

Research integrity at IOB

As a consequence of a number of incidents in some European countries related to plagiarism and other forms of fraud, universities are increasingly putting into place instruments aimed at ensuring research integrity. IOB introduces the following mechanisms.

1. Training and declaration of integrity

IOB provides staff with rules and practices on scientific integrity, including such issues as plagiarism, self-plagiarism, and the ethics of data collection and exploitation. Staff and PhD researchers are expected to read and understand this document, and sign a declaration of integrity.

2. Plagiarism checks

At the stage of submission for pre-defense, a plagiarism check will be performed on PhD dissertations. Journal articles, book manuscripts, and all other types of publication (except op-eds and interventions in discussion forums) will be submitted to a plagiarism test prior to submission. This is the responsibility of individual authors.

3. Informed consent

In-depth qualitative research, in which human interaction is studied in its natural context, has a particular impact on written informed consent. Two main issues are at stake here: i) the importance of the creation of trust, and often long-term relationships, and ii) the often significantly different context in the Global South.

First, ethnographic research in the Global South occurs in a context which is significantly different, both in terms of context (political climate, institutional framework, socio-economic realities) and in terms of the population's characteristics (socio-demographic characteristics of the research 'subjects'). This has a fundamental impact on the research process, and particularly on the possibility of collecting formal signatures and the importance of trust. As has been highlighted by the American Anthropological Association Statement on Ethnography and Institutional Review Boards, it is often not appropriate to obtain consent through a signed form. On the one hand, referring to the abovementioned context, some research is carried out in insecure environments, in countries where there is a legacy of human rights abuses creating an atmosphere of fear, or in places with an ill-functioning state bureaucracy, making people careful and suspicious. On the other hand, referring to the population's characteristics, the research 'subjects' in this kind of research are often illiterate and unfamiliar with written documents.

Second, trust is a crucial element in such circumstances, and the act of signing one's name risks converting a friendly discussion into a hostile encounter. Again, according to the statement of the American Anthropological Association: "Cultivating an ethical climate for ethnographic research requires trust among all involved in the process of implementing a research project. Because the ethnographer often resides in the participants' community or geographical area and participates in

community life, trust develops between the ethnographer and participants as a result of ongoing relationships. In some cases, ethnographers return to the same community or area over time, for instance over 20 years or more. Therefore IRBs should view informed consent in this context as an ongoing and dynamic process.”

All of this does not mean that informed consent is not important; on the contrary, it is a crucial and essential part of the research process. However, because of the reasons pointed out, written informed consent may have a range of negative consequences. The UA ethical commission grants waivers to researchers conducting in-depth research in the Global South, allowing them to use other and more appropriate means of obtaining informed consent, such as oral consent, which is either explicitly stated at the beginning of an interview, observation or other kind of interaction, or which is embedded in the relationship of trust that develops between researcher and research subject.

4. Data management

Data from field research need to be kept and stored, for two main reasons. First, this research is often longitudinal, sometimes covering dozens of years. “Old” field data therefore need to remain available for comparison. Second, in order to combat fraud it is necessary that original field data remain available for verification internally and even, provided guarantees exist on privacy and safety of participants, externally. The UA ethical commission authorizes storage of these data in the University of Antwerp repository with full respect for the rules and procedures governing this repository.

5. Hostile Environment Awareness Training (HEAT)

Some IOB staff perform fieldwork in dangerous environments. Up to now, they have gone there without specific preparation, and major incidents have fortunately not occurred. IOB however wishes to ensure that researchers working in such environments benefit from at least basic training.

IOB considers as hostile environments those areas experiencing civil war, operations of non-state armed groups, an extremely weak state, or a state hostile to independent research. In these contexts, researchers may be confronted with violence against themselves or their participants, rape, kidnap, or brutality by security sector agents or nonstate groups.

Researchers planning to work in environments where these risks could occur must follow a training. IOB opens this opportunity to researchers from other institutions.