten” was common to both cultures. However, the definition of the term “kindergarten” varied between the two cultures. Kindergarten in the USA generally means programs for five year olds while in Russia; they mean those that are community-based and for children between age one and six years old. In order to establish collegial conversation and work toward common goals, it is important for one culture to be able to understand what the other culture means, as well as the symbolism and action tied to those meanings.

There is also the option of hiring interpreters and translators. Ann argued that collaborators are “always at the mercy of the interpreter” and that she usually “has somebody with her that speaks English.” Her fellow partner, Bell, adds to this by stating that interpreting is basically an “accuracy issue” and “interpreters become a really critical part of how everyone is able to survive.” Interpreters have the ability to mistranslate or to try and take things out of context if they so wish. Often interpreters may not be professional translators, but rather teachers who are want to earn some money outside of their teaching role. This could also create potential problems concerning over where their true motivation lies; toward merely acquiring money or toward being honest in their work while doing so.

Frequent Contact

A final barrier that may be present in international collaborations is that of being able to establish frequent contact. Establishing good communication is important in partnerships,

because it is this communication and open dialogue that keeps the partnership going.

Communication is what makes the collaboration, as it is the chance for those individuals who are a part of the collaboration to state what they wish to happen, how they wish to contribute, and what they think needs to change or be restructured. Being able to establish contact on a regular basis is often dependent upon the technology, funding, and time available to those in the partnership.

International partnerships increasingly rely on electronic connections. In Russia, universities have erratic access to resources such as the internet and electronic communication. There are still times when internet access suddenly stops. Residents of larger cities, such as Moscow and St. Petersburg may have good internet access whereas rural areas may struggle to acquire such resources.

Oftentimes it may be difficult to make technology work for both partners. While tools such as Skype and special phone rates for international calls exist, the geographic areas in which the partnerships take place can affect the ability for these techniques to be effective. Other countries or areas where partnerships take place may not have enough funding to be able to manage the amount that it costs to keep the technology running for contact to take place. It also takes time to keep this equipment up and running, and time for collaborators on both sides to sit down and try to set up meetings to keep up to date with one another.

Part of the socialization that humans seem to become accustomed to, is that of being able to connect with friends and socialize with those similar to them. This appears to be a normal process of everyday human social activity. Therefore, personal contact with partners may also be important. As Tara explains, “there are just some things that you can’t do over email or Skype or you know electronic meanings. Sometimes, you just need to be face to face.” Being face to face

adds to the ability to be able to socialize and create social networks, as well as to exchange ideas with the Russian people.

Elliot explains this best when he states that you “have to develop relationships with people over here and people at home.” You have to be able to “take them places, take them shopping.” While he believes that this is good, it is really the “human relationships that are the cement that holds this stuff together.” To be able to maintain those human relationships and keep the conversation and dialogue flowing so the partnership is strong, frequent contact is important.

Benefits in International Research

While there are several barriers to international research, there are also benefits. International research and collaborations can be useful for people who wish to enhance their professional experiences, meet their educational goals, and expand professional networks. It is essentially the benefits of the research that motivates those who are a part of them to continue, despite the challenges. It is also the benefits that keep international collaborations strong and thriving.

Professional Experiences

International collaborations allow for members of both sides to enhance their professional experiences. These experiences in turn can be used to either fine-tune or strengthen their particular careers at their home institution. Kaelee explains that those who have been a part of her international collaboration with Magadan, Russia have stepped out and really contributed in group and conference presentations. They have lived with other students, and practiced respect as well as maturity in their presence around other students. Particularly, they were able to learn about and experience a culture unlike their own and were able to grasp an idea of what culture shock was like. These experiences helped enhance their awareness that there are people similar

to them located across the world and that perhaps cultural differences are not as large and significant as they originally thought.

A similar experience was stated by both Ann and Bell of Wisconsin. These two are partners that manage a firm. This firm brings professionals from CIS countries to the USA to meet professionals with similar interests. They both have noticed that the international partnerships help them to exchange view points, theories, and approaches to their work. They try to understand how each country approaches common issues. This works toward building and establishing peace, which is part of their firm's mission statement. Those who have been a part of their organization have been motivated by the feeling that they are making a difference, and improving relationships of the world, as well as contributing to peace and understanding.

Educational Goals

International collaborations are useful for both those who teach research as well as students interested in conducting research. A large proportion of respondents, 83%, mentioned that educational goals are met through international contexts. It provides scholarship opportunities, as well as for the ability of an institution in one country to enhance its own prestige by working with an institution in another.

International collaborations allow students to travel to another culture and learn about how that culture approaches an issue that may be similar to one they have back at home. This enhances the discipline that is being put under study, as it pushes for an expansion in theory and methodology. This may possibly create movements or understanding of the discipline that otherwise would not have been discovered.

Besides an enhancement of the approach of research, it also allows that student to gain and practice an understanding of someone who lives in a totally different culture than them and

to discover similarities in that person rather than differences. This again, establishes international understanding and cooperation rather than miscommunication and weariness between two cultures. It also may encourage the students to start their own partnership some day, so other students and investigators they may work with could have the same chance they did. As Bell explains, “approaching every encounter with the opportunity to learn rather than teach” allows for people to be able to “seek to understand rather than to be understood.”

Professional Networks

A final benefit to international collaborations is the enhancement of a person’s professional network. Networks include those people that a person knows who may express a similar interest to their work or who could be potentially beneficial to adding to that work. Professional networking can be accomplished through both private and primary or through public secondary means. In international contexts, people are able to enhance their knowledge and their social awareness of those critical to their work, beyond their own country to a global level.

Particularly, international collaborations allow people to work with international colleagues. These colleagues are not just people that they meet on a daily basis. Rather, they are individuals who may act or serve as friends or as fellow professionals in a scholarly manner. Maintaining and building professional networks at an international level, allow both individuals involved in the network to learn and understand from one another. They can help each other with their discipline, as well as expand that discipline through different yet agreeable approaches to theory and methodology. The more connections a person has, the more he or she is able to learn and enhance both him or herself and his or her understanding and commitment to their discipline.

Discussion

This study was an exploratory project to study the phenomenon of the differences in ethic review boards in Russia than the USA. The student investigator realized that there is more to international collaborations than ethic review boards. International partnerships are multi-faceted and face barriers and benefits. The interviews in this study illustrated some of the important ideas about conducting international research or forming business with international partners.

First, as in any partnership, there needs to be negotiation. Negotiation helps the partners feel the responsibilities, contributions and benefits are distributed equally.

The studies' respondents also felt that it is important to remember to have time and patience. Sometimes research can get complicated by problems that are beyond the influence of the researcher and leading institutions. It is also important to have time and patience when working with international partners, as restrictions on travel, technical resources, and time can make constant communication difficult. Partners in international collaborations need to be open-minded and willing to make the partnerships successful. This means that they need to be both willing to learn about the other's cultures, as well as to have the ability to agree to disagree when the time calls for it.

Both parties need to contribute to the success of the project. Both need to be willing to have the motivation to look for grants, donations, and other funding opportunities that may help the project progress. Both need to take the responsibility to fund different portions of the project.

It is important to continue to study international research processes and the benefits and barriers of international collaborations. Goodnow (2006) observed that difficulties in international collaborations bring with them "an awareness of new questions and a second look at practices or assumptions that we usually take for granted" and this is a benefit in itself because

it opens new doors toward where the collaboration can go and toward how strong it can become. Such studies can help to enhance the understanding cross-culturally concerning the difficulties of partnerships, along with the benefits.

Conclusion

Creating international academic partnerships or conducting international research can be a difficult process. However, along with the difficulties in these partnerships and research come various benefits. Every partnership is unique in its own way. No two collaborations are alike.

All types of collaboration take place within their own cultures and around their own social norms and values. To maintain a strong collaboration requires the motivation to keep the collaboration going, as well as the ability to agree to disagree with the other side when the need calls for it. Since international collaborations exist along a continuum of situational contexts and disparities in culture, the approach each country as well as each partnership has toward research may vary. There are no two cultures that are identical, nor two governments, nor approaches toward ideas and beliefs in what constitutes as ethical and moral.

Conducting research cross-culturally allows both parties involved to learn more about one another and one another's culture. It encourages open-mindedness and helps for the awareness and practice of culture relativism instead of ethnocentrism. It also openly practices and strengthens diversity in the continuum of research in general.

In order to be able to do this, some important questions should be considered for future research. First of all, it is important to ask if one institution in a partnership imposes ethical behavior on another without respect for that institution's cultural and social disparities. Do partners on both sides of collaboration accept ethics in research and follow them, or do they disobey them? If they disobey them, why do they? Finally, do both parties feel comfortable in

discussing conflicts in research and are they willing to negotiate with one another to find a plausible solution?

These questions are fundamental to ask and consider in expanding the scope of the importance of research projects in cross-cultural collaborations. Different societies contain different norms and values, which need to be respected and honored when research is done beyond a single culture. These questions should be used to construct future research between not only the USA and CIS, but also in other international collaborations as well. Studying different methodological approaches would expand the discussion of the difficulties and challenges of international collaborations, as well as to show the fundamental differences and importance between the values from one society to the next.

Research is not always easy to conduct. Rather, when conducted internationally or cross-culturally, several factors may act as barriers toward the success or completion of projects. The transition of government in 1991 may have particularly made access more open to scholars in Russia. However, there are still hurdles to face when attempting to conduct research within this and other countries.

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