

Guyana - How Do You Know Where to Get the Information You Need? Determining Ethics Approval Requirements in a Developing Country

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Article abstract

Determining the process for obtaining local research ethics approval, or whether such a requirement even exists, may not always be straightforward in the context of some developing countries where such information may not be easily accessible to overseas researchers. How far do a researcher's ethical obligations extend in determining whether there is a requirement for local research ethics approval, and what form this would take (e.g., institutional or centralised ethics review)? In other words, how far should a researcher be expected to go in seeking out local ethics approval, especially where such information is not readily available? As part of this discussion, this case study describes the steps that I took as the principal researcher, before I was able to reasonably conclude that no national ethics approval requirement existed in Guyana for my particular research, which involved interviewing justice service providers about the implementation of Guyana's Domestic Violence Act. Drawing on this experience, I discuss various considerations that an international development researcher should bear in mind when planning and conducting research that seeks to meet leading international norms of research ethics.

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ÉTUDE DE CAS / CASE STUDY

Guyana – How Do You Know Where to Get the Information You Need? Determining Ethics Approval Requirements in a Developing Country

Gloria Song^{1,2}**Résumé**

Déterminer le processus d'obtention d'une approbation éthique pour une recherche au niveau local, ou savoir si une telle exigence existe, n'est pas toujours simple dans le contexte de certains pays en développement où une telle information peut être difficile d'accès pour les chercheurs de l'étranger. Dans quelle(s) mesure(s) les obligations éthiques d'un chercheur s'étendent-elles pour déterminer si l'approbation éthique pour une recherche locale est nécessaire, et quelle forme devrait-elle avoir (par exemple, un comité d'éthique institutionnel ou centralisé)? En d'autres termes, est-il attendu d'un chercheur qu'il obtienne une approbation éthique au niveau local, en particulier lorsque ces informations ne sont pas disponibles? Cette étude de cas décrit les étapes que j'ai suivies en tant que chercheuse principale, avant de pouvoir raisonnablement conclure qu'aucune exigence d'approbation éthique nationale n'existait au Guyana pour mes recherches. Celles-ci impliquaient d'interviewer des agents de l'ordre sur la mise en œuvre de la Loi sur les violences domestiques au Guyana. S'appuyant sur cette expérience, je discute de diverses considérations qu'un chercheur en développement international doit garder à l'esprit lors de la planification et de la conduite de la recherche afin de répondre aux principales normes internationales de recherche.

Mots clés

loi, genre, éthique de la recherche, pays en développement, accès à l'information, développement international

Abstract

Determining the process for obtaining local research ethics approval, or whether such a requirement even exists, may not always be straightforward in the context of some developing countries where such information may not be easily accessible to overseas researchers. How far do a researcher's ethical obligations extend in determining whether there is a requirement for local research ethics approval, and what form this would take (e.g., institutional or centralised ethics review)? In other words, how far should a researcher be expected to go in seeking out local ethics approval, especially where such information is not readily available? As part of this discussion, this case study describes the steps that I took as the principal researcher, before I was able to reasonably conclude that no national ethics approval requirement existed in Guyana for my particular research, which involved interviewing justice service providers about the implementation of Guyana's Domestic Violence Act. Drawing on this experience, I discuss various considerations that an international development researcher should bear in mind when planning and conducting research that seeks to meet leading international norms of research ethics.

Keywords

law, gender, research ethics, developing countries, access to information, international development

Introduction

Researchers from developed countries may be accustomed to having access to well-established research ethics procedures and resources (i.e., clear national guidelines and research ethics boards at their host institution). But how does a researcher go about obtaining local research ethics approval in a developing country where they plan to conduct research involving human participants?

It is important to recognize that conducting research in a developing country can be challenging, especially when dealing with a different cultural context that may have very limited resources and an underdeveloped infrastructure. Furthermore, the process for obtaining local research ethics approval in a developing country may not always be straightforward. Even simply determining whether there exists a requirement to obtain approval from a local research ethics body may be difficult. This situation presents a related dilemma: where it is difficult to determine the local ethics approval process requirements, do international development researchers still have an ethical obligation to obtain local ethics approval from the appropriate national body in the country of research?

The main article for this special issues makes the case for obtaining local ethics approval when conducting field research in a developing country [1]. At the very minimum, researchers must satisfy themselves as to whether a local ethics approval requirement exists. This case study further expands on this argument by examining scenarios where it is not easy to determine whether there is a local requirement to obtain ethics approval in the country of research.

This case study recounts efforts to determine whether there was such a research ethics approval requirement in Guyana, a small Caribbean country located on the northern shore of South America. This research project was conducted as part of the International Development Research Centre's (IDRC) research award program. The objective of the research project was to use an anti-essentialist feminist legal theory framework to study the implementation of Guyana's Domestic Violence Act, by conducting case law research and interviewing various justice service providers, including lawyers, the judiciary, and women's organizations, about their experiences and observations of the protection order application process that is provided by the law. As such, the nature of the research was both based in legal studies and the social sciences.

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A personal narrative approach has been used as the format for this case study. Narratives and the act of telling stories are a powerful tool frequently used by feminist legal scholars [1], as well as the related fields of critical race theory [2] and queer legal theory [3], recounting both personal experiences as well as experiences of others dealing with the subject matter firsthand. The use of narratives serve many crucial purposes, including bringing to light experiences that may often not be discussed publicly in order to make abstract claims more tangible [4] and to challenge stereotypes [5]. Personal narratives challenge the notions of scientific rationality prevailing in our society that “privileges universality, statistical significance, and logical deductions as ways of knowing about the world” by presenting experiences as “a way of knowing that should occupy a respected, or in some cases a privileged position, in analysis and argumentation” [4]. The theoretical framework used for this research project, anti-essentialist feminist legal theory, particularly emphasizes the need to prioritize the voices of those going through the experience [6], in recognition of the feminist principle that the personal is political. Although I do not claim to speak on behalf of marginalized voices in this particular context, given the useful purpose that narratives can provide, I present my personal experience in going through the process of determining whether there was a local ethics approval process.

Case Presentation

As the principal researcher, I used a number of methods and sources to explore what, if any, national research ethics approval requirements existed in Guyana for my research, including correspondence with a regional bioethics organization, other researchers, Guyanese government offices, and the Guyanese High Commission. The research project had gone through an ethics approval process with the IDRC’s Advisory Committee on Research Ethics, as is required by IDRC’s research award program. However, in international development research, it is important to also obtain ethics approval from the appropriate local research ethics body in the country being researched, if there is such a legal requirement and if research ethics infrastructure is present [7]. As such, I set out to determine whether there was such a requirement in Guyana.

An initial web search using search terms such as “Guyana”, “research” and “ethics” in varying forms did not produce any answers as to whether Guyana had an ethics requirement for this type of legal and social science research, interviewing justice service providers and researching laws. Many countries limit requirements for research ethics review to biomedical research. I therefore contacted several other sources.

One source was the Bioethics Society of the English-Speaking Caribbean, which aims to “increase knowledge and understanding of bioethics through promoting and fostering deliberations across the English-speaking Caribbean” [8]. The Society informed me by email that ethics review in Guyana is conducted by the ethics committee at the Ministry of Health, and recommended that I contact the Chief Medical Officer for Guyana. The Chief Medical Officer’s office did not respond to my email inquiry. The Chief Medical Officer’s email address was the only contact information that had been provided. It is plausible that with sustained effort, other forms of contact may have been discovered, such as phone, fax, or regular mail. However, I opted not to further pursue this line because the advice did not appear to be correct. Although the Society’s recommendation was understandable in light of its focus on bioethics, it seemed unlikely to me that the proposed legal and social science research would necessarily fall within the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Health, as health is a separate ministerial jurisdiction from legal affairs and social sciences.

I then consulted with researchers who had previously conducted field research in Guyana. One researcher from the social science field had recently opted not to seek local ethics approval from the Guyanese authorities, because the researcher had perceived there to be safety concerns in doing so, due to the controversial nature of their research topic. Such decisions are of course difficult to make, and not all researchers may agree on when such a decision may be justified. For further discussion on what to consider when deciding whether to forgo local ethics approval, please refer to the main article in the thematic issue “The Case for Local Ethics Oversight in International Development Research” [7].

Another researcher had recently completed her doctoral research on the Makushi Amerindians’ perceptions on environmental education in Guyana [9] and as a result had been required to obtain approval from the ministry responsible for the environment and the ministry responsible for Indigenous peoples. It therefore seemed logical that I would have to consult with the relevant government ministries, likely the Ministry of Legal Affairs and the Ministry of Social Protection.

To follow up on this particular lead, I sought to contact the relevant government ministries in Guyana. This process involved numerous and repeated phone calls in an attempt to connect to the relevant body. The website for the Ministry of Social Protection appeared to not be operational, but contact information for the Ministry was available through the Guyana High Commission’s website located in London, United Kingdom [10]. I telephoned the Ministry of Social Protection, and was referred to the Women’s Affairs Bureau. After a few telephone calls, the Women’s Affairs Bureau referred me back to the Director of Social Services under the Ministry of Social Protection. With many more phone calls, I was finally able to connect with the Director, who explained over the phone that no government approval would be required to conduct my research, unless I wished to interview someone from the government department. In that case, the request would have to go through the department secretary. In an ideal situation, best practices dictate that written confirmation should be obtained; however, it is important to note that this may not always be possible in a developing country context where even reaching an official by telephone may be near impossible, as was noted in this particular case.

Another resource was the Guyana High Commission located in Ottawa, Canada. The High Commission staff responded to my email inquiry approximately one month later, advising me to ask the Ministry of Legal Affairs. I sent an email to the office, and

followed up approximately two weeks later with several phone calls, when I was referred to a staff member in the Ministry of Legal Affairs. The staff member promised to look into the question of whether approval would be required. Two weeks later, I followed up with the Ministry of Legal Affairs, and the same staff member advised that she had confirmed that no approval would be required to conduct the research, unless I intended to question anyone from within the Ministry.

I therefore concluded that there did not appear to be one overarching research ethics approval body in Guyana, as is the case in many developing countries. Instead, ethics approval may be required for particular types of research falling within the jurisdiction of particular government ministries, such as health, environment, or Indigenous peoples. Furthermore, if research was to involve speaking with staff members of a government department, the researcher should request permission from the department, although this requirement did not appear to be for the purpose of ensuring that research ethics standards were met, so much as for control of the type of research that would be permitted in that department.

Learning from experience: Considerations for determining local research ethics approval requirements

Detail has been provided in describing this process in order to demonstrate that local research ethics requirements may not always be easy to determine, particularly in developing countries where the governing infrastructure may have limited resources. Information about such requirements may not be easily accessible for researchers from abroad. Despite this, it is still important to determine whether there are local ethics requirements in the country being researched, for ethical reasons relating to justice [7]. As such, it is useful to be resourceful and explore creative strategies for finding the answer.

Such strategies also require adapting to the various ways that other cultural contexts may operate. In Canada, for example, people are used to having information available online and regularly use email as a reliable form of communication. From a legal perspective, it may very well be preferable to receive such information in writing in order to confirm one's understanding of the communication and to keep as a record of proof. However, the reality is that online communication may not be the dominant method in some work cultures. In some developing contexts, an office may not have the required resources to use email on a regular basis. As such, a researcher may have to use various methods of contact.

Researchers should also pay attention to the sources that they consult when determining whether a local research ethics approval requirement exists. For example, it may be helpful to ask other researchers who have dealt with that particular country; however, it is not enough to rely on their information alone. Ideally, researchers will want to confirm their understanding with the appropriate government authority, where possible.

Finally, patience and persistence are also required. At all times, researchers should remain respectfully cognizant of the fact that government offices in developing regions may be working with limited resources, have competing high pressure priorities and deadlines, and have other legitimate reasons for not immediately responding to the researcher's inquiries. A lack of response from an office does not necessarily absolve researchers of their duty to exercise due diligence in determining whether an ethics approval requirement (and system) exists. The onus remains on the researcher to ensure that all and any ethics approval requirements met, in addition to those of their own host institution. Repeated follow-up to initial inquiries is recommended, and if one method of communication is not successful, the researcher may wish to try a different form. And it is important to recognize that this process may take some time.

Ultimately, I was able to go through the proper channels of authorization to interview Guyanese government officials, thanks to the Canadian High Commission in Guyana, who graciously provided valuable assistance in setting up these interviews. The Canadian High Commission, or embassies in a given country, may therefore serve as a valuable resource for questions that a researcher may have regarding local research ethics requirements.

Questions to consider

- How far should a researcher go (i.e., due diligence) to determine whether there is (and respond to) a requirement for local research ethics approval? At what point does one stop and conclude that there are none?
- What resources can a researcher use to determine whether there are local research ethics approval requirements?
- What resources should be considered as reliable authorities (e.g., government agencies, international associations) for determining local research ethics requirements?
- What is the role of the researchers' host institution research ethics body (such as Research Ethics Boards in Canada) in this context?

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Conflit d'intérêts

Aucun déclaré

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Conflicts of Interest

None to declare

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