

## **Ethical Evaluation and Action Research: Toward New North-South Research Collaborations?**

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### Article abstract

This case study examines the author's experience gaining ethics approval for an action research project, to build capacity for new North-South research collaborations among graduate students trained in health and environment. It is argued that the ethics review process and action research framework seem to talk past each other. While the former may reinforce the divide between researchers and researched communities, potentially exacerbating North-South power asymmetries, the latter may presume that such asymmetries are overcome too easily through the good intentions of northern researchers, rather than through the work of southern actors to take back power. Considerations are offered for more realistic approaches to ethical North-South research collaborations.



## ÉTUDE DE CAS / CASE STUDY

**Ethical Evaluation and Action Research: Toward New North-South Research Collaborations?**Mathieu Feagan<sup>1</sup>**Résumé**

Cette étude de cas examine l'expérience de l'auteur en obtenant l'approbation éthique pour un projet de recherche-action, afin de développer des compétences pour de nouvelles collaborations de recherche nord-sud chez les étudiants gradués et formés à la santé et à l'environnement. Les auteurs font valoir que le processus d'évaluation éthique et le cadre recherche-action semblent communiquer entre eux. Alors que le premier pourrait renforcer le fossé entre les chercheurs et les populations étudiées, ce qui pourrait exacerber les asymétries de pouvoir nord-sud, le dernier pourrait supposer que de telles asymétries sont également aisément surmontées grâce aux bonnes intentions des chercheurs du Nord, plutôt que par le travail des acteurs du Sud pour reprendre le pouvoir. Des considérations sont proposées pour des approches plus réalistes de collaborations de recherches éthiques nord-sud.

**Mots clés**

évaluation éthique, recherche-action, développement des compétences, collaboration de recherche nord-sud

**Abstract**

This case study examines the author's experience gaining ethics approval for an action research project, to build capacity for new North-South research collaborations among graduate students trained in health and environment. It is argued that the ethics review process and action research framework seem to talk past each other. While the former may reinforce the divide between researchers and researched communities, potentially exacerbating North-South power asymmetries, the latter may presume that such asymmetries are overcome too easily through the good intentions of northern researchers, rather than through the work of southern actors to take back power. Considerations are offered for more realistic approaches to ethical North-South research collaborations.

**Keywords**

ethics review, action research, capacity building, North-South research collaborations

**Background**

With a “democratic and participative orientation,” action researchers are committed to “pragmatic co-creation of knowing *with*, not *about*, people” [1]. Across the Americas, action research has a history of establishing collaborative relationships in the name of social and environmental justice [2,3]. In my one-year contract as a Research Award Recipient (RAR) with the International Development Research Centre's EcoHealth program [4], I wanted to engage peer groups in Canada and Latin America in an action-reflection process, to build new research capacity based on collective inquiry and learning across North-South relations.

This case study describes my experience seeking ethics approval for this project, and shares reflections on how the ethics review process and the action research framework intersect with dominant North-South power dynamics. I end with considerations for how international development research can begin changing the relationship between Northern research priorities and Southern community partners.

**Gaining ethics approval**

My project was essentially about supporting the work and formation of two peer groups – one in Canada and one in Latin America – while examining our different experiences of graduate training, and building new capacities for collaborative inquiry. Members of the Canadian group had been trained in ecosystem approaches to health (ecohealth), and our work together focused on using our collective experiences to improve this training, by intervening in the design and delivery of future ecohealth training. The Latin American group members were part of a graduate training program in environment, health, and society; our work focused on discussing the role of research in environmental justice and social change. In both cases, I hoped that by working through peer relations, the groups would learn something new about their own capacities for self-organized collaboration, and peer-led intervention strategies.

I submitted my initial concept note/proposal to the IDRC's internal ethics review committee by their first suggested deadline. The feedback from the committee called for more details about recruitment, consent, and data collection – how would I operationalize working with the peer groups? I re-submitted, with more specific examples:

- Prior to my contract with IDRC, the Canadian peer group had prepared a survey with open-ended questions designed by and for the group to understand some of the diversity of members' ecohealth training experiences. I proposed to conduct interviews with group members to capture deeper self-reflection and analysis of group dynamics, and I provided a consent form to this effect.

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- The Latin American group was different. Even though members knew each other, they now lived in different countries across South America, and were not engaged in regular interaction. To start, I proposed an online meeting to discuss the challenges and opportunities of using academic research for the purposes of social-environmental justice. I suggested that consent would have to be negotiated on an ongoing basis, depending on how (and whether) the group wanted to continue the discussion.

In both cases, I was dealing with dynamic group processes that raise questions about who is the researcher, who is being researched, and how these lines are drawn and redrawn as the project develops. Yet, in the eyes of the ethics committee, I was the sole researcher, and the peer group members were my research participants, not collaborators. While I wanted to push back against this framing, it also occurred to me that neither categorization – research participant or collaborator – fit clearly with either group. I suggested that the peer groups needed to direct their own group processes, such that the notions of recruitment, consent, and data collection would have to make sense to them; but I could see how this might not help the ethics review committee make a determination on my research protocol, since it would have to be responsive to the emerging needs of the groups [5].

The response from the ethics committee was relatively fast, given its workload with about 15 other RAR proposals. I was asked for some additional assurances on how I would protect the identity of the institutions that the graduate students in my peer groups were affiliated with, to avoid any reputational damage. I proposed additional measures to ensure confidentiality, and my project was among the first RAR proposals to be approved. But I was now five months into my twelve-month contract, and while the committee's feedback seemed helpful for thinking through my project further, I was not convinced that the ethics review process and the action research framework had much to do with each other: at best they seemed to talk past one another, each concerned with different priorities.

## The ethics of research across North-South relations

There is a long history of communities in the global South reporting negative experiences with Northern researchers, intent on extracting data, rather than building collaborative relations [6]. Likewise, researchers from the North working in the South have raised critical questions about the actual benefits their research brings to communities [7], some going so far as to say: "ethical research guidelines [as imposed by Universities] could be yet another western construct that create a global discourse of 'our way' is the 'right way' to do things" [8]. My peers in the Latin American group introduced me to concepts – such as cognitive capitalism [9,10] – that they used to explain how Northern researchers typically impose research frameworks on Southern communities, undervaluing the knowledge those communities have already developed. We conducted our work in Spanish, but they explained how published work in Spanish is virtually ignored by the English speaking academic community.

I felt that we were sharing and learning a lot from each other, but one challenge that kept arising was that I was paid by IDRC to make time for this collaboration, whereas my collaborators had their own schedules and workloads that were already full. While I could justify putting more time into group coordination and logistics (we were funded to meet in person in Central America to deliver a workshop), this raised questions for me about how to support the group's self-directive capacities without imposing my own northern research agenda?

Now, three years later, I am still engaged with many of the same group members in Canada and Latin America, working on new projects, which I see as a sign of success of our collaborations so far. But this has not resolved the challenges of navigating the researcher/researched divide, nor am I convinced that we have avoided perpetuating dominant North-South asymmetries. The results from my interviews with the Canadian group, and the response to the workshop organized with the Latin American group, suggest to me that peer relations hold a key for learning about power relations, though transforming them is part of a much bigger project.

## Considering new directions for ethical research collaborations

Given this issue of the *Canadian Journal of Bioethics* is focused on how newly mandated national ethics review processes can support the ethics of international development research, I ask:

1. How would mandated national ethics review committees confront the emergent ethical challenges of action research, as described in this case study?
2. Would mandated national ethics review processes play into a stronger international consensus on what are the ethical standards of international development research, or would we see sharp demarcations between different national priorities?
3. How could mandated national ethics review processes support community-based capacities to manage how Northern researchers gain access to working with Southern actors?

Given my experience discussed here, I see three interconnected issues that ethics review committees could have a role in addressing. The first is the simplest: introduce more precise language to distinguish between researcher-participant versus researcher-collaborator relationships, as many ethics review committees have done already (the Latin American group has since agreed to become a collaborator on a new grant in exactly this way). Second, ethics review committees require the

purview and resources to go beyond approving (or not) a set protocol (with amendments), toward establishing ongoing lines of communication with researchers, to support the emerging nature of ethical issues, especially for action research projects. Last, the biggest challenge is for ethics review committees to acknowledge their place within the ongoing imposition of Northern research priorities on Southern communities. This challenge can only be addressed through a shift in power. For example, some indigenous communities have established their own ethical approval processes that do not depend exclusively on universities or the state, but rather recognize rights of communities to assess for themselves the benefits of proposed research projects, and then decide how to proceed [11]. Mandated national ethics review could be a step in the direction of greater local control; however, if the process falls under the purview of the state, then it seems likely that it will not get in the way of state priorities, even when they are at odds with indigenous peoples' struggles for self-determination [12]. Without addressing these three related points, ethics review committees may be supporting forms of research that exacerbate injustices, while failing to support the kinds of ethical research collaborations that action research hopes to nurture.

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#### Conflit d'intérêts

Aucun déclaré

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#### Conflicts of Interest

None to declare

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