Barry Bull's Commentary on "Ethical Issues in International Educational Research"

Commentary On
Ethical Issues in International Educational Research

This case, while seemingly straightforward, raises profound and puzzling ethical issues not only about research undertaken in international contexts but also about social science research more generally. The most immediate issue in the case concerns the researcher's efforts to obtain informed consent through an explanation of the research project to its intended participants and a request for consent to their participation by means of a signed consent form. This means of documenting informed consent has become a standard expectation of Institutional Review Boards and a standard practice of researchers on human subjects. However, the actions of the head teacher, Mr. Konadu, in this case have disrupted this standard practice. In part, Mr. Konadu's actions apparently arise from cultural differences according to which the head teacher exercises more direct authority over Ghanaian classroom teachers than is usual for school principals in the United States. As well, these actions in part also seem to arise from the dependence of schools in Ghana on international governmental and non-governmental aid, as is frequently the case elsewhere throughout the developing world.

These particular circumstances undermine the assumed autonomy of adult research subjects upon which the usual practice of informed consent is based. No matter what the intentions of the researcher may be, the classroom teachers in this case do not apparently have the freedom of choice which would allow their signatures on the consent form to document their voluntary participation in the research project. The structure of authority within which Ghanaian schools operate seems to defy the assumptions that are built into the standard practice of informed consent. Furthermore, although Mr. Konadu's actions in this case make the nature of the relationships explicit, the authority structure would still be real even if those actions had not taken place and so, too, would the resulting involuntary nature of the

teachers' participation. After all, the existence of social authority and not just the emergence of particular actions in which that authority is expressed is what makes teachers' participation less than fully voluntary. From this perspective about social authority, however, much social research faces a similar problem. Social research frequently involves participants involved in a wide variety of social institutions, and that research involves the nature of those individuals' activities within the institutions. Since an institution is, from one perspective, an arrangement for the deployment of social authority, one is led to have doubts about whether the participation in research of any of an institution's members can be fully voluntary.

These reflections suggest that much research conducted about and in social institutions, foreign and domestic, is likely to violate the ethics of informed consent. As such, they should remind researchers to be especially cautious in conducting such research since it is likely to involve a degree of social coercion even when the standard practices of informed consent have been followed. Now, this caution need not take the form of a refusal to conduct such research on ethical grounds, although sometimes that may be in order. As the Belmont Report (1979) reminds us, the principle upon which informed consent is primarily based is respect for persons, which is in turn based upon two ethical considerations — first, that subjects are to be treated as autonomous agents and, second, that, if subjects are diminished in their autonomy, they are entitled to protection. This second consideration has been thought primarily to apply to children and to disabled adults. However, as we have seen, many subjects in social research are not fully autonomous even though they are functioning adults, and in these cases informed consent is not an entirely ethically satisfactory way for the researcher to demonstrate respect for persons. Thus, we must turn to the consideration of protection in order to demonstrate that respect.

The authoritarian context in which some adults operate can be so oppressive that the only way to protect them is to refuse to conduct research in which they are direct participants. However, that is not clearly true in this case. What is more, to avoid research on people within authoritarian contexts can in many cases be to condone silently the authoritarian arrangements that may exploit them. Yet to pursue the research as if the consent given is entirely voluntary from the start — that is, to pay no attention to the coercive nature of the social research context itself — seems inappropriate. One possible response in such cases is to design or to modify the research project itself in such a way that it invites and enables the

participants to express their autonomy. If, for example, the research involves interviews, the participants themselves might be invited to take part in the development of the interview protocols so that issues that are centrally important to them become a focus in part of the research and so that issues that the participants regard as excessively risky are avoided or at least reconceptualized so as to be less threatening. Of course, the researcher has hypotheses or theories that generate a need for inquiry, but these can be explained and negotiated in the process of collaborative design of the methods of the research themselves.

This protective adaptation of the research is something that the researcher has to do on the fly by being thoughtfully sensitive to the interests of the prospective participants. As a result, there is probably no algorithm that can be followed in cases such as this. The researcher needs to be on the lookout for undue authoritarian structures in the research situation and to work conscientiously to develop ways simultaneously to protect participants in those situations and yet to allow important knowledge to emerge.

Reference

- National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research. The Belmont Report: Ethical Principles and Guidelines for the Protection of Human Subjects of Research. Washington, DC: Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, 1979.