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Keeping academic field researchers safe: Ethical safeguards

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Abstract:

Competent risk management is central to the ethical conduct and profitability of organisations including universities. Recent UK research highlights the risks of physical and psychological harm and emotional distress for researchers and the importance of developing strategies to deal with these issues prior to data being collected. Actual numbers of incidents of researcher harm in Australian universities are unavailable; however anecdotal evidence and Bloor et al's (2010) case studies suggest that this is a significant issue. They recommended risk management practices such as training about researcher safety, pre-trip security briefings, established call-back systems, working in pairs, and compulsory de-briefings are recommended. Yet Australian universities do little to protect the safety of field researchers when they collect data in private locations, such as participants' homes and when dealing with emotionally challenging content. This is at odds with the duty of care requirements on employers in current state based occupational health and safety (OHS) laws where breaches attract considerable penalties. The failure to adequately address the potential safety hazards and manage the risks associated with data collection places Australian universities in a vulnerable position, and possibly at risk of litigation, in their duty to adequately protect researchers. The paper presents a review of the international literature and draws on the UK research. Conceptual modelling is provided to illustrate the risk to universities if researchers are harmed in the field. Finally, the paper concludes with a call for further research to develop robust policy and practice that protects the field researcher.

Key Words: Researcher safety, risk management, ethical research practice, occupational health and safety, universities.

Introduction

Research with human participants in Australia is regulated by the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007). However, this statement focuses more attention on the treatment of research participants than it does on the field researchers' safety. As Dickson-Swift, James, Kippen and Liamputtong (2007) argue in their study on field researchers in public health organisations, "there is insufficient recognition of the need for protection of researchers". This is despite human research ethics committees having a duty to "assess risks to researchers and ensure that strategies are in place to minimise them" (Dickson-Swift et al 2007:576). This issue also emerges within the university sector as much research in the social sciences use qualitative methodologies that collect data, sometimes in risky environments. As Allen (2008:105) noted "The ethical conduct of researchers is increasingly a matter of institutional concern because of the degree to which non-compliance with national standards can expose the entire institution to risk". He questions whether a university ethical review results in actual ethical conduct of research; however his focus is once again on risk to the participants. He calls on a resituating of research ethics to within "a broader framework of institutional governance" and to promote "reflective practice of researchers through every stage of their work".

University ethics procedures generally place their focus on risk to the participant from whom the data is collected from. Little is in place to assess the risk or account for risks to the field researcher collecting the data except for a general requirement to undertake a risk assessment prior to the data collection using ethics approval processes. However, perception of the level of risk is subjective. What one person perceives as a risk, another may not (Statzer, 1999; Tolbert, 2005). These risk reduction policies fail as they rely on Heads of School/Department, PhD supervisors or Chief Investigators to decide on the level of risk involved in the project and to suggest strategies to protect field researchers. An example of this can be found when

researchers are asked to 'risk rank' a task. Differences between rankings can vary considerably from one person to another, and may be the result of previous past experience or 'close calls' (Hopkins, 2005). Manuele (2010:30) found that there is generally "a lack of awareness of the nature of risk" and that "there was concern over the subjective judgements made and the uncertainties that almost always exist when risks are assessed". Hubbard, Backett-Milburn and Kemmer (2001) maintain that the failure to recognise risk for field researchers is due to the principal researcher or PhD supervisor's remoteness to the project. In many cases the principal researcher or supervisor has been many years out of the field and may not have collected data themselves for some time. Bloor et al, (2010) maintain that this is not a structural support issue but rather one of institutional culture. The culture of research institutions while supporting research by providing structures such as ethics processes and mentoring; may not *recognise* the risk that field researchers can encounter while collecting data.

Moreover, as has been shown in the UK, research budgets are perceived as being too tight to implement safe working practices such as researchers working in pairs or using a call-back system (Bloor et al, 2010). However, Bloor et al (2010) argue that using limited funds as an excuse not to implement such safe procedures is simply poor planning by grant holders. In Australian universities there appears to be no in-built safety measures canvassed except for a requirement for the principal investigator to provide a risk rating prior to the data collection. With limited funds available for research in Australia the problem is likely to be as acute here. While structural support is needed to afford implementation of safe working practices, so too is cultural change such that 'safety thinking' permeates through institutions. This paper discusses this issue by reviewing the current literature and asks two questions in a call for further research. How do researchers and other key stakeholders in the research process assess researcher risk? What policies and practices are in place in Australian universities to

ensure the safety of field researchers? It concludes with a conceptual model of the risks to universities if a field researcher is harmed in the course of their collecting data. It calls for empirical research to develop robust procedure and policy in Australia to protect field researchers.

An important safety issue

Whilst Australia is striving to be one of the world leaders in occupational health and safety practice (ILO, 2005); it appears that limited inquiry may have led to a lack of focus on duty of care for university field researchers. In 2003, Johnson and Macleod Clarke (2003:423) began the conversation in Australia by stating that there was a 'lack of any systematic inquiry into the experiences of field workers while collecting sensitive data'. Dickson-Swift et al (2005) followed up by investigating 37 Australian university ethic application forms to determine the number that addressed the safety of the researcher and found that in 78% of cases there was no reference to risk to the researcher. There was only one application form that identified that some research could involve physical or emotional and/or psychological risk to the researcher.

Australian universities appear to be lagging behind and silent on this issue, whereas a recent report (2007) and article by Bloor et al (2010) details a commissioned inquiry conducted in the UK by *Qualiti* (Qualitative Research in the Social Sciences: Innovation, Integration and Impact; a node of the Economic and Social Research Centre's National Centre for Research Methods) into risk and the well-being of researchers in the UK. The inquiry report and subsequent article argue that field researchers and PhD students are let down by principal investigators and supervisors who fail to manage researcher risks effectively. They sampled 83 PhD students who were invited to post their stories on a website in the UK. They followed up with 13 in-depth interviews to investigate practices in place to protect the field researcher.

Their recommendations included providing researcher safety in their curricula, health and safety audits for all university departments, and specific questions in ethics applications that addressed contextual safety issues (Bloor et al, 2010: 52). This area of research appears to be limited except for the UK enquiry, with a paucity of literature from other countries in the world.

Managing Risk

For organisations including universities, managing risk is paramount to profitability. Organisations have moved towards recognising that to minimise the cost of risk it is necessary to focus on identifying and reducing major sources of risk (Bohle & Quinlan, 2000; Grammeno, 2009). Collecting data as a field researcher poses several areas of risk (Bahn & Weatherill, forthcoming). There is risk to the participants involved in sensitive data collection in that they rely on adequate ethical procedures from the researcher (Mertens & Ginsberg, 2008). Conversely there is risk to the researcher in that they can be emotionally challenged (Mitchell & Irvine, 2008) and in some cases may be collecting data that is not in a public space such as in the participant's home. Both these situations have the potential to impact on the field researcher's emotional and personal safety.

Bohle and Quinlan (2000: xii) state that "persons are far more likely to suffer a serious injury at work than from travelling in a car or from a crime of violence". Hence organisations have embarked on risk management processes to adhere to their duty of care requirements and encourage 'safe systems of work' for their employees. Current Australian Occupational Health and Safety (1984) legislation (and the impending harmonised WHS Act in Australia (Safe Work Australia, 2010)) requires employers to provide a safe system of work for their employees with considerable penalties being attached for failure to comply. Under the law employers are required to: provide and maintain a safe working environment with safe

systems of work; and information to employees in relation to health, safety and welfare in the workplace. Within the Western Australian Occupational Health and Safety Act (1984) the 'duty of care' legislative requirements are described in the guidance notes that accompany the Act as:

"General duty of care" and "general duties" describes duties that the OH&S Act (1984) places upon people to ensure their own safety at work and that of others who are at the workplace or who might be injured by the work. These general duties are aimed at preventing anyone being killed, injured or contracting an illness because of work or activities at a workplace, including using plant or equipment (Commission for Occupational Safety and Health, 2010).

The provisions within the guidance note of preventing anyone from 'contracting an illness' extends to emotional stress. While it could be argued that it is not practicable for institutions to do a full OHS review for settings where field researchers may be undertaking their work, or indeed that researchers would support an increase in ethics paperwork, it appears that safety for field researchers barely appears on the radar and that the institutional culture begs for change. As Bloor et al (2010:51) state: "the inadequate management of researcher risk by universities should not be seen as simply symptomatic of wider corporate failure" and therefore remain unaddressed.

Ambient risk

Lee (1995) described risk for field researchers as 'ambient' or 'situational'. Ambient danger is risk that is situated in the environmental setting where the data is collected for example, the risk of exposure to tropical diseases and parachute jumps. Situational danger is described as risk that occurs while collecting data in a particular setting for example, threats of violence towards researchers while collecting data from drug dealers or prostitutes. Based on Lees' (1995) work, any field work in people's homes is a situational risk, however this risk becomes amplified when it is not recognised by the grant holder, PhD supervisor or field researcher as a threat to the interviewers personal safety (Hopkins, 2005). When collecting

data, for example, from sick, dying, or disabled participants in their homes, there are often other individuals working and providing services within the home at the same time. Although the participant may not pose a physical threat to the field researcher, this cannot be guaranteed from other individuals. Field researchers may be subject to physical assaults on their person, verbal abuse or simply slipping and falling as they navigate their way through the home. Stated simply; the field researcher has *no knowledge* of the environment they are entering when collecting data in the home environment. Moreover, these risks are generally overlooked or underestimated (Tolbert 2005) and when they are not recognised as a threat to the safety of field researchers they are amplified (Hopkins 2005).

It is the unknown that poses the greatest risk and it is the unknown that diligent risk management demands be foreseen and addressed. This is echoed in the revised Risk Management Principles and Guidelines for Australia and New Zealand ISO 31000:2009 (Standards Australia, 2009: ii) that now “defines risk in terms of the effect of uncertainty on objectives”. Universities have a moral and legal duty to ensure the safety of their employees and it is expected that all risks are identified and adequately controlled.

While it is not practicable for institutions to undertake full OHS reviews of all settings where field researchers may collect data, and researchers may balk at increasing paperwork associated with gaining ethics approval and proceeding with data collection, universities have a legal duty of care for the safety of their employees and it is therefore reasonable to expect that *all risks* are identified and adequately controlled. While Bloor et al (2010:51) argue that “the inadequate management of researcher risk by universities should not be seen as simply symptomatic of wider corporate failure” the question is do Australian universities do what they should to encourage and support ‘safety thinking’?

Conducting ‘sensitive’ research

Numerous authors have published research on the issues of collecting sensitive data as a researcher, including psychological harm and emotional distress (Corbin & Morse, 2003; Booth & Booth, 1994; Lee & Renzetti, 1990), and a desensitising of emotional feelings (Dickson-Swift et al, 2007; Johnson & Macleod Clarke, 2003). Dickson-Swift et al (2007), Johnson and Macleod Clarke (2003), and Durham (2002) raise the issue of increasing participant vulnerability while they tell their stories in that they 'relieve' traumatic experiences. Additionally, Shaw (2003) notes that when participants retell their story the researcher invariably becomes an actor in the tale and is at risk of emotional distress. Opie, Goodwin, Finke, Beattley, Lee, and van Epps (1992) found that many qualitative researchers absorb often traumatic data and internalise the suffering of those they interview and relive these experiences when transcribing recorded data. Booth and Booth (1994) stress the need for researchers to care for themselves as well as their participants as they reported feeling tired and exhausted due to the emotional strain of interviewing vulnerable participants. Coulter (2005) reported distress while researching female circumcision rites in Sierra Leone and Moran-Ellis (1997) whilst interviewing support workers involved in child protection. Dickson-Swift et al (2007) found that researchers become desensitised when talking about their own experiences in conducting sensitive research because they had heard so many difficult stories. Field researchers conducting qualitative research may also become 'desensitised' to the possible risk to their personal safety as they are regularly in the participants' homes when collecting data. Establishing policy in this area would promote a change of culture and alter researchers practice in the field.

There is some discussion in the literature regarding personal safety (Lee, 1995; Bloor et al, 2007, 2010; Howell, 1990) or as Howell (1990) defines as the 'human hazards of fieldwork'; however many of the scenarios presented illustrate the risks of contracting physical illnesses such as hepatitis and malaria (Lee, 1995; Peterson, 2000) or the dangers of collecting data in

risky environments such as working with drug dealers (Lee, 1995; Sampson & Thomas, 2003). Examples of personal safety risks to field researchers include a case study by Belousov et al (2007) where they report the murder of a key gatekeeper at the beginning of the fieldwork; and a PhD student who was imprisoned without trial in Africa while on fieldwork (Bloor et al, 2010). Collecting data in these situations is indeed risky and universities take considerable steps to protect the field researcher. However, there is latent risk that lies within all qualitative data collections, particularly when this occurs in people's homes. This risk may be overlooked or underestimated (Tolbert, 2005).

Bloor et al (2010) argue that organisations such as those working in the media, providing social and therapy services within people's homes and aid agencies manage field workers better than universities. Their staff attend safety training, pre-trip security briefings, and compulsory de-briefings. Additionally their staff often work in tandem, have established call-back systems, and peer support. However, Spencer and Munch (2003:535) found that social workers rarely report violent incidents as they perceived that this was an inevitable part of their work and a lack of an organisational standard reporting requirement discouraged reporting of incidents.

To address these issues Corbin and Morse (2003) found that some review boards of institutions (those panels that review qualitative research proposals), are so concerned about the risks of psychological harm and emotional distress that they require researchers to develop strategies to deal with these issues prior to commencement of the data collection. For example, the Integrated Research Application System (currently superseding the UK's National Health Service Central Office for Research Ethic's Committees) is the most widely used form in the UK. It contains questions about possible researcher harm including "What is the potential for adverse effects, risks or hazards, pain, discomfort, distress or inconvenience to the researcher themselves?" with specific reference to "risk for lone researchers visiting

participants at home” and require applicants to “describe the measures proposed to address such issues” (Bloor et al 2010: 51).

Bloor et al (2007) noted that universities provide risk guidelines in their ethics applications to support the development of these strategies. However, they explain that although formal risk assessments are becoming more common in social research projects they are not a universal occurrence nor are they developed to a global standard (Bloor et al, 2010). In addition standardised risk assessment tools used by universities may be wholly unsuitable for social research. Bloor, et al’s study revealed that although universities have available advice on correctly conducting risk assessments, the provision for counselling to mitigate distress and the provision to provide additional insurance coverage, these resources are under-used.

Modelling university risk against field research safety

How risks are perceived affects how they are managed and the effects of risk management on the organisation. Smallman (1996) models the influence of factors such as structure, strategy, culture, organisational effectiveness and context on risk perception. Universities already have in place risk management practices which require ethics approval prior to data being collected (risk management structure). As part of the ethics approval process, the Chief Investigator or PhD Supervisor is required to determine the level of risk within the project and perform a risk assessment (risk management strategy). However, determining the level of risk depends on an individual’s perception (organisational performance effectiveness) and they may choose to rank risk ‘low’ to reduce additional ethics approval requirements (risk management culture). Once ethics approval is gained the field research begins, but there may be unacknowledged and unrecognised risk associated with collecting the data in terms of emotional or physical safety. Three actions can result if the researcher is harmed: 1) The incident may not be reported, which in turn results in further harm to the researcher; 2)

Counselling may be undertaken to resolve and debrief emotional stress; or 3) A workers compensation claim may be lodged (organisational performance strategy). In the event of a claim being lodged the university will be deemed non-compliant in their duty of care provision and the incident may be investigated by the government authority (organisational performance effectiveness). Future insurance costs for the university may increase and the university's reputation as an employer of choice and a leader in OHS practice could be undermined (organisational performance context).

So, how can the issue of poor policy and practice be addressed? One possible strategy to support a broader understanding of identifying risk for field researchers could include specific training in workplace hazard identification (Bahn, 2012) at the induction stage for new entrants in universities and within research methodology units for PhD students. This type of training could also be offered as professional development for existing staff.

Other strategies include as Bloor et al (2010) have recommended: introduce a call in policy for those conducting field research in that they need to phone when they arrive and leave the interview; send field researchers out in pairs and ask more questions within the risk assessment process when applying for ethics clearances to conduct research. None of the above strategies are particularly costly or onerous, particularly when compared to the cost of litigation if a researcher is injured while collecting data. However, these strategies require validation by empirical research to determine their acceptability and use by university staff and researchers.

Conclusion

This paper discusses the issue of the safety processes that are currently in place in Australian universities to protect the field researcher as a starting point to begin introduce this issue in the literature. Two questions were posed in a call for further research. 1. How do researchers and other key stakeholders in the research process assess researcher risk? 2. What policies and practices are in place in Australian universities to ensure the safety of field researchers? A simplistic response to these questions would be to suggest that stakeholders (researchers, supervisors and managers) make judgement calls as to the level of risk based on their perception and that the policies and procedures in place in Australian universities are not particularly supportive. The literature identified the problem of effectively assessing risk also arguing that this process is clouded by perception. Research in the UK by Bloor et al (2010) highlighted the complexity of evaluating risk to researchers due to this assessment being performed by supervisors and researchers who may be distanced from the data collection process and in some instances may have been out of the field for some time. There is evidence from the UK study that risk to field researchers is evident particularly for those who collect data that is not in the public domain, such as people's homes. Field researchers are exposed to risks to their physical safety from other people and in the case of collecting data in sick and dying participants' homes navigating around equipment that could lead to trip hazards. Risks to the psychological and mental wellbeing of field researchers can also occur when collecting sensitive data such as accounts of abuse, illness, and torture. Universities in Australia appear to pay scant attention to the risks to field researchers and instead focus on the risks to participants within their ethics policies and procedures. What is lacking is minimum policy requirement to address field researcher risk across Australian universities. Research is needed to investigate models of practice to develop such policy from which universities to draw to provide adequate care for these employees. This research should be given urgent attention as heavy penalties are due to come into effect in Australia in 2012 with

the harmonisation of the WHS Act for organisations who fail in this duty. As it stands Australian universities are possibly unacceptably exposed if a field researcher is seriously injured in the course of their data collection activities.

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