Conceptualising risk (and potential for harm)

Various kinds of risk and harm are clearly outlined in sections of the *Massey University Code of Ethical Conduct for research, teaching and evaluations involving Human Participants:*

Risk of Harm to Participants
Risk of Harm to Researchers
Risk of Harm to Groups/Communities/Institutions
Risk of Harm to Massey University

Massey University requires that all research projects complete a formal assessment of risk as part of the ethics process through the Risk Assessment questions and this involves considering both intended and unintended consequences for each of the four categories of stakeholders.

'Risk' is a vague word which covers a range of potential harm and assessing risk or harm it is not simply a procedural requirement – it requires deeper reflection. Key questions to consider are:

- What constitutes 'risk' and 'harm' in this research context and for whom?
- Whose notions of risk or harm are most relevant in this context?

'Harm' is often invisible and elusive, complicated by differing estimations and differing viewpoints – the researcher's and the participants' standpoints.

Many social researchers see their work as largely benign, or at least harmless in comparison to research in, for example, medical settings. However, a better way of understanding notions of risks or harm that may arise in social research is to see these to be *different* in nature. While most codes of ethical conduct state that the researchers' first concern must be the effects on the individual research respondent, it is important that any risks to the researcher are also unpacked.

For example, some researchers and various disciplines (anthropology, defence studies, politics) commonly work in and undertake research in developing countries, working in contexts which are unpredictable, fragile and/or dangerous, researching issues which are complex and multifaceted, i.e. Ebola; child labour; trafficking; piracy, or terrorism. With our growing overseas international post-graduate cohort and the fact we teach in the distance space, we also have students working in environments which on the face of it seem risky (i.e. Afghanistan) but may in fact, for the researchers be home territory. This can pose problems for ethics committees who may have grave concerns about researchers working in risky environments, where rules surrounding harm, safety, consent, rights, self-determinism, participation, autonomy, justice, beneficence and non-malfeasance are not straight forward, where fieldwork plans might be tentative and data collection techniques maybe non-standard. However, from a disciplinary perspective the planned research might not be judged high risk

but because the setting is the Thai-Burma border or Zimbabwe, the research is deemed by those outside the discipline to involve higher risk. Questions about researcher safety are then understandably asked.

In taking ethics seriously, while also thinking beyond the idea of institutional protection, some programmes at Massey have developed internal ethics processes for their research students. Development Studies will be used here as an example. Firstly, students must read all relevant Massey University documents and forms. Secondly, students then complete the Development Studies programme in-house ethics form and meet with three academic members, two of whom are the supervisors and one who is independent from the process. The meeting takes between an hour to an hour and a half and the Development Studies programme in-house ethics form guides the meeting. Potential ethical scenarios are posed and a key point of the meeting is to encourage the applicant to think through potential ethical issues and how they would look to prevent them prior or mitigate them. The focus is on the principles of respect, responsibility, reciprocity and relationships. Level of risk and issues of safety are assessed in relation to: research questions, fieldwork site (country, location, participants), cultural issues, gender, insider/outsider, logistics (climate, wet season, politics), health, research permission, research assistants and conflicts of interest.

Ethics committees have a responsibility to ensure that researchers have discussed and carefully considered potential risks and harm to themselves, their participants and the community or institution to which their participants align. Sometimes insufficient information about the research context can make it difficult to evaluate the level of risk assessment which has been done. Having the applicant and supervisor attend the Committee meeting can be useful for both parties in further exploring the potential for harm. Applicants and participants who are familiar with a situation may be less at risk of harm than an outsider might perceive. Assessing risk is often a case of a tension between the autonomy of participants (as individuals or as belonging to a collective), researchers, the research knowledge to be gained, and the avoidance of any potential for harm to any of the humans involved.

Thinking from a principle of ethical risk

It is also important to consider more broadly the appropriateness of talking about 'risk of harm'. Describing risks as 'risks of harm' also has the potential to be misleading as it implies that harm is ultimately the only ethically relevant consideration. Harm is just one ethical consideration among many. Harms do not always and everywhere matter ethically and there are lots of harms where there is no ethical requirement to prevent (sometimes – not always – this is because the harm would have occurred anyway, sometimes it is because the harm in question is one where someone else is responsible for…..for example, upsetting a racist or sexist participant by being of the wrong race/sex is to cause harm to the racist/sexist, but this is not the kind of harm we have a responsibility to prevent because plausibly people ought not to have racist/sexist attitudes). Indeed, 'risk of harm' might be better described as 'ethical risk', because the risk is that one will be doing something unethical, rather than something harmful (doing something harmful is often unethical, of course!).

The point is just that it is ethical risk that matters, not risk of harm per se. This, perhaps, would also underscore that ethical risk is something one gets a sense of by reflection on the nature of the research, rather than by trying to do some kind of cost/benefit calculation which is often what happens when we look to assess risk based on the things we have listed prior.

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