Research Ethics (2011) Vol 7, No 2, 39–50

ISSN 1747-0161

Original paper

Perceptions of research assistants on how their research participants view informed consent and its documentation in Africa

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This paper discusses the issue of informed consent from an African perspective with a particular emphasis on the problems posed by the documentation of consent in the African socio-cultural environment. The paper presents two small-scale surveys which typify and exemplify the African perspective with regard to procedures for obtaining consent (agreement) and for documenting it. To avoid causing moral pain to African research participants and the feeling of having been used as mere sources of data, this paper suggests, as a short-term solution, that African cultural values be incorporated in the procedures and regulations aimed at protecting their human rights. As a long-term solution, the paper encourages universities and research institutions operating in Africa to come up with clear guidelines of ethical conduct which would satisfy both the interests of ordinary Africans (particularly the rural and uneducated population) and legal requirements to which Western research institutions and funding agencies are subjected.

Keywords: *informed consent, research, Africa, linguistics, Democratic Republic of Congo*

Introduction

Although discussions are still going on concerning how much of the legislation relative to human subject research should be applicable to linguistic investigations, many linguists around the world are nevertheless of the opinion that linguistic investigation should meet some basic ethical standard regarding respect for human subjects. Obtaining and documenting informed consent are two of the most frequently mentioned requirements for making research involving human subjects ethical. Many commentators see informed consent as involving the following elements: firstly, the respondent must have a clear understanding of what the study demands of him or her and be mentally competent to make the decision; secondly, the respondents must be aware of the potential risks and benefits of their participation in the investigation; and finally, the participants must be free from external pressure [1].

In order to comply with legislation relative to research ethics, most Western universities and research institutes have established ethical review boards or ethics committees to assure the implementation of standard procedure for obtaining and documenting consent. This paper discusses the issue of informed consent from an

African perspective, and puts a particular emphasis on the problems posed by the documentation of consent in the African environment. The paper presents two small-scale surveys of research assistants which typify and exemplify the reactions of African research participants towards procedures for obtaining consent (agreement) and its documentation. In the first survey, I interviewed 13 Bible translation degree students at Shalom University of Bunia (Democratic Republic of Congo) who had worked alongside a linguist to recruit subjects and collect their folktales and personal narratives for a discourse analysis course. In the second survey, I interviewed four nurses who were research assistants recruiting research participants and collecting data for a PhD medical studies student from the University of Liverpool.

The paper argues that legislation relative to research ethics as currently designed by Western universities, funding agencies and research institutions, are oriented toward Western legal systems and cultures, and therefore may not be appropriate for sub-Saharan situations. Finally, the paper calls upon institutions and individuals conducting research in Sub-Saharan Africa to develop guidelines and procedures that are culturally appropriate for addressing the ethical challenges posed by human subject research. While waiting for the above-mentioned guidelines, the paper proposes to researchers operating on the African continent not to downplay the consequences of imposing Western value-laden guidelines on African research participants for fear of potential legal actions that Africans may never bring against them. For the purpose, researchers are encouraged to play by African socio-cultural norms if they truly intend to treat African research participants the same way they are required to treat Western ones. It is important to note that the views expressed in this paper are only applicable to Sub-Saharan Africa.

Methodology and research design

In this section, I present two small-scale surveys of research assistants showing their perceived reaction of Congolese research participants to the process of obtaining and documenting consent. In the first survey, a short written questionnaire was administered to 13 Bible translation degree students at Shalom University of Bunia, the project's research assistants. A few months earlier, each of these 13 students had helped a linguist with the Eastern Congo Group of SIL International[1] to recruit participants to collect folktales and personal narratives in preparation for a discourse analysis course. A statement of consent had been prepared in regional languages, Lingala and Swahili depending on the region. The research assistants were instructed to explain to the potential participant storytellers in local languages the contents of the statement and ask them to sign the consent form if they were willing to participate. Between them, the 13 assistants helped collect stories from 100 participating storytellers. The questionnaire was composed of three closed questions and one open question. The first question asked the assistants to give an estimate of the proportion of storytellers who felt uneasy (all, most or few) about the idea of signing the consent form. Secondly the assistants were asked whether the storytellers suspected a hidden agenda behind the consent form. Thirdly, the assistants were asked if they knew any other reasons why storytellers would have resisted signing the consent form. The final probe urged the assistants to mention anything that the questionnaire did not address. In addition to the questionnaire, an informal group interview was conducted in order to seek clarification and ask some follow-up questions.

In the second survey, several informal interviews were conducted individually with four nurses holding a BA in nursing. These nurses were hired as assistants by a PhD medical student from the University of Liverpool to

[1] A faith-based nonprofit organization committed to serving language communities worldwide as they build capacity for sustainable language development. See www.SIL.org.

recruit participants and to collect data for her studies. The study was about the relationship between difficult childbirth and pregnancy follow-up by medical staff. For each interview with a woman who had had a difficult childbirth (case), research assistants had to interview another woman who had a normal childbirth, living in the same area or village as the one who had difficult childbirth (witness). Each woman was required to sign a consent form otherwise she was dropped from the sample. Altogether the four research assistants interviewed 350 mothers in Bunia and surrounding villages. Research assistants were interviewed on two broad topics: the difficulties they encountered in obtaining and documenting consent, and their impressions of the reasons for research participants' reluctance to sign the consent form. First, assistants were asked to talk about their experiences with regard to the seeking of consent and its documentation. Additional questions were asked in order to probe the specifics of difficulties in obtaining and documenting participants' consent. Finally, they were asked to elaborate on what they thought were the reasons behind research participants' reluctance to sign a consent form.

The results are the research assistants' perceptions of how their research participants regarded informed consent and its documentation. As it is not a survey of the research participants themselves, the numerical proportion of participants apparently reacting in one way or another is not specified. Descriptive proportions are less likely to give a misleading impression that the research assistants' insights were always based on objective and reliable evidence.

Results

Reporting problems with consent

In the first survey, out of 13 research assistants, seven of them (54%) reported that most participating storytellers apparently felt uneasy about signing the consent form and thought that the practice was unusual or strange. Three assistants (23%) said that they thought that every storyteller in their area felt uneasy signing the consent form. Only one (8%) assistant out of 13 reported that every storyteller was happy to sign the consent form and two (15%) assistants reported that very few storytellers in his area openly disliked the idea of signing the consent form. As evidence for their views, the assistants reported either that they heard the storytellers discussing the issue among themselves or, in some cases, that the storytellers voiced their concerns directly to the assistants.

With regard to women who were interviewed regarding childbirth problems, the four nurse research assistants reported that women seemed to behave differently depending on the location where they were interviewed. With the exception of a few women who had superstitious ideas and who believed that giving an interview to a stranger would harm their babies, women who were interviewed on hospital beds generally agreed to be interviewed without much hesitation. In some cases, even those who did not fit the criteria requested to be interviewed. In contrast, women who were found in their own homes were much more reluctant to consent to the interview. More importantly, only one out of ten among women research participants found in their family homes agreed to sign the form without hesitation. Similarly, of the women who were interviewed on hospital beds, the nurses estimated the proportion which had serious hesitation over signing the consent form at more than 75%. The assistants reported that some women seemed to look for excuses to avoid signing the form. This included asking the research assistant to sign on their behalf, or arguing that they were not literate enough to sign the form. But when the research assistants raised the possibility of affixing the interviewee's fingerprint on the form, their objection to the procedure became obvious. In one striking instance, a woman who had agreed to be interviewed, heard the statement of consent being read, and answered the questions, adamantly refused to sign the form at the end of the interview in spite of her friends urging her to do so.

Rationale behind reluctance to signing the consent form

With regard to perceived justifications that research participants had for not signing the consent form, these two themes occurred most frequently:

Fear of committing to the unknown

According to the four nurse research assistants in the second survey, whereas most women happily agreed to be interviewed, as soon as the signing of the consent form was mentioned, the women's mood immediately changed and they became suspicious about the whole process. Although the consent form that the women were asked to sign clearly stated that each individual would be interviewed only once, most women apparently believed that by signing the form they were committing to future events of which they had no idea. Thus, before considering whether they wanted to sign or not, women asked the research assistants what the next step would be and what the true purpose of the research was. Regardless of the written statement of the purpose of the research, the participants drew their own conclusions concerning the aim of the research and what might happen in the future.

Women who had had a caesarean section or whose babies were in very poor health apparently thought that they may be offered some help, and to secure their future benefits signed the form and asked the research assistants not to omit them from the final list. On the other hand, some women apparently concluded that the research assistants had some hidden agenda and thought that by signing the form the assistants were trying to tie them down to undisclosed future developments. They were the most reluctant as to the idea of signing the consent form. A small but significant minority of women apparently thought that they might one day be called to testify in court and none of them wanted that. Others apparently believed that by signing the form they might incriminate hospital personnel who helped deliver their babies.

Fear of deceit and treachery

Ten out of 13 research assistants who helped the SIL linguist to collect folktales and personal narratives in the first survey reported that participating storytellers generally believed that if there were nothing to gain from the stories, the researcher would have not required them to sign the form. Participating storytellers were told that they would be 'telling a story for no payment'; reportedly, some assumed that this was a euphemism for 'telling the story for a modest reward not worth mentioning by a white person'. Most research assistants reported that participating storytellers watched them closely in order to find out if the linguist was going to pass on something to the assistant. A few research assistants believed that the wording of the consent form might have caused some participating storytellers to assume that the SIL researcher might have been squeezing them out of possible future gains their stories might generate. The consent form stated that: 'I have given the stories freely and neither I nor my children shall require SIL to make payment…'

In the areas where Congolese university students and research assistants frequently come to collect data for BA or MA research projects, the fact that they never ask for signatures reinforced the idea of a hidden agenda. As Westerners who enter the community through church channels are generally reputed to be honest, most participating storytellers believed that the assistants were trying to keep whatever little money the linguist might have given to them. In one case, a participant was reported as saying 'Let me sign the form but I am convinced that you are benefiting from my blood'. Benefiting from someone else's blood means deceitfully collecting someone else's pay.

Discussion

Mismatches between cultural values: Individualism and collectivism

Although the concept of ethics in research involving human subjects can be traced back to

pre-Nazi Germany, the Nuremberg Code appears to be one of the internationally decisive defining factors towards legally binding legislations in the history of research ethics [2]. Over the years, universities, research institutions and funding agencies have developed stringent ethical regulations for research in order to fully comply with the codes of human rights within the countries where they operate. However, troubles arise when Western cultural value-laden regulations are applied to research situations in Africa.

The individualism of Western societies emphasizes respect for the identity, the rights and the needs of individuals over the needs and rights of communities [3]. As a result, individuals generally feel free to do whatever they want as long as they are not breaking the law. The difficult balance between the rights of individuals and the needs of their own societies has come under serious strain in the Western world recently as various governments struggle to design strategies to protect their citizens from terrorist attacks. In some cases, measures designed to protect nations as a whole have been perceived as infringements on the rights of individuals. As far as research is concerned, individualism-driven legislation gives a research participant the latitude of choosing whether he or she wants to participate in a research project or not. Thus, freely-given consent in Western cultures presupposes that the consenting individual possesses the legal capacity to give consent and that no coercion is exercized upon him or her. As a proof of respect of due procedure, researchers are required to document the consent they freely obtain from research participants. However, the question worth asking is whether these rules as defined by individual-centred low-context Western societies address the concerns of group-centred high-context societies.

Collectivism, the predominant relational tendency in sub-Saharan Africa (and Asia to some extent), emphasizes and promotes group cohesion and values. Individuals see themselves as members of a larger group and behave accordingly. As the privileges which come with community membership outweigh the benefit of individual freedom, group values generally override individual preferences. The pre-eminence of 'we and ours' above 'me and mine' seriously impacts the concept of intellectual property, one of the pillars on which informed consent and its documentation stand with respect to linguistic research. In this respect, what may be perceived as an individual's intellectual property by Westerners, and treated as such by the Western judiciary system, may in African and other cultures, belong to the whole community. As a result, when approached by a researcher for an interview, an African research participant may first need to judge whether he or she constitutes an authorized mouth to talk about the issue or topic being researched. Thus, the degrees of freedom that individuals have to consent to activities depend on the socio-cultural perception of the nature of the activity. Accordingly, members of traditional communities in sub-Saharan Africa have more than one way of giving consent depending on circumstances. When the activity or event that the individual is asked to engage in is unregulated or has no special socio-cultural considerations, individuals are free to consent or refuse to participate in a given activity based on their own judgements. For example, if a researcher wants to collect data regarding how children learn to speak their mother tongues in the DRC, parents would feel free to allow or refuse the researcher access to their children. But for most sociolinguistic research topics, such as language shift, attitudes, etc which are socially and emotionally charged, the point of view of community leaders is to be sought, since the participant's responses may be directed to facts which involve the community as a whole.

Another outworking of this perspective is that generally, people seek to adhere to the majority point of view in order to be on the safe side. For instance, when I was collecting data for my doctoral studies among the Hema of DRC, no

one would speak to me until he or she was assured that the paramount chief had been consulted. The interethnic upheaval that was going on at the time reinforced the fear of being seen as a betrayer of the community. A local community leader who had refused to be interviewed when first approached later felt compelled to participate when he realized that the paramount chief had authorized the research. When he met my research assistant at the home of the paramount chief and saw that some elders were being interviewed, he decided to reverse his first decision. As an insider, I suggest that he had not suddenly realized that he had made a wrong decision; rather, he noticed that he had made a minority decision and that it was time he joined the majority point of view. To redeem himself, he clandestinely made a sign to the research assistant to follow him outside and told him that he was now ready to be interviewed. No coercion was exerted on this man in order to change his views: he simply realized that he had misjudged the situation and the group norms were leading him to readjust to the situation. Thus, in communities where the opinion of individuals depends on group consensus, researchers may need to learn how to spare individuals from trouble by allowing them to change their mind and align their opinion with the group one.

Three cases in which consent by proxy is justified

1. Differences in exposure to the larger world

Standard procedures for obtaining and documenting consent as designed by international research and funding institutions seem to make little provision for situations where research participants have little or no concept of research and may have minimal exposure to the larger world. In this respect, they seem oblivious to the fact that members of most traditional communities in Africa may not be in a position to fully understand what some advanced research projects involve and make informed decisions with regard to the risks a given research activity poses to them and to their communities and environment. One may wonder whether it is realistic to expect individuals without formal education or members of preliterate (predominantly oral) communities to make informed judgements with regard to what PhD research within the field of biotechnology involves, or what effects the construction of a dam could have further downstream on the ecology of their homeland.

Misunderstandings with regard to the purposes of research reported in the second survey exemplify this point. Although the participating women were given information regarding the aim of the research project, women who happily agreed to be interviewed believed that next time they were going to receive much better treatment as results of the research. Yet, none of their assumptions was correct. In sub-Saharan Africa, individuals with little exposure to the larger world generally seek help from those they can trust to enlighten their decision-making process while dealing with situations of which their understanding is minimal. Most ethnic communities in the Democratic Republic of the Congo have bodies of knowledgeable men called ‘notables’. This group of people often speak on behalf of their communities thus bridging the gap between the community and outside world (international NGOs or government agencies). People may have recourse to the help of an educated member of their community who otherwise has no authority whatsoever. For example, in the Ruruuli-Runyara survey report, Nannyombi et al. (2007) maintain that many interviewees in the village setting were unable to understand what they were asking and why they were asking it [4]. As a result, people simply looked at either the head of the household or a community leader to signal whether they should consent to the interview or not.

2. Rules of hospitality and power distance

A researcher who enters an African community will generally be seen in one of two lights: as a

powerful person, or as a person in need of hospitality. Someone who comes endorsed by a powerful person, or who otherwise tries to command respect, falls into the first category. Someone who is introduced as a friend, or who comes humbly, in a casual manner, falls into the second category.

In most African cultures, an essential part of the rules of hospitality is to avoid embarrassing a guest, by bringing up a subject that has the potential for controversy or appearing to question his or her integrity. The basic rule of hospitality requires that the host be nice to the visitor, even if this may involve sacrificing one's rights. Since relationship takes precedence over business, people will do everything to avoid questioning the visitor [5].

Another cultural aspect of sub-Saharan Africa is a high awareness of the power distance between people of different levels of status. A less powerful person, one with lower status, does not question a more powerful person, one with higher status, for fear of being seen as disrespectful, or even of being punished. The prestige ascribed to the researcher (eg as someone who is associated with a university or other powerful institution) identifies him or her, ipso facto, as a person of higher status. This is particularly true if the researcher is a Westerner.

Often, the respondent is lacking information that is necessary for informed consent. Whether the researcher is seen as a higher-status visitor or as a friendly guest, the interviewee is culturally constrained from asking questions of clarification that may be necessary to give truly informed consent. In the eyes of the respondent, to pose even what a Westerner would consider an innocent question may be a face-threatening act for both parties. As a result, consent may be given without being truly informed, or more rarely, it may be withheld.

But this dilemma can be avoided: a third party, another local person, can help negotiate informed consent and spare both research participants and researcher. That is, in case of any questions, the person being interviewed can look for answers from a knowledgeable insider rather than from the visitor. For example, during their linguistic survey among the Ruruuli-Runyara language communities of Uganda, Nannyombi and colleagues noticed that their local contacts played a pivotal role in whether research participants agreed or refused to sign the consent form [4].

3. Social inclusion of the researcher

When Harrison (2008) was studying language use among church women in Brazzaville, she experienced the fact of being accepted as a 'ndoyi' of the daughter of their pastor's wife [6]. In the Lingala language, two people having the same name (namesake) are called each other's 'ndoyi'. This implicitly gave her group membership, and also the right to conduct research among them. Such a case of trust by proxy has also been reported in the West where researchers introduced themselves to potential respondents as a friend of a friend [7, 8]. Whereas in the West, researchers may use such a proxy-trust relationship as an icebreaker, in Africa, friends play a much more significant role and get deeply involved in everything, acting as a go-between between the researcher and the interviewee. In such a case of social inclusion, to seek a formal statement of consent would be interpreted as a strange act. Membership in a group carries certain rights; why ask for something that has already been given? In such cases, common to ethnographic research, the researcher is wisest to use an informal approach, for example to ask: 'Is it okay for me to record this conversation?' and 'Is it okay for me to use this recording for my studies?' Asking participants to sign a statement would place a strain on the whole interaction.

Application

In short, sub-Saharan cultures allow for three ways of giving consent. Firstly, when the topic of the research falls into an area that is unregulated by community norms, individuals may feel free to consent or not. Secondly, the

research topic may fall into the area where only community leaders or gatekeepers are entitled to give consent in the name of the whole community, or to give their approval for individuals to be approached by outsiders. Community leaders possess the power to veto the consent given by individuals and may punish the offender if need be. Such a situation calls for collective consent giving, in which community leaders may convene in order to make a decision which would be based on the interests of the community as a whole. Thirdly, there are cases of consent by proxy. For example, due to lack of exposure to the modern world, individuals may not be in a position to make informed decisions. They may therefore seek help from the people they trust, and the trustee may be commissioned to act on behalf of an individual or a community. Such consent is based on trust by proxy. The reaction of the interviewees in the Ruruuli-Runyara language groups of Uganda exemplifies this case. During this survey, 16 interpreters (from the local community) signed the consent form on behalf of individual interviewees and six interpreters signed the consent form on behalf of the groups that were interviewed [4].

The fundamental question is whether these three forms of consent fit the bill of freely-given informed consent by Western standards or whether they are adequately attended to by standard procedures. Researchers from outside sub-Saharan Africa must be made aware of the fact that the way ordinary Africans negotiate agreement is likely to appear very informal to them or, they might not even notice that they have been granted consent already.

African perspectives on the act of signing

While asked how they dealt with an interviewee's reluctance to sign the consent form, the four nurses or research assistants in the second survey responded that obtaining signatures from the interviewees was the most difficult part of their job. While the PhD student from the University of Liverpool assumed that a clear explanation regarding the purpose of the research would cause people to sign the form, their experience was different. 'She appeared not to have a clue of what we were going through', one of the four nurses commented. Thus, from various comments made by the research assistants, it can be concluded that the main hurdle to the signing of the consent form is the perceptions that Africans have of signatures. To cite an example from Uganda, Prossy Nannyombi and colleagues reported that some interviewees found their request to sign the consent form unjustified, absurd and even ridiculous [4]. Often the interpreter felt the need to temper or justify this request with a remark such as: 'Westerners have strange rules they have to obey'. Thus, in this case, the forms were signed in order to satisfy Westerners' cultural norms and for face-saving purposes. In other words, when a Westerner asks for a signature, it is relatively understandable since they are known to possess unreasonable and sometimes ridiculous rules. On the contrary, when an African asks for a signature in the same circumstances, more suspicions arise, as the interviewee finds no plausible explanation for such unfriendly behaviour on the part of fellow Africans.

Historically, signatures in sub-Saharan Africa have been associated with the disguised deeds of colonial powers, and the forcefully obtained confessions of police states that followed decolonization. Across Africa, there are numerous accounts of cases where village elders believed they were signing for something beneficial for their communities, only to realise later that they were totally wrong. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, for instance, before the advent of literacy, wherever colonial civil servants asked a person to sign a document, the latter concluded that he or she was in serious trouble with the colonial administration [9]. In other words, pieces of paper requiring a signature often brought bad news to individuals signing them. Generally, signatures have in most cases condemned Africans rather than acting as recognition of their rights. Thus, Africans have learned to be suspicious and very conscious of deeds requiring their signatures.

Whereas paperwork requiring a personal signature (eg bank accounts, title deeds, wills) is a commonplace in the West, most individuals in sub-Saharan Africa may live their entire life without having to sign a single document. Generally, a signature is used in legal and administrative transactions which most ordinary inhabitants of sub-Saharan Africa are not part of. A signature is also used in large-scale commercial and financial transactions where individuals participating in the transaction do not know each other personally or are acting on behalf of their employers: again, transactions to which the majority of ordinary men and women in Sub-Saharan Africa have no access. In interpersonal transactions, however (informal in nature), a signature is used only in contentious situations where trust has been lost.

In African perspective, a signature is proof of the exchange of objects among people who do not trust each other. Moreover, it is the receiver of the goods who is required to sign and not the giver. Thus, signing for having produced a story or having given an interview on the request of a researcher appears awkward and strange. Thus, if a signature is required, it is the story collector or the interviewer who should sign for having received something from them and not the opposite. Therefore, the standard procedures prescribed by Western ethical review boards cause African research participants to wonder more than ever about the true intentions of the researcher.

Habitually, Africans operate on the basis of mutual trust, whereby the honesty and sincerity of the other party are assumed. For example, even a relatively large amount of money by African standards can be handed over to a second person without request for a receipt. Generally, requests for receipts tend to be interpreted as a lack of trust and tacitly signifying that the receiving party could steal the money. Even in socio-cultural transactions where there is a potential for conflict in the future, Africans tend to assume goodwill from everyone (doubt in this regard is generally kept unexpressed for face reasons). Thus requiring proof of goodwill would go against the aforementioned presuppositions of goodwill.

In the case of bride wealth, for instance, the two families are aware of the possibility of divorce and that a situation may arise whereby the bride's family may be required to pay back the bride-wealth. Among the Hema people of DRC, for example, the participation of a large number of people from different age groups in the bride-wealth negotiation provides the two families with camouflaged witnesses. In other words, by associating young people to the event, the two families are assured that if controversy arises with regard to payment of bride-wealth, there is the likelihood that younger eyewitnesses from both sides may still be around to clarify the situation. The Alur of DRC looked at probity as a self-governing entity. If a person did not keep his or her part of the deal, a curse would befall that person [10]. Thus, there was no need to put any kind of legal fence around social deals. Thus, whereas the seeking of consent falls within the limits of cultural norms, the documentation of consent is foreign to sub-Saharan Africa.

Solutions

Research ethics is not the only area where African values clash with Western practices. By raising the issue of discrepancies between African socio-cultural values and research ethical practices derived from Western values, my intention is not to free researchers operating in Africa from being accountable with regard to research ethics; rather, my concern is how the research community can guarantee that the rights of African research participants are respected without causing them moral pain by subjecting them to procedures seemingly aimed at protecting researchers against potential lawsuits in their home countries. Given the complexity of the matter, it would be naive to expect an easy way out.

For a long-term solution, I propose that African universities, and research institutions operating in Africa, develop codes of research ethics and conduct to address the issue of consent, its

negotiation and documentation in a culturally appropriate manner. With respect to informed consent, such guidelines should clarify the issue of how much and what kind of information should be given to ordinary Africans before they can be said to have received enough information to make an informed decision. With respect to negotiation, they should reflect a serious analysis of African perspectives on intellectual property, and therefore of who should give consent for what kind of research. For example: What should the involvement of a husband be when one wants to interview a married woman? How do we accommodate the cultural role of gatekeepers and trusted knowledgeable individuals in providing consent? What should be the role of community leaders when an ethnographer wants to settle in the community? With respect to documentation, there is a need for guidelines for recording consent in a way that minimizes cultural intrusion. I therefore invite African scholars to join the debate so that we can come up with ways of doing things that suit the thought patterns of ordinary African men and women, instead of imposing on them a standard brought from elsewhere.

In the absence of guidelines specific to African situations, I suggest that researchers and funding institutions be sensitive to the needs of research participants rather than putting forward their own needs for protection against potential lawsuits in their home countries. If anyone is to take a risk, it should be the researcher and not the researched. Ordinary Africans should be allowed to express their consent in culturally appropriate manners. A Western concept of legal capacity should not be imposed on people from other cultures if by so doing the researcher is transgressing local norms. Although rules (in Africa) with regard to who has the latitude to speak for others are not always obvious to foreigners, I encourage foreign researchers to educate themselves and learn local norms before they engage communities. In this regard, Harrison's (2008) example is enlightening to whoever wants to apply African ethics to their research [6]. Following advice from her friends in Brazzaville and scholars at the Université Marien Ngouabi, she discovered that church women whose language use she was studying saw themselves as members of a close-knit group where everyone has responsibility towards the network, thus there was no point in requesting each woman to consent individually. Based on local culture, women preferred to give their agreement as a group and orally. As a result, she tape-recorded the consent statement given to her by the women's group. The statement of consent should preferably avoid making reference to a possible future financial claim either by research participant or his/her descendants. Africans generally view such a statement as a guised accusation of dishonesty or as a sign of an undisclosed research agenda.

Conclusion

This paper was aimed at two things: to initiate a discussion among scholars with regard to developing appropriate ethical protocols for language research in a sub-Saharan African context, and to make three suggestions as to how to seek and document consent in rural Africa. For the first purpose, I undertook two small-scale surveys whereby I interviewed research assistants who were in charge of obtaining and documenting consent. The results of the surveys showed that standard procedures for obtaining consent and its documentation, as presently designed by Western research institutions and funding agencies, are based on Western socio-cultural values and legal requirements which seem to clash with the socio-cultural values of the people of sub-Saharan Africa.

While Western cultures emphasize the rights and needs of individuals, African cultures generally value group consensus and the needs of communities as a whole. In everyday life, members of traditional communities generally operate on the basis of mutual trust, particularly in interpersonal and informal transactions. Moreover, the rights and needs of communities override those of individuals. I have raised

fundamental questions with regard to the applicability of criteria of legal capacity to give consent: for, as I have argued, not all mentally healthy adults from communities without research traditions are capable of adequately grasping what every type of research project involves. This is true even if the statement of consent is written in his or her own mother tongue.

In addition, the paper invites scholars to examine the socio-psychological implications of the documentation of consent; for I have argued that requests for signatures jeopardize the basis of interpersonal transactions in rural sub-Saharan Africa. In this respect, the results of two small-scale surveys presented in this paper revealed that many Africans find the documentation of their consent (at least in written form) unjustified and potentially malevolent. Where there is no exchange of material goods, there is suspicion that a signature may be used for undisclosed purposes.

With regard to the second purpose, the paper makes three suggestions as to how to seek and document consent in rural Africa. As a short-term solution, this paper invites Western researchers and research institutions to incorporate African values into their ways of doing business. Researchers should be aware of the fact that almost every encounter in sub-Saharan Africa has a potential for producing a long-term relationship among the individuals involved. When a researcher does not maintain a certain level of contact with his or her research participants after data collection, Africans are likely to conclude that they have been used as mere sources of data. Researchers should be aware of the fact that African communities tend to expect tangible results from every research activity. When nothing is shown to them for a long time (by African standards) the researcher may be accused of doing something other than what was said. The concept of research for the sake of scientific advancement is still foreign to most Africans. Thus, one should be realistic as to what people can expect from the research project and when the results may be expected. For instance, the four nurses reported that most women found their survey questions too intimate and embarrassing. In spite of shame and embarrassment, women agreed to be interviewed because they believed that a solution was being sought to their problem. The feeling that this research would ease women's suffering was reinforced by the fact that the interviewers were introduced by health centre medical personnel who were looking after those women. However, the nurses have now realized that those women are expecting swift results and believe that the next time they go to hospital for childbirth, the medical teams will be better equipped to deal with cases of difficult childbirth. Therefore, in my opinion, being realistic and frank with regard to what people can gain from an investigation, and when the results can be expected, are parts of being accountable. With medical research for example, it should clearly be mentioned that the research may take many decades and the people participating in the research may never benefit from it.

As a long-term resolution of the problem, African universities and research institutions operating in Africa are encouraged to come up with clear guidelines of ethical conduct which take into account the psychological well-being of ordinary research participants in rural Africa and legal requirements to which Western research institutions and funding agencies are subjected.

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the contributions of Douglas W. Boone in reviewing and editing the draft of this paper. I would equally like to thank Maik Gibson for editing an earlier draft.

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