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Interviu / Interview

On Research Ethics. Interview with Professor Derica Lambrechts

Apie tyrimų etiką. Interviu su profesore Derica Lambrechts

Interview conducted by dr. **Neringa Mataitytė**, Vilnius University

Research ethics and the committees supervising adherence to ethical norms have been receiving increasing attention in academic institutions as they are tasked with ensuring responsible conduct and integrity in research practices. The main goal of the committees and their members is to assesses the compliance of planned research with research ethics requirements. They also assist researchers in planning their research in accordance with ethical principles, and provide relevant advice and methodological support. As research ethics has become an established standard in academic journals and scholarly publications, political science faces an imperative to align its practices with these evolving ethical expectations. The text presents a conversation with Professor Derica Lambrechts from Stellenbosch University, South Africa, who has been serving as a committee member for more than a decade. She shares her experiences and challenges in a local South African context while conducting her research on crime gangs in Cape Town. Her insights are based on personal experiences and should not be identified with the positions of the committee. The interview may prove valuable to committee members, lecturers reflecting on the ethical dimensions of their research, and students undertaking their first scholarly works.

Interviewer: Could you briefly describe your role in the Research Ethics Committee and your general experience in this field?

Prof. Derica Lambrechts: Around 2012 or 2013, I was asked by the dean to join the research ethics committee for social sciences and human sciences at Stellenbosch University. The committee was quite small at the time, and there was a need to strengthen ethical oversight in these fields. I served on that committee for approximately eight to ten years.

Within this faculty, each department has a Departmental Ethics Screening Committee, or 'desk'. All ethics applications are submitted online, reviewed initially by the departmental facilitators, and then distributed to members of the desk. Members have two weeks to review the applications, which include the research proposal and documentation on data storage, informed consent, and other ethical considerations. Applications are scored as low-, medium-, or high-risk. Low-risk applications, such as those involving non-intrusive questions, can be approved at the desk level, with a larger ethics committee providing oversight. Medium- and high-risk applications are escalated to the full Research Ethics Committee, where two reviewers provide feedback on the applications.

Since its inception, the ethics process at Stellenbosch has evolved, grappling with the question of what constitutes ethical research and how best to conduct it. I believe that research ethics must constantly evolve. While basic principles, such as respondent-centered design and sensitivity to participants, remain constant, new challenges arise, such as those posed by AI and technology. In particular, AI, new technologies, and other challenges can make it easier to deceive respondents, which increases the importance of ethics committees.

I can provide an example from my experience. During the COVID-19 pandemic, primary data collection was restricted because of lockdowns. I had research funds that needed to be spent, so I collaborated with a research company that used an application to collect qualitative data remotely. The respondents downloaded the app, consented digitally, and interacted with me via chat. This method rais-

es new ethical questions about confidentiality, data security, respondent anonymity, and payment, all of which I had to address in my ethics application. This experience illustrates the need for social science researchers to continuously reevaluate ethical research practices.

What other emerging challenges do you see for the research ethics committees?

One key challenge is verifying the reliability and authenticity of the data. As social scientists, we study human behaviors and lived experiences. With AI-generated data and synthetic content, we must be cautious regarding the origin of our data.

Fake news and misinformation also influence respondents' perspectives, affecting the quality of the data collected. Researchers must consider how respondents receive information and how virtual reality shapes opinions.

What are the most common challenges faced by research ethics committees at your university?

One major challenge relates to the sensitivity around race and ethnicity. For example, a few years ago, an article published by Stellenbosch University made problematic assumptions about certain ethnic groups and women in those groups. Although the research had ethics approval and underwent blind peer review, the article was later retracted due to its harsh assumptions. This highlights the need for researchers to be extremely sensitive when dealing with race and ethnicity, given the history and the specific context of South Africa. This case, for example, showed that researchers must avoid making assumptions based solely on racial or ethnic group membership.

Similarly, gender research requires sensitivity beyond binary categories and recognizes diverse gender identities. The concept of 'family' also requires careful operationalization because the traditional Western nuclear family model does not represent the diversity of family structures in many communities. Researchers must be cautious in defining and measuringthese concepts.

So, in your experience, as explained in this example, ethics committees evaluate the broader context of research proposals, such as assumptions and theoretical framework?

This is a common challenge. Our ethics committee, like many others, struggles to engage deeply with the substance of research proposals beyond procedural ethics. Some researchers view ethics committees as obstacles when commenting on theories or conceptualizations.

Our committee comprises members from diverse disciplines, and not all members feel competent to critique specialized theoretical frameworks, such as gender studies. Such critiques may overstep the intended role of the ethics committee.

By the time a proposal reaches the ethics committee, it should have already been reviewed by faculty committees with the relevant disciplinary expertise. Ethics clearance is increasingly required for publication in reputable journals, which underscores the importance of the role of the committee in upholding research standards. However, their role is to ensure ethical conduct rather than evaluate academic merit or theoretical soundness.

Could you share your personal experience of facing particularly interesting research ethics challenges and how you managed to address them?

I would probably give an example related to my PhD research. My PhD research examined the impact of organized crime, specifically gangs, on state social control in the Cape Flats area near Cape Town.[1] The Cape Flats has a complex history, including forced re-

[1] South Africa continues to rank among the most crime-affected countries globally, recording a crime index of 75.4 in 2024, which is the highest on the African continent, and placing the country fifth most dangerous worldwide according to the same index (https://www.statista.com/statistics/1399476/crime-index-south-africa/). Crime distribution is highly uneven across geographic and socio-economic contexts: crime is concentrated in certain neighbourhoods such as townships or economically marginalized urban zones; in contrast, central business districts and affluent or suburban areas tend to exhibit lower exposure to violent crime, although risks may increase at night. In cities such as Cape Town, crime is often spatially concentrated in a limited number of high-risk neighbourhoods associated with gang activity, whereas safer districts and central areas experience comparatively lower rates.

movals during Apartheid, poverty, unemployment, and the growth of gangs that exert informal authority over certain communities.

As a young white female researcher, gaining access to high-risk environments posed significant challenges. I had to develop an ethics application that ensured my safety, minimized intrusion, and respected the local communities. Conducting fieldwork requires leaving the field as it was found and designing respondent-centered studies that treat the participants with respect.

Initially, the ethics committee seemed to be an obstacle because it placed high expectations on safety and ethical considerations. In particular, my safety was discussed significantly. However, during this process, I began to see them as collaborators. For example, we managed to come up with some good solutions, which ensured that my study was conducted not only by adhering to ethics towards participants, but also to my own safety. For example, to avoid gang-related risks, I proposed conducting focus groups in a neutral location (a former provincial hospital boardroom). The ethics committee recommended having a therapist or social worker on standby to debrief respondents if sensitive topics arose, which was also helpful in this study. However, attendance at focus groups was low, and I could not afford to keep the therapist on a retainer for extended periods. I then proposed an alternative approach to the ethics committee: providing respondents with contact details for debriefing sessions if needed, rather than having someone physically present at all times.

This experience taught me to view ethics committees as partners who help improve research validity and reliability rather than as barriers. Many committee members have research experience and genuinely want to support ethical research.

I was fortunate to have an excellent research assistant who was familiar with the area and acted as a ‘gatekeeper’. Gatekeepers are more than just access facilitators; they help researchers understand the social and contextual dynamics of the field, which is crucial in such studies. My gatekeeper’s assistance was invaluable.

Additionally, the ethics committee suggested using a university-branded vehicle, but I argued that using my own car was safer because it was less conspicuous than a university-branded vehicle. In studies that require engaging with and observing a specific community, researchers must recognize that they are strangers in the community and cannot assume they know what is safe. I never entered the area at night and always heeded local advice about which streets to avoid because of gang activity. Respecting local knowledge is thus crucial.

What would be the main lessons you learned in terms of communication with the ethics committee during the preparation of your study, especially considering the challenges they raised as crucial?

It is essential to clearly and openly explain how you address their concerns. In my case, I explained the measures I would take to ensure my safety. Ethics committees expect this and will question any gaps if they are not clearly or superficially explained.

Regarding my experience, I elaborated on the benefits of having a research assistant as a gatekeeper who is familiar with the area and that I was aware of the limitations of local police support. Knowing that the police were not there to ensure my safety, given the gang presence, I ensured that I considered other measures to ensure my safety that were suitable to the specifics of the community and environment I was researching. Open communication with the ethics committee, including discussions beyond the written proposal, helps to find workable solutions.

What research ethics considerations do you encourage undergraduate and graduate students to reflect on at Stellenbosch University?

At the Bachelor's level, students are not permitted to collect primary data because of time constraints and lack of training. The departmental ethics screening committee also lacks the capacity to review many applications at this level.

At the Master's level, students must apply for ethical clearance if they collect primary data for their research. However, the application process is lengthy and detailed, requiring explanations of data protection, consent, sample size, and access. Supervisors encourage students to critically consider whether they can realistically access their target respondents within their timeframe and whether those respondents will contribute meaningfully to their research questions.

For example, a student researching environmental justice in the Niger Delta, southern Nigeria, may wish to interview senior executives of oil companies. Accessing such elite informants requires institutional permission and careful planning. Students must assess whether such access is feasible, and whether alternative approaches might better address their research questions.

Students are also taught to design respondent-sensitive studies and respect respondents' time and contributions, such as being punctual for interviews.

Thank you very much for this conversation.