Providing ethical guidance for collaborative research in developing countries

Nina Morris
University of Edinburgh, UK

Abstract
Experience has shown that the application of ethical guidelines developed for research in developed countries to research in developing countries can be, and often is, impractical and raises a number of contentious issues. Various attempts have been made to provide guidelines more appropriate to the developing world context; however, to date these efforts have been dominated by the fields of bioscience, medical research and nutrition. There is very little advice available for those seeking to undertake collaborative social science or natural science research in developing countries and what is there tends to be held within disparate sources. Charting the development of a set of ethics documentation for future use by the Ecosystem Services for Poverty Alleviation (ESPA) programme research community, this paper outlines past and present attitudes towards ethics procedures amongst this community and suggests ways in which ethics procedures might be made more relevant and user-friendly to researchers working in this area.

Ethics is one of the 'buzzwords' of the 21st century and in the last decade, amid growing concern over economic inequalities and international human rights, increasing public interest in scientific endeavours (Molyneux and Geissler, 2008) and broader social trends towards individual and organizational 'accountability'

Corresponding author:
Nina Morris, Institute of Geography and the Lived Environment, School of GeoSciences, University of Edinburgh, Drummond Street, Edinburgh, EH8 9XP, UK.
Email: N.Morris@ed.ac.uk

(Boden et al., 2009; McCormack et al., 2012), ethical issues have attained greater significance than ever before (Schroeder and Pisupati, 2010). Ethical review by Research Ethics Committee (REC) is now a standard part of the grant application/award process for social science and natural science research in UK universities (Jaspers et al., 2013) – particularly since the publication of the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) Framework for Research Ethics and the Natural Environment Research Council (NERC) Ethics Policy in 2005 (Boden et al., 2009; Hammersley, 2009; Burr and Reynolds, 2010; McCormack et al., 2012) – and most institutions and organizations who support pure and/or applied research will now have a college, if not school, level REC (Ekberg, 2012).

There are a number of reasons why it is desirable for researchers to adhere to ethical norms. As Resnik (2011) synthesizes, it helps to promote the aims of research (knowledge, truth, avoidance of error) and the values that are essential to collaborative work (trust, accountability, mutual respect, fairness), it ensures public accountability (particularly important when researchers are funded by public money), it can help build public support for research (trust in quality and integrity), and assist in promoting other important moral and social values (social responsibility, human rights, etc.). Where the research involves international collaboration between researchers from developed and developing countries it can remind those working in privileged positions and in wealthier countries of the need to reflect not only on their own framework of thinking, but also on the implications of the very different mind-sets and environments in which their research projects will be carried out (Benatar, 2002; Nuffield Council on Bioethics, 2002). It can also draw attention to the risk of exploitation that might result from inequalities (e.g. financial, access to resources) between the project collaborators (European Union, 2010). There is also a strong case for REC regulation. Responsible for reviewing research proposals before data collection commences to evaluate the risks faced by the researcher and researched, RECs play a key role in "the wider quality assurance and quality enhancement processes that operate within all institutions that conduct research" and, in turn, help to protect the integrity and reputation of science as a 'virtuous profession' (Ekberg, 2012: 335).

Whilst researchers largely accept the rationale for ethical oversight (Klitzman, 2011; Nind et al., 2012) there is, however, rising concern regarding the perceived bureaucratization of ethics through REC regulation (Hammersley, 2009, 2014) and the applicability of the prevailing biomedically-derived model of research ethics governance (Hoeyer et al., 2005; Rice, 2008; Dingwall, 2008; Librett and Perrone, 2010; Blee and Currier, 2011; Schrag, 2011), particularly when the research involves qualitative or ethnographic methods (Burr and Reynolds, 2010; Bond, 2012; Morrell et al., 2012; Monaghan et al., 2013; Emmerich, 2013). These 'fault lines' are especially apparent in international collaborative research involving developed and developing countries (London, 2002). Although there are some

transferable elements (e.g. security considerations) it is frequently impractical to apply ethical frameworks created for research in developed countries to developing world contexts (Creed-Kanashiro et al., 2005; Choudhury, 2007; Sultana, 2007; Cannella and Lincoln, 2011; Araali, 2011; Mollet, 2011; Ravinetto et al., 2011) and there is a real danger that researchers end up reproducing "the colonial established authority of Western epistemologies" (Chilisa, 2005: 675) whilst 'silencing' indigenous ethics (Tikly and Bond, 2013; Louw and Delport, 2006). For example, the conventional principle of informed consent assumes that "research participants are individuated subjects who are more-or-less autonomous of social ties and obligations, literate, adult, and accustomed to relating to others in the context of formal contractual agreements" (Butz, 2008: 242; Hoeyer et al., 2005; Burr and Reynolds, 2010), making it ill-suited to addressing community-level concerns (Guta et al., 2012; Klitzman, 2012). In Chattopadhyay and De Vries's (2008: 108) opinion, even when 'tweaked' to relocate autonomy in the family, clan, or with an elder, the concept of the researched as an autonomous being "is an assault on the tradition and values of non-Western societies who believe in the matrix of relationships in dynamic equilibrium of the cosmos". What is more, any efforts to make bioethics more 'culturally appropriate' have to date amounted to little more than 'adapting' western bioethics to 'varied cultural settings' (Chattopadhyay and De Vries, 2008).

The identification of procedures which both meet the ethical demands of the research sponsor(s) and are appropriate to the context within which the research is to be carried out is an all too familiar problem for those involved in international collaborative research between developed and developing countries (Sultana, 2007; Ajuwon and Adegbite, 2008; Rowson, 2010). This problem is amplified if (and as is usually the case) the presiding REC is unfamiliar with the social, political and cultural circumstances of the host country (Mollet, 2011; Smith, 2012) or if it lacks the resources to undertake independent assessment of the risks associated with the research under review (European Union, 2010). Although this is an area which has received significant attention in recent years (Velho and Velho, 1996; SCRPDC, 1998; Tan-Torres Edejer, 1999; Caballero, 2002; Creed-Kanashiro et al., 2005; Choudhury, 2007; Sugarman et al., 2007; McIntosh et al., 2008), there is still very little advice available for those seeking to undertake collaborative social or natural science research in developing countries. As Molony and Hammett (2007) attest, searching academic databases for guidance on the ethics of employing local research assistants, and advice on the additional difficulties frequently experienced when researching in the developing world, is a frustrating experience. The natural scientist searching for guidance on sampling rare or endangered taxa/species and then transporting these samples out of the host country would find a similar dearth of material. Guidance from sponsor organizations is also scant and researchers wishing to undertake

research in these areas are forced to obtain advice from a number of disparate sources (e.g. professional Codes of Conduct in related disciplines, national and international legislation, international treaties, etc.). To compound this, although certainly growing in numbers (Klitzman, 2012), properly functioning RECs simply do not exist in many developing countries and where they do they tend to be ineffective, under-resourced and unevenly distributed (Nuffield Council on Bioethics, 2002; Choudhury, 2007; Hyder et al., 2004).

In 2012, recognizing these problems, the Ecosystem Services for Poverty Alleviation (ESPA)[1] Directorate (see ESPA, 2014) commissioned the author to produce an ethics form and accompanying guidance notes for future use by the ESPA research community. The ethics documents had to be accessible, relevant to both natural and social scientists, and cover all pertinent issues including health and safety. To date, the named Principal Investigators (PIs) on the grants awarded by the ESPA research programme have, with only a few exceptions, been based in UK institutions (although this does not necessarily mean that the UK is their country of origin). The work funded by ESPA has, however, involved collaborations between academic colleagues in a diverse range of disciplines, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), government institutions, and other stakeholders in countries across Africa, Asia, Australia, Europe, North America, and South America. The aim was not to provide an iron-clad formula for 'ethical' research; rather, it was hoped that the new ethics procedure would foster discussion, offer a framework for making decisions for both social and natural science researchers, encourage PIs and their Co-Investigators (Co-Is) to design culturally sensitive and appropriate studies, make intelligent choices before, during and after their time in the field and, as a result of undertaking ethically aware research, develop relevant capacities in the host countries (Sultana, 2007). As such, ESPA understood that research ethics involves far more than just anonymity or confidentiality, issues that can sometimes consume the 'protectionist discourses' of RECs (Nind et al., 2012); rather, they wanted their ethics guidance to be "embedded in the totality of scholarly practice" (Baarts, 2009: 424).

This paper focuses on the findings of the research which later went on to inform the development of this ethics guidance. It begins with a brief outline of the research strategy and the work done to engage members of the ESPA research community in the design process. I then outline the extent to which the members of this community had (or had not) engaged with ethics procedures in the past (be this in their own institution, a collaborating institution, overseen by the funding body, relevant professional panel, or in-country department/panel) and their attitudes towards ethics review procedures focusing, in particular, on their responses to questions regarding the communication of ethical protocols, host-country review, monitoring and evaluation, IPR and authorship, and collaborative relationships. In so doing, the paper highlights points of consensus but also

areas of contention which must be taken into consideration in the design of ethics documentation.

The design process

The design process incorporated four key phases. Phase One comprised a desk-based literature and Code of Practice review to highlight pertinent issues and collate examples of best practice from research in a range of disciplines relevant to the work funded by ESPA (e.g. African studies, agriculture, anthropology, biology, business, civil engineering, conservation, development studies, economics, education, energy studies, environmental science, forestry, health studies, geography, life sciences, meteorology, psychology, social policy, urban studies, zoology). The search period was 1990–2011 and the key search terms were: ethic*, develop*, guid*, code, practice, conduct, protocol, committee, collab*, consent, confidentiality, intellectual property rights (IPR), international, data, sampl*, indigenous, specimen, environment, field site, non-governmental organization (NGO), field/research assistant, permit, treaty, trans*, dissemination, benefit, capacity, health, safety, travel. The databases searched included Academic Search Elite, Article First, ASSIA, Google Scholar, IngentaConnect, Web of Knowledge, and Scopus. A snowballing technique was then implemented using the reference lists of the papers identified during the search; recommendations made by the questionnaire respondents and interviewees were also followed up. Draft documents were then created (using the University of Edinburgh School of GeoSciences ethics procedure as a template as requested by NERC) and published on the ESPA website for comment (these included an ethics form, Self-Assessment Guidance Notes, and Full Assessment Guidance Notes for those undertaking research on vulnerable human subjects or sensitive topics, using invasive procedures, and certain types of biophysical research, e.g. sampling rare/endangered or harmful taxa/species).

Phase Two involved the distribution of a Project Information Sheet and questionnaire to all past and present ESPA grant holders and, to broaden out the response, all recipients of the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) – Department for International Development (DFID) Joint Scheme for Research on International Development (Poverty Alleviation) Phase 1 and Phase 2 awards (for the advantages of this approach see Sax et al., 2003; Kaplowitz et al., 2004; Denscombe, 2009) (n=146). For data protection reasons ESPA requested that the questionnaire be emailed to the ESPA grant recipients via the ESPA Administrator; I emailed the questionnaire directly to the ESRC-DFID grant recipients. Similarly, ESPA were also unable to provide contact details for the Co-Investigators (Co-Is) on their projects and the ESRC-DIFD award website only stated the PI's institutional affiliation. As a result it was agreed that all the PIs would be asked to forward a copy of the questionnaire to their respective Co-Is; the responses show that

some did comply with this request, but it is impossible to determine how many Co-Is actually received the survey. All the questionnaire recipients were requested to return their completed survey to me personally and were assured that ESPA would not see the raw data. Split into two sections, the anonymized questionnaire included a mix of Likert Scale, straight yes/no and open-ended questions; Part 1 canvassed the recipients' views on the need for, and value of, research ethics and asked questions relating to the 'doing' of collaborative research with particular reference to their ESPA or ESRC-DIFD award, and Part 2 solicited their feedback on the draft documents. The quantitative survey data was analysed using Microsoft Excel 2010; a database was created and the data was coded and analysed to obtain response ratios. The qualitative survey data was analysed and coded thematically. It is important to note that not all the respondents answered all the questions that were relevant to their project.

In Phase Three, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with self-selecting questionnaire respondents in order to gain a deeper insight into their views on research ethics and current procedures, to follow up specific responses, and to discuss how the draft form and guidance notes might be modified to increase their relevancy and make them more user-friendly. At the participants' request all but two of the interviews were conducted via Skype, the exceptions being conducted in person at the individual's place of work. All the interviewees gave their permission for the interviews to be audio-recorded and the anonymized interview files were transcribed in full by an independent transcription service. Each interviewee was assigned a pseudonym (e.g. Interviewee 2) and informed that every effort would be made to delete project identifiers (e.g. country, region, specific subject matter, project partners); however, participants were also made aware that, due to the unique nature of some projects, they might be identifiable to those who were intimately connected to, or knowledgeable about, their work. Each individual was given the opportunity to view their transcript and to make amendments. All the interviewees provided written or verbal consent; two requested to see the report before its submission to ESPA. The interview material was analysed and coded thematically.

The final stage of the project, Phase 4, involved the production of a revised set of ethics documentation incorporating feedback from Phases Two and Three.

Attitudes towards ethical review

Only 23 completed questionnaires were returned by the deadline despite email reminders (Table 1); a further two questionnaires were returned after the quantitative analysis had been completed. The quantitative data from these responses has not been included here, but the qualitative material has been used where applicable. Eight of the emails sent to the ESRC-DFID PIs were returned as 'undeliverable',

Table 1. Respondent demographics (n=23).

Characteristics	ESPA	ESRC-DIFD
Role of respondent		
PI	7	11
Co-I	4	1
Duration of grant (months)		
0–12	1	
13–24	8	5
25–36	0	7
37–48	2	
Country of residence		
UK	8	11
Non-UK	3	1

five elicited an 'out of office' response, and one ESPA PI noted that their project had not yet started. Nine interviews were conducted, including one PI who did not complete the questionnaire but agreed to be interviewed, and one with an expert in the field of development research ethics recommended by an interviewee.

Twelve respondents confirmed that they had been involved in a research project in a developing country in the last eight years (the time elapsed since the ESRC and NERC launched their respective research ethics protocols) which had not been ethically reviewed by any REC or professional body (Table 2a). The reasons for this were diverse, with interviewees citing the lack of a perceived need due to the nature of their research (e.g. data processing, no human subjects), lack of demand from the funding body, and the absence of an institutional REC (a particular problem for those based in developing countries, although not exclusively). Several interviewees who self-identified as natural science researchers and/or who used data modelling or secondary data said they associated research ethics primarily with work involving human subjects or animals. As Interviewee 4 commented:

> most of our projects are environmental projects. So we're trying to improve [environmental] quality or [resource] availability, you know, the general eco-system. […] we're not using humans as test subjects, we're not using animals. So it's always been something that we're used to preparing for any proposal, but it's always just kind of like the last paragraph you prepare because usually there's no major ethics considerations, and that maybe because I'm a scientist and I may not be understanding what ethics are. But as far as I'm concerned it's, you know, there's usually not very many … we're not doing medical science, so there's no ethics. There's a lower ethics […] let's say.

When these interviewees considered research ethics it was a reactive rather than proactive process, often at the specific request of the funding body or the home institution and done at the last minute with little in-depth consideration of the

Table 2a. Respondents' appraisal of research ethics.

	Yes	No	Do not know
Does your institution have a Research Ethics Committee?	20	2	–
Have you undertaken any research in a developing country in the last 8 years that has not been reviewed by a Research Ethics Committee?	12	10	1
Have you ever chosen not to pursue a particular research project because a desirable ethical standard could not be met?	5	16	
Have you ever been involved in a research project in a developing country where the research practice has caused you ethical concern?	7	15	

Table 2b. Respondents' appraisal of research ethics.

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
It is important to consider research ethics	17	6	–	–	–
I know where to find all the information I need relating to research ethics in my subject area.	1	13	5	2	–
I feel knowledgeable about research ethics relating to my subject area.	6	14	3	–	–
Ethics guidelines are useful in heightening researchers' sensitivity to ethical issues.	11	8	3	1	–
I feel that ethics procedures are an inconvenience in the life-course of a research project.	–	6	3	7	6

relevant issues or 'dilemmas'. These interviewees also expressed ambivalence towards the procedural aspects of ethics review, which they saw as an inconvenience in the life-course of a research project, and several noted that they 'dreaded' the bureaucracy of securing ethics approval (Pickersgill, 2012). In order to 'pass' they went through the motions of ticking what they presumed to be the 'right boxes' or 'saying the right thing' rather than thinking through the relevant ethical principles and making substantive ethical judgements about their work and practice (Dyer and Demeritt, 2008; Mollet, 2011).

All the questionnaire respondents said they felt that it was important to consider research ethics (however, it is necessary to conclude, given the quote above, that this may be brief in some cases) and the majority were confident that they knew where to find information relating to, and were knowledgeable about, ethics in their subject area (Table 2b). Seven said they had, in the past, been involved in research

in a developing country which had caused them ethical concern (Table 2a). The most common causes for concern being the research participants' exposure to risk (e.g. through the absence of adequate compensation mechanisms, ineffective communication, inadequate risk/benefit assessment, ineffective project management, the absence of formal contractual agreements for local field assistants, lack of or ineffective project monitoring and evaluation, and lack of informed consent), and the inequitable distribution of IPR (including instances of academic imperialism, ineffective dissemination, and failure to ensure fair distribution of potential benefits). Describing their involvement in a previous project, Interviewee 1 stated:

> [The specialist researchers] said they would provide [additional assistance for the control group]. Now because this is in a remote place people don't have the same understanding[s] […] [and] although the [specialist had] explained it to their satisfaction it made absolutely no sense [to the research participants] and it was followed … it was not properly followed up because the [specialists] left [a] local community […] worker to do the following up and he was based at a considerable distance and wasn't given any particular incentive to carry this out and as a result one [group experienced huge losses] and was very puzzled and distressed and couldn't understand what had gone wrong.

This interviewee felt that the project leaders in this situation had 'violated' both the principle of prior informed consent and the ethics of practice but recalled feeling powerless to do anything about it given there was no recourse provided by a pre-approved ethics document. It is worth noting, however, that only five respondents said they had chosen not to participate in a project because a desirable standard could not be met and there was no evidence to show that any collaborative agreements had broken down because of disagreements relating to ethics (Pickersgill, 2012).

Sixteen questionnaire respondents confirmed that their ESPA or ESRC-DFID project(s) had been ethically reviewed (either by the PI's institutional REC and/or professional body in the PI's country of residence) (Table 3), although one interviewee appeared to have misunderstood the function of the JES system, assuming that ethical review was part of the post-submission vetting process:

> we write a proposal with, on what is the Joint [Electronic] Submission system […] so we fill everything in then, […] it goes to the university administration and then […] I know it goes through various checks and whatever and so it might be that one of the checks is not for review committee but to be honest, well, yeah, it's probably the nature of scientists trying to not … or yeah, as long as it goes through and it gets to the funding agents then we're happy and basically the rest did not really occur to me ever that I would have to actively look for an ethical committee, I always thought that and other requirements or whatever would be taken [care] of by the […] grants managing entity in [my university] or the other universities. (Interviewee 3)

The interviewees who had not had their project reviewed, or were unsure if it had been reviewed, confessed that they were unsure of their institutional ethics

Table 3. Ethical review and training.

	Yes	No	Do not know
Was the project proposal subject to ethical review before the research commenced?	16	3	3
Who reviewed the proposal?	13	–	
Research Ethics Committee internal to the PI's institution			
Research Ethics Committee external to the PI's Institution in the PI's country of residence	–	2	
Research Ethics Committee in the host country	5		
Were/will relevant Codes of Conduct and/or ethical guidelines (be) communicated to all members of the project team (including translators and/or local field assistants)?	18	3	
Were/are there any members of the project team (including translators and/or local field assistants) who had/have not previously received appropriate research ethics training?	8	4	8
Did/will the project provide, or allocate funds to cover, training?	4	5	

procedure and had either neglected to think about ethics at the time of the application or had assumed/hoped that someone else (either another member of the research team or someone in their institution) would take care of, or assume responsibility for, this on their behalf. Although these researchers were in the minority (indicating, perhaps, that consideration of ethics is becoming the norm rather than the exception), the question of who should take responsibility for ensuring that projects have been ethically reviewed looms large here. Certainly more could be done to empower researchers to take responsibility for the ethical conduct of their research and the collaborative relationships they enter into. However, it would seem that current grant application and funding mechanisms play a key role in enabling abstention and failure to engage meaningfully with research ethics.

Only five questionnaire respondents confirmed that their project had been reviewed by a REC in the host country (Table 3). One felt very strongly that all research handling personal data should be subject to ethical review first in the host country (if this was not the PI's country of residence) before being reviewed by the PI's institutional REC (or appropriate professional body), a response which questioned directly the validity of undertaking ethical review in a developed country if the research is being undertaken in an entirely different socio-cultural, economic, and environmental context (Honan et al., 2013). There is some support for a one-track approach given the increased level of detail and amount of documentation now required by many RECs, the increasing number and complexity of the rules

to which researchers are expected to adhere, and the ever growing raft of university and government regulations that are being put in place to regulate research conduct (Stewart, 2011; Mollet, 2011). However, it is generally agreed that research collaborations between developed and developing countries should be ethically reviewed in both the host and the PI's country of residence as standard practice (Hyder et al., 2004), thus enabling the specificities of each context to be taken into account (Ravinetto et al., 2011). One has to assume that the paucity of developing country RECs had a significant impact on the number of projects reviewed within the host countries, but there are a number of other possible reasons why researchers from developed countries may fail to apply for ethical approval in a developing country regardless of REC availability, including: ignorance, perceptions of cost, an assumption that certain research is exempt (as demonstrated above), arrogance or paternalism (Van Teijlingen and Simkhada, 2012). As demonstrated by the quotes from Interviewees 3 and 4 above, at least some of the ESPA/ESRC-DFID award holders fall into one or more of these categories.

The questionnaire respondent with strong views on host country review further advocated that if the local partners had no REC, they should be supported to establish one. When the interviewees were asked to respond to this suggestion there was some debate as to where responsibility for this might lie, but they all felt that it was unfeasible to include this within the remit of a single project. The key prohibiting factors were the relatively short duration of the projects, funding limitations, and the amount of institutional support required by RECs to make them credible (e.g. independent ethical review boards – especially those which charged a fee – were seen as being venal). As Interviewee 1 commented:

> I really don't think it's feasible because, you know, basically the developing countries that I've worked in, any sort of regulation is minimal, is easily corrupted, is easily bent and I think that while it would be admirable to put resources to that, we've already talked about the difficulty of carving up the resources and working in these places and I just, to be honest I just don't see that, but I do think that, you know, we try and work by example and we have growing numbers of colleagues who've maybe been through the UK system or similar systems with ethics training and who take that very seriously and who […] apply those practices in their own works so I think that being realistic about it that's about as good as you can get and being quite clear that you don't get involved in projects where there's going to be contravention. That may be slightly too pragmatic and not sufficiently idealistic a response but I can't begin to envisage […] to set up an ethics committee. I can envisage having those discussions with people at every opportunity and raising it as an issue and expecting the best standards from people and encouraging the best standards.

In general, although host-country REC review was a valid and highly desirable long-term goal, the interviewees felt that for the time being it would be sufficient for ESPA to insist that all projects go through some form of approved institutional ethical review (regardless of where this took place) on the understanding that the

ethics protocols for each project had been developed through cross-country dialogue (Tikly and Bond, 2013) and that the project partners would discuss the ethics of their research at every opportunity. In the meantime, it should be the funding bodies (ESPA included) and the PI institutions who took responsibility for helping to establish robust host country RECs.

Eighteen questionnaire respondents confirmed that their project involved working with local NGOs and/or experts not named on the grant application, while 17 said that their project involved working with translators and/or local field assistants (Table 4). When asked if relevant Codes of Conduct and/or ethical guidelines had been, or would be, communicated to all members of the project team (including local NGOs and/or experts, translators and/or local field assistants), only three said no. The interview data suggested, however, that the channels of communication were stronger in some projects than others and ranged from ad hoc discussion of ethical issues as they arose through to providing specific research training for translators and/or local field assistants:

> it's, exactly, not a conscious decision but more, yeah, but we'd never really thought about it […] we know each other pretty well as a team and, yeah, solve problems when they come [up]. (Interviewee 3)

> We have a kind of system of a three or four day pre-testing. So that starts with, you know, careful explanations of the questionnaire or if it's qualitative, you know, the focus group, and then they do role plays amongst themselves, and that's actually very effective for screening out, you know, people seem to learn much more if they get a chance. […] After that couple of days of kind of workshop-based training, then they go to the community and try out again and then come back and review and sort of … and it gives us a chance to review the questions as well (Interviewee 5)

One interviewee who had answered 'yes' to this question clarified that all collaborating partners involved in undertaking the fieldwork had been sent the ethics application and the comments of the REC, but it was left up to them which elements of this they passed on to their field assistants and that they would not know until the final field study report what training had been provided and to whom. This devolvement of responsibility is particularly interesting given that research data collection in the type of project funded by ESPA frequently takes place in areas which are physically and economically distanced from the PI's institution (Kingori, 2013). As a result, a great deal pivots on data collectors' practices and views (Kingori, 2013), and as Interviewee 1 demonstrated above, many play a crucial and often under-recognized and under-supported role in 'doing ethics' in the field, with important implications for the success and quality of the research itself. If the collaborating partners fail to take them seriously as collaborators and partners in research endeavours (Molyneux and Geissler, 2008) and to adequately support their decision-making, it could have very serious consequences for the

Table 4. Nature of the collaborative relationships.

	Yes	No	Too early to say
Did/will all the project partners named on the grant application contribute to:			
The preparation of the research proposal?	19	1	
Discussions regarding the nature and degree of collaboration?	19	–	
The writing up and publication of the research findings?	16	3	
Were formal agreements made regarding IPR on data and results, publications, and authorship?	7	12	
Was/will the relationship between the collaborating partners (be) subject to monitoring and evaluation?	8	10	
If you were/are a Co-I did/do you feel like a valued member of the project team?	4	–	
Were/are there any tensions in the relationship(s) between the collaborating partners?	7	9	
Did/does the project involve working with local NGOs and/or other local 'experts' not named on the grant application?	18	5	
Did/will the project involve working with translators and/or local field assistants?	17	6	
If applicable, did/will any of the local field assistants require research methods training to enable them to do their job effectively and responsibly?	13	2	
Was/will your relationship with the translators and/or local field assistants (be) bound by a formal contractual agreement acknowledged by both parties?	10	5	
Did/have you find/found any of these working relationship(s) to be problematic in any way?	3	7	7
Were/will any residents of the host country [not previously mentioned] (be) involved in:			
Research prioritization?	11	–	
Project planning?	13	–	
Monitoring the project?	12	–	
Reviewing the research outputs?	17	–	
Disseminating the project findings?	17	–	
Did you find/have you found this type of inclusive activity problematic in any way?	1	12	8

research findings. For example, compliance with research ethics protocols may be far more difficult to achieve in poor countries where basic infrastructure is lacking (Heimer, 2013), and local fieldworkers face significant challenges in mediating between the very different priorities and concerns of research institutions and

low-income communities in which they may themselves live (Molyneux and Geissler, 2008; Kingori, 2013). Without discussion, these issues may never come to light.

Attitudes towards ethics documentation and guidance

Chilisa (2005: 676) highlights that collaborative research between developed and developing countries 'invariably' begins with a contract that positions the researchers within a hierarchical structure in a "framework which goes back to colonial times, when the colonized were regarded as empty vessels to be filled". A decade on, the ESPA and ESRC-DFID funding schemes appear to be well aware of the fundamental importance of "strong collaborative partnerships with local and established individuals, institutions and structures" (Molyneux and Geissler, 2008: 690). On the whole, the questionnaire respondents registered a high degree of collaboration amongst the project partners at all stages of the research design and implementation across the projects surveyed (Table 4). Of the 18 respondents who answered the question, however, less than half said that the relationship between the project partners on their grant had been, or was, subject to monitoring and evaluation (Table 4). These monitoring and evaluation strategies tended to be based on established institutional codes of conduct or working agreements (e.g. consultancy contracts) or had been developed organically to suit the needs of the research programme and the individual partners. As Interviewee 2 explained:

> we decided to design a fairly very simple […] [two-strand] strategy, that […] helps to track implementation and execution of the project, […] as we designed it, […] one of them is to monitor the quality of work we do, another one is to monitor collaboration [and this] looks at the honour and the respect that is given to intellectual property and the contribution of business.

The interviewees stressed, however, that this type of agreement requires commitment and sustained input from all parties to be successful and of mutual benefit. Several of those whose projects did not have a formal monitoring and evaluation strategy challenged this 'unnecessary bureaucratization' (Stanley and Wise, 2010, in Monaghan et al., 2013), arguing that it was often impractical or unfeasible to expect individuals to work to strict deadlines (which they associated with such procedures), that it would add undue pressure to an already pressurized working situation, that it would add another level of 'complication' to the project, that there was not enough time to do this given the short duration of many of the projects (the average was 28 months) and that it would be an unnecessary burden given the seemingly endless amount of reporting that researchers are now expected to do during the life-course of a research project. As Interviewee 4 noted:

> There is no formal monitoring process [in our project] where we evaluate the participation of each partner. It's an informal process where, you know, if you participate … the more you

contribute, the more you appear in scientific publications, […] what you put in is what you get out, more or less. But, you know, it isn't … it probably wouldn't be a bad idea to come up with a formal monitoring programme of partner activities, but it's … it would complicate things. It's a two year project so there's very little, you know, not a lot of time to do the actual work and there's already so many forms […] that we don't want to complicate things any further.

Several interviewees questioned why the success of a project could not be judged simply on its deliverables, for without good working relationships no outputs would ever be produced – an opinion which suggests a slightly naïve approach to the power imbalances which can occur in this type of research.

Formal IPR agreements covering data and results, publications, and authorship were also relatively scarce and only seven questionnaire respondents confirmed that their project had this type of accord in place and that all the project partners named on the grant application had been required to sign up (literally and metaphorically) to it prior to the commencement of the research (Table 4). These tended to be based on the rules of the Vancouver Protocol, sometimes with additional clauses covering the inclusion of collaborators from the host country in the publication of the research findings. Those interviewees without a formal agreement cited, by way of explanation, the lack of a perceived demand from the funders, lack of time, a desire to avoid additional bureaucracy, a lack of interest among non-academic partners in peer-reviewed publications, the presence of already well-established collaborative relationships and/or non-project-specific blanket ethics clearance agreements. Interviewee 3 noted:

[I'm] not very keen [on IPR agreements] because it's a lot of bureaucracy. […] So if not really necessarily, I try to avoid as much as I can, because [it's] bureaucracy for me, for them, and in general so far it has worked very well. Also because they have, the other partners they're typically, at least those that I work with have less interest in really peer-review publications, it's of course nice and it's great for the CV, but it's not going to change their life, particularly the NGOs. On the other hand, they are much more concerned with outreach publications and so I … and then of course I do collaborate with them on writing outreach publications and I probably have more than a typical scientist, because I believe that it's important just for the type of stuff we're doing and because it's a great way to get our research into policy of course, but we have, somehow we are flexible about that, yeah, and I admit being guilty of having put strategic co-authors on papers sometimes just, just, yeah, well, but try to find a balance between those, but yeah, I've never really felt the need.

It is not uncommon for academics to prefer peer-reviewed papers (a desire driven in part by the need to secure yet more funding, establish professional reputations, earn promotion, etc.) and for non-academic partners to place more weight on project reports which might assist them in obtaining further funding and/or impacting upon policy (Jeffery, 2014). However, it was startling how freely this interviewee admitted to 'authorship disintegrity' (Abu-Zaid et al., 2014) and one would assume that if it is this easy to add authors then it must be just as easy to leave other contributors off.

That said, it would be wrong to assume that agreements regarding IPR were completely absent in those projects with no formal accord. For some interviewees at the start of their funding IPR agreements were not yet in place but were on the agenda and had featured in early discussions. Others spoke of tacit agreements with their collaborating partners regarding who was entitled to have their name attributed to which publications. In general, these informal arrangements were said to work well, but what was less clear was how they were policed, how decisions were made regarding author order, how and to whom grievances might be aired, or whether some individuals (particularly those who were not named on the funding application given that 18 questionnaire respondents said that their project included this type of person) might find this type of working arrangement more pressured or stressful than if a formal agreement had been in place from the outset. Undoubtedly there can be problems with authorship agreements: staff may change, differing disciplinary or cultural expectations can make for awkward negotiations (Jeffery, 2014; Teixeira da Silva, 2011), and the research may change as it progresses, necessitating re-evaluation of the agreement (Friedman Ross et al., 2010). However, a 'pre-contract' with an agreed ethical approach to authorship and contribution at the start of the project (Hayter et al., 2013) means that there will always be a point of reference which can provide guidelines and clarification (Henry, 2013).

Only 16 questionnaire respondents answered when asked if there had been, or were, any tensions in the relationship(s) between the collaborating partners on their project (Table 4). The seven who said yes identified budget allocation (e.g. informal approach to accounting on the part of one partner, the practical allocation of funds), commitment to deadlines (e.g. some partners' unwillingness to prioritize the project above other projects they were involved in, partners failing to make the inputs they promised at the proposal stage), and differing work practices (e.g. different approaches to field research in different disciplines, division of labour, timing of inputs) as the main sources of tension. The interview quotes below highlight two different scenarios:

> we were working with […] an NGO and they had their own rules and regulations […], what we were doing was providing them with the money to allow them to employ the researchers, the associates on our project but they saw them as part of their team, so they, […] were actually expected to go on team building weeks and [do specific work] within the organization, which has sometimes cut across what we wanted them to do. […] because they were then members of the [NGO] team, they had to follow the rules about expenses and travelling allowances and […] we were prepared to say, I mean, because these funds are trivial in our terms, you know, […] if you can't come by train, for God's sake, buy an air ticket and, and go you know, it's, it's within the budget, but then the rules [of that] organization said, that if these people are allowed to do that, then we have to do it for everybody else, and we can't have that. (Interviewee 7)

> … we thought that it would be appropriate to have [a] partner organization [in Country A] which specializes in [X skill] and broadly speaking that works […] they were actually recommended

to me by the other partners who have worked with them in the past. […] but because of the way that the project was structured […] we ended up with a situation where the three research institutes got the lion's share of the overheads. That was very upsetting to the [skilled] group and partly because of the timeline and partly because of the fact that sort of doing this over Skype and email that we just didn't really get to a point where they were completely happy with … I found as many ways as I could to make it work for them but essentially I think that they felt that they were marginalized by that process. You could say they were. (Interviewee 1)

This interviewee acknowledged that a number of these issues could have been dealt with more effectively by the management of expectations, but they pointed out that the lack of regular face-to-face contact (which is a common feature of research of this type due to the geographical distribution of the project partners) can hinder the successful resolution of problems. This shows that while formal ethics guidelines play an important role in regulating research practice, implicit day-to-day social relations and engagements between people are fundamental to the research process (Molyneux and Geissler, 2008). A situated research ethics as opposed to a universal ethics requires a contextualized understanding of the research process itself, which partly revolves around the politics of partnership and demonstrates the need to engage with the complexities of power relations not only between the researcher and researched (Tikly and Bond, 2013) but also between the collaborating partners. The establishment of trust through relationship-building seems to be particularly important here, taking time to listen to each other's concerns, interests and needs and incorporating them into the research agenda (Friedman Ross, 2010).

One respondent felt very strongly that ESPA were wasting their time creating what would inevitably be another set of universal guidelines wherein western notions would be applied to societies in which attitudes and practices were very different. Yet 19 agreed that ethics guidelines could be useful in heightening researchers' sensitivity to ethical issues. When asked to elaborate, the interviewees noted that the guidance such as that proposed by ESPA could potentially raise issues that the researchers may not have been aware of or may have ignored in the past (e.g. their privileged position and relative wealth) (Molyneux and Geissler, 2008). Whilst it was indeed wrong to assume that biomedically-rooted research ethics could be universally applicable, the principles inherent in the ethical conduct of research – integrity, respect for persons, beneficence, and justice – still provided a useful yardstick against which to measure research practice (Honan et al., 2013).

A key concern was the inability of standardized REC protocols to take into account ethical issues that arise in the field and the many evolving situational judgements that social (and one could argue natural science) researchers must make as their project develops and circumstances change (Klitzman, 2012; Heimer, 2013; Darling, 2014). Standardized REC procedures tend to assume that the full

scope of a research study and suite of participants/actors with whom one will come into contact can be anticipated in advance (Boden et al., 2009); however, as Blee and Currier (2011) point out, knowledge production is temporally, spatially and culturally bounded. All the interviewees stressed that context is crucial in the type of research that ESPA funds and that any ethics procedure and documentation must be flexible enough to facilitate rather than inhibit their work, allowing them to take different customs into account (e.g. age at which one becomes an adult, nature of consent) and adjust to local circumstances without the need for a revised ethics assessment (Araali, 2011). As Interviewee 7 argued:

> I think some of the ethics literature is not very helpful at all. It's, kind of, dancing on the point of a needle to make fine, fine judgements about things, which you can't make fine judgements about in practice, particularly not in developing country settings. […] there are real potentials for making ethics make research impossible, […] the idea that, you know, you set it all out in advance, and if you change it, if you go back […] to the ethics committee, to […] approval of anything, any change … well, ethnographic field work is always adjusting to local circumstances and you can't go back, […] and get further approval, because, you know, […] it takes six months out of, you know, a year's field work time … you've lost it … you've just completely lost the project. […] the other thing […] we had […] is that the local ethical review board starts saying, 'oh we don't think much of this project, you ought to be doing this instead', and we think, 'well we just got funded to do this', you know, how many times are we going to go forwards and backwards with people who say, 'we don't think you can do the research because it's not ethically viable because it's not scientifically viable or valid', and then you have to go back to the funders and say 'we're having to change the programme', you know, and then you come and go, again, for six months before you're allowed to start. And it's, it's usually trivial.

Guilleman and Gillam (2004, cited in Honan et al., 2013) make a distinction between macroethics (the domain in which RECs institute general principles for ethical research conduct in the field) and microethics (everyday ethical dilemmas in specific research contexts), while Heimer (2013) notes the disparity between official ethics (ethics on the books) and ethics on the ground (ethics in action). Both argue that ethics form part of "an ongoing process that is always subject to negotiation and reinterpretation rather than reification outside the research context" (Monaghan et al., 2013: 68). It is important that ethics guidance uphold core ethical principles, but it has to meet the contextual needs of the researchers (Guta et al., 2012) and give them the security to adapt methods as they see fit without the need for further review (McCormack et al., 2012).

The interviewees also felt ethical guidance should be sensitive to specific issues such as the disruption of social norms. Although one interviewee noted that the whole ethos of their discipline was to cause as little disruption as possible, the majority felt that an element of disruption was inevitable given the nature of the projects that ESPA funds (e.g. engaging with local communities, knowledge

exchange, development), that this would happen regardless of where the researcher was from, and that it was not necessarily always a bad thing. For example:

> Well I guess there … it's a kind of a utilitarian perspective somewhat, which is the social norms, are they in the good of society as whole? So if it's a social norm, for example, that women have no control over certain household assets or livestock, it may be, in the short term, […] something which is useful for the men, but in the long term, it's not useful for the society as a whole. So I think that you shouldn't do … disrupt social norms just for the sake of it, or if harm could result, but if, if … sometimes social norms have to change in order for development to happen. So, basically, it's something we should be careful about, think it through, but certainly not a blanket, you know. I mean female circumcision is a social norm. (Interviewee 5)

A clear distinction was made between positive and negative disruption; whilst any social interaction is disruptive, the consensus amongst the interviewees was that it is important to ensure that it is supportive and encouraging rather than aggressive and unpleasant. The overall sense was that no set of guidance notes would ever be able (or should indeed try) to take all eventualities into account and it was impractical to ask researchers to document these on a form, However, researchers must be aware of their potential impact on the situations they found themselves in and the people they come into contact with, and realize that there might be a lasting impact that remains long after the research is complete (Molyneux and Geissler, 2008). Likewise, researchers must find ways to recognize and strengthen the agency of so-called vulnerable individuals, groups and communities, whom institutional review has thus far only viewed as candidates for protection (London, 2002).

Conclusions

The principle aim of this research was to produce an ethics form and accompanying guidance notes for the ESPA research community which would sensitize members to the ethical issues associated with undertaking collaborative research in developing countries. Despite the small sample size, the findings from the survey and interview data suggest that the participants did accept the importance of, and need for, ethical review when undertaking collaborative work in developing countries (Librett and Perrone, 2010) and that they were more likely than not to have had their ESPA/ESRC-DIFD projects reviewed. However, negative perceptions of what this entails (e.g. time, effort, bureaucracy) and /or an ambivalence towards ethics have in the past meant that some respondents have not taken ethical assessment seriously (Dyer and Demeritt, 2008; Mollet, 2011) or have avoided it where possible. As such, consideration of ethics appears to have been the result of external drivers rather than a desire to critically think through research practice and the nature of the collaborative relationships in which these researchers were

participating. Whilst there appears to be a particular need to raise awareness of the relevance and potential benefits of ethical review amongst natural science researchers and/or those using modelling or secondary data, it would seem that part of the problem lies not necessarily with 'ethics' per se but with the prevailing systems of ethical governance and the bureaucracies imposed by current REC regulation (Emmerich, 2013). For example, even those participants who had attempted to fully engage with their institutional ethics procedures (or those of a relevant professional body) expressed dissatisfaction with the rigidity of REC regulation and highlighted the difficulty of applying certain principles in developing world contexts – critiques which are already well-established within the literature.

The respondents cautioned against fostering a compliance culture wherein to be 'ethical' means to conform to the 'prescriptions and proscriptions' of the REC (Hammersley, 2014). Their advice was that the ESPA guidance should facilitate a situated ethics (Ekberg, 2012) which appreciated the need for flexibility and gave researchers the confidence and support to make in situ decisions without the need for further validation. This would require a rethinking of ethics as 'practice' and an appreciation (on the part of the REC) of the locally specific relationships between the researchers and researched, but also require a higher degree of reflexivity (on the part of the researcher) in relation to the research process and their collaborative relationships. For example, there is a need to raise awareness of the mutual benefits and reassurances that can be derived from formal agreements (e.g. in relation to IPR, collaborative relationships with non-academic partners, monitoring and evaluation procedures). Conversely, there is also a need to recognize that long-standing collaborative relationships or blanket ethics clearance agreements between institutions may lead to complacency and prevent new projects from being ethically assessed on a case by case basis. A key determinant of the above of course is time; grant recipients must be encouraged and enabled to build time into their projects to think about the practicalities of ethical research and share this information with their collaborating partners to form mutually agreeable parameters.

The overall sense from the research participants was that ESPA's initiative was not misguided per se as it would go some way towards ensuring that proper respect was shown to the people with whom, and environments that, ESPA funded researchers came into contact with, particularly given the dearth of RECs in the developing world. In this sense, the ESPA ethics guidance notes would not be asking the researchers to do anything different from what they should be doing anyway; rather, they would encourage the researchers to give in-depth consideration to the ethical issues involved in their research, whether it involved human participants or not, to ensure that they had ethical clearance from the appropriate authorities/people, and ensure that their protocols were locally appropriate (de Vries et al.,

2011). That said, it was recommended that if the PI was based in the UK (or in an institution outside the UK which has a robust REC), the research should be ethically reviewed by their institution REC *or* ESPA, *but not by both*. RECs which lack experience in, or are uninformed about, this type of research sometimes have a 'paternalistic' tendency to require researchers to take additional (and often disproportionate) precautions to ensure the 'safety' of the research participants (Klitzman, 2012; de Vries et al., 2011); in such cases the researchers would be able to draw on the ESPA guidance in order to justify their protocols. Any guidance issued by ESPA should of course be subject to periodic renewal and revision (Bond, 2012). In time, the hope would be that all ESPA grant recipients would make every effort to get all, or at least part of, their proposed research reviewed by a robust REC in the host country. However, it was recognized that this may not be possible in some countries for a considerable length of time. Just who should be responsible for helping to facilitate the development of robust host country RECs remains to be seen, but the respondents were keen to place this burden at the feet of funding bodies such as ESPA and the PI institutions rather than the award holders.

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