

Thinking about Journals, IRBs, and Research Partners (Interviewees)

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In the spring of 2018, I had the pleasure of participating in a roundtable at WPSA entitled "Will the real "research ethics" stand up? IRBs, DA-RT, QTD, and the APSA Ethics Guide in the age of Trump." The following is an edited portion of my remarks at that roundtable.

I am concerned at the lack of understanding of the international context in attempting to protect human subjects as part of the research process. There are many issues of concern related to language and culture, but in these remarks here, I will reflect on how these new efforts toward assuring trust for the readers can generate complications and distrust (and as a result, potentially danger) for the research subjects and the researchers.

To give some context: The research I have been working on for more than a decade is with Dr. Hani Zubida, an Israeli political scientist, and concerns temporary labor migrants in Israel, the approximately 250,000 to 350,000 non-Jewish, non-Arab migrants performing construction, agriculture, carework, cleaning and gardening and, previously, some factory work. They account for about 5 percent of the total population and 11 percent of the labor force. In Israel, residency permits for foreigners are tied to employment and, as a result, migrants' residency status in Israel is precarious. Loss of a job means deportation or becoming an undocumented worker and an even more precarious existence. The legal system provides few modes of recourse if migrants are subjected to deportation processes.

Due to the risk, it is hard to get migrants to trust researchers. It takes time to

develop a relationship. Learning about these people and their experiences is important for research and policy making, as Israel is but one of many cases of temporary labor migration schemes. Worldwide, the ILO estimates that 42 million people are temporary labor migrants. Their decisions to come and stay have demographic, economic, political, social and cultural implications. Their remittances account for more than \$600 billion, according to the World Bank, and are critical sources of foreign exchange for many countries. Knowing when, where, why and how they come, go, stay, bring others, remit, receive, ask for assistance, make businesses, etc. is as important for the sending as the receiving countries, communities, employers and families.

In the last year and a half, my research partner and I submitted two manuscripts to journals that were peer-reviewed, and we were offered the opportunity to revise & resubmit. The initial article was submitted blind and with no identifying information, as per the consent information sheet that was approved by an Institutional Review Board. In the comments from reviewers and subsequent comments from the editors, we were asked to unmask the research partners (interviewees). We were asked to provide more information about the migrants' background, age, country of origin, time in Israel, occupation, sex, etc. I'll quote from the reviews (in *Italics from both journals*; our responses to the reviewers are underlined) concerning what we were asked to do:

I would appreciate more details about research participants next to each quote. A pseudonym and/or a list of key characteristics regarding e.g. gender, age, nationality and profession would put each quote into a context, e.g. Pseudonym (male, aged 30, Ghanaian, cleaning staff).

We were told that this was necessary to contextualize our research partners. We said that unmasking them would place them in danger and that we had promised through the IRB informed consent sheet NOT to do that. Further we explained that by listing their

characteristics as national origin and sex and occupation, we were reducing them to a string of work-related categories and not presenting them as whole human beings, exactly the criticism levied by our research partners which we discussed at length in the paper. The editor then wrote us a letter attached to a second round of reviews, stating:

We would appreciate if you could provide more details on your research group. We read your justification for not ascribing interviewees to any particular socio-demographic group. However, we have to stick to a more general rule of qualitative methodology which is transparency (in this case with regard to the characteristics of the studied group). Taking into account your reservations to reveal characteristics of quoted persons, we propose the following. Please number interviews and provide the table listing all interviews with the main characteristics of the interviewees (gender, age, country of origin, occupation etc.). Then, while quoting your interviewees, please provide just a number of the interview for each quotation. We hope this solution is acceptable for you since it allows for keeping both transparency and preventing readers from reading research results from a perspective of social roles and groups of interviewees.

We responded:

We have read the reviews and considered them carefully. We responded to each point in the second round with our thoughts about methodology and content. We performed a major revision using the helpful comments of your reviewers. In reading this most recent review we have feel that we cannot change the article to meet the wishes of your reviewer without changing the integrity of our research.

In our reply we again noted that we could not make the changes they wished for ethical and methodologic reasons. We were happy to have the article published as is but refused to make these (and other) changes. The article was rejected.

A few months later, we submitted a second piece, again to a peer-reviewed journal. Again, the manuscript was sent with no identifying information. In the revise and resubmit, the reviewer made the following suggestion:

It is strange that no information was provided on the interviewees. There should be a table with basic demographic characteristics of the migrants interviewed – country of origin, sex, age, marital status, co-habitation status, occupation and if possible

income and amount paid to migration brokers.

Similar to our response to the first journal, we responded to the reviewers as follows (with a paragraph break added to make the reading here easier):

We were asked to include a table indicating the “basic demographic characteristics of the migrants interviewed – country of origin, sex, age, marital status, co-habitation status, occupation and if possible income and amount paid to migration brokers.” There are two reasons we have included the information the way that we have. We have included demographic sketches on pages 15-16 that provide an overview of the demographics of our interview partners. We have also offered demographic data when presenting the interview data. We have chosen not to do more for both methodologic and ethical reasons. Firstly, from a methodologic perspective, there is an argument in the field about how much and what kind of information to provide about “research subjects.” Does being a “Ghanaian” or a “male” affect the remittance practices? Does being a “Filipina caregiver” (as opposed to, say, a “Nepali caregiver”) matter? Does being “old” (what is “old”?) change how you view remittances? These categorizations remove the informants from being experts of their condition and render them as Ghanaians, women, old people, cleaners, and caregivers; exactly the complaint made by our interview partners: they are more than their jobs, age, gender or nationality. They are multifaceted human beings. We are looking at migrants as a whole, not at ethnicities or gender-specific or age-related, etc. behavior; all of which are incredibly important but for future papers. As we continue our work, we hope later to examine how these characteristics affect remittance patterns.

Secondly, and from an ethical perspective, more importantly, although we appreciate the desire for ease that comes from a table, we cannot provide such a table because it would easily unmask our respondents. We promised the interview partners as part of our ethical subjects’ agreement (Institutional Research Board) approval that we would not provide identifying information in our published reports. By listing the country of origin, age, occupation, etc., it would take seconds to figure out who said what. To provide such a table could endanger their ability to earn a living and their temporary residency status. Our respondents are in precarious circumstances. Even for those in completely legal employment contracts, they risk losing their employment or having their residency rights rescinded for comments that they made. Although we appreciate the idea, and as researchers understand why it would be valuable, we must respect and protect our interview partners for ethical considerations and because that was part of the agreement we made in exchange for their thoughts.

The article was accepted. I don't know why one journal accepted our explanation and the other did not.

Editors' decisions to demand unmasking interview partners has implications for the trust between researchers and studied populations, IRB's and researchers and readers and journals as well as for the quality of information. What value does an IRB determination have if a journal editor can simply overturn it? Who is there left to protect interview informants? What does this say about our production of science? As a reader, I might trust a journal and the information in an article more knowing that the researcher kept professional promises to protect interviewees. Since professors are often on time clocks for reappointment, tenure and promotion, sacrificing a promise to an interviewee may seem tolerable, even acceptable, especially when the interviewees occupy marginal political and social spaces, reside far away and we can rationalize risking their livelihoods for our own. I wonder if fifty years from now will we be reading about our own versions of Henrietta Lacks?