RELATIONAL RESEARCH ETHICS AND DISENGAGEMENT FROM COLLABORATIVE RESEARCH PROJECTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION: A CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

Research collaboration is a common practice in higher education, and so is the discourse of research ethics. However, the colonial orientation of some research as well as the managerial models of higher education practices undermine the connectedness and relationality of collaborative research. In this article, I argue this point with a focus on disengagement or withdrawal of collaborators from research projects before they are completed. I argue that this practice has ethical implications at various levels, especially the level of the researched or colonised communities. Drawing from multi-disciplinary literature, I follow a conceptual analysis method, focusing on research collaboration, research ethics and disengagement. The article identifies the types and benefits of collaborative research, as well as common reasons and ethical implications of disengagement from such projects. It concludes by recommending an extension of research ethics regulations to incorporate disengagement, in consideration of the relationality of collaborative research projects.

Keywords: collaborative research, disengagement, relational ethics, managerialism, higher education

INTRODUCTION

The role of research in producing knowledge for society cannot be overstated. To this end, many researchers in the world pursue collaboration as a way of enhancing their research practices, compare contextual conditions and of improving on research relevance and productivity (Leibowitz, Ndebele, and Winberg 2014; Onyancha and Maluleka 2011). Such collaboration is also pursued by those who do not believe to be the sole emancipators of humankind in the colonised communities (Smith 2012). Leibowitz et al. (2014) note the significant need of collaborative research in a South African context where inequalities in the higher education sector are concerning. While such importance of collaborative research are identified for various reasons, it sometimes happens that collaborators disengage or withdraw before the research projects are completed, leaving those involved waiting, deterred or working

better, depending on the relationships that were existing in the project. This article provides an opportunity for researchers in South Africa and similar contexts, where collaborative research has a potential to produce knowledge for addressing colonial practices, to reflect on the seemingly overlooked ethical issues related to disengagement.

As a researcher, I was introduced to the research practice through collaborative projects. Throughout my career, I have disengaged from some collaborations and I have led some from which collaborators disengaged. These experiences sparked my reflection on disengagement and the potential implications for ethics, especially the relational ethics (Chilisa et al. 2017; Ellis 2007; Ellis, Adams, and Bochnet 2011; Patel 2016). I state this background about myself in response to Patel's (2016, 58) view that researchers need to pause and reflect on their experiences "that make them appropriately able to craft, contribute, and even question knowledges". As I paused and reflected on collaborative research practices, I realised that not much has been written on the ethics implied in disengagement. Yet, if ethical considerations are key to collaborative (and other) research projects, then research project disengagement should also be part of the discourse because it is not uncommon.

This article is not narrowly focused on personal experiences of disengagement, although these inform my approach to conceptualisation. Instead, I draw from multidisciplinary literature to analyse three major concepts: collaborative research, research disengagement, and research ethics. My assumption is that a broader conceptual analysis of this topic will open debates and possibly inform further reflections and practices from other researchers, and potentially inform policies in this regard.

In the rest of the article, I first discuss types of research collaboration and their importance to researchers, communities and research funders. Particularly, I foreground the relationships that exist across collaborative research processes and discuss what goes into collaboration in collaborative research. The second section pays attention to disengagement, looking at the few documented reasons for this practice. The third section conceptualises relational ethics as implied in collaborative research. I compare relational ethics to the other forms of research ethics to illustrate the complicated nature of research relationships. The fourth section consolidates the first three as I make conclusions on the ethical implications of disengagement from collaborative research projects.

RESEARCH COLLABORATION: BENEFITS AND TYPOLOGIES

Research collaboration, meaning the working together of two or more people who identified a problem and are guided by a research question to produce knowledge, has various benefits when successfully conducted. Of course, there are constraining factors in the practice, but in

this section, I deliberately focus on benefits to situate the global importance of collaboration.

The benefits of research collaboration

Collaborative research produces "complex knowledge through input from different collaborators" (Balland, Boschma, and Ravat 2019, 1812). In other words, each collaborator brings his/her expertise such that the knowledge produced is better than it would have been if only one person was involved. Furthermore, Balland et al. (2019, 1812) note that public policies promote collaborative research due to its ability to "tackle the problem of fragmentation of research, provide savings in the cost of research, [and] contribute to avoiding duplication of research effort". This statement suggests that when research is collaborative, knowledge developed from one project may possibly be shared across to other communities or contexts and this process may save costs of duplication. This statement is not ignorant of the issues of context and the research approach, but where possible, such knowledge may be increasingly shared. In this case, collaborative research may even save communities from being over-researched, a situation that has been noted in literature (Smith 2012).

In addition, Syed et al. (2019, 358) argue that collaborative research impacts positively on "the research culture and ethics of the participating researchers and their institutions". A common institutionalised example includes graduate students or postdoctoral fellows collaborating with established academics in their field of research. Through this practice graduate students are socialised in various academic activities towards becoming researchers (Feldon et al. 2016; Madikizela-Madiya, Goba, and Nkambule 2013; Molefe et al. 2011). Moreover, Syed et al. (2019) suggest that through collaboration, researchers can monitor each other's codes of research ethics during a research project.

Research collaboration has also been found to enhance research results, thus improving academic performance, developing human resources and extending the dissemination of knowledge (Freshwater, Sherwood, and Drury 2006; García de Fanelli 2016). García de Fanelli (2016) also notes that academics from the less resourced universities prefer to collaborate to make use of the resources from the better-off universities. He uses an example of some Argentinian universities that are resource constrained to argue that researchers become motivated to collaborate in order to gain access to resources that are unavailable in their context. I would argue that such access empowers not only the researchers but also those that are researched, for or with whom the shared resources can be used.

Another important benefit of collaboration is funding. Some collaborative research projects need financial support, depending on the nature and the extent of the identified research problem. Many collaborative research projects get financial support, either from the research

institutions or the companies and other funding bodies (Bartlett 2016; Heffner 1981) for resources, travelling and other necessities. For example, one of the research projects that I led and from which some collaborators disengaged, included researchers from three countries in sub-Saharan Africa and it was funded for collaborators' travel and accommodation when we had seminars for knowledge sharing and data synthesis.

Researchers in collaborative research projects can enhance their research publication and co-authoring with well-established researchers (García de Fanelli 2016). Smith (2012) also mentions instances where young indigenous people involved in research are trained, mentored and supported to develop knowledge about best practices of indigenous research as collaborative endeavours. These are just some of the benefits of collaboration which depend on whether the research projects are completed or not.

Types of research collaboration

Research collaboration can take place across nations or regions, such as that mentioned by Balland et al. (2019) and Syed et al. (2019). My abovementioned research project falls in this category as it included researchers from Uganda, Zambia and South Africa. It was also a multi-disciplinary research project, which is another type of collaboration. According to Lee and Bozeman (2005, 674) when research collaboration is multi- or cross-disciplinary, it brings together "special expertise and knowledge", which can be shared in the project.

I introduced this section with a very general definition of what research collaboration is. Hayat and Lyons (2017) define this concept specifically as "a social process, taking place in a social context, in which researchers interact to share meaning, develop understanding, and perform tasks to achieve a mutually shared superordinate goal, which generally produces knowledge" (see also Roux et al. 2010). This definition speaks to one form of collaboration where the people involved in research are "researchers" – of whom research is part of their careers. In the definition, Roux et al. (2010) mention interaction, development of understanding between the researchers, and the achievement of mutually set goals. The main aspects of this form of collaboration are the co-construction of knowledge, the sharing of research expertise or an increase in research productivity (Iglič et al. 2017; Lee and Bozeman 2005; Woolhouse, Albin-Clark, and Webster 2019). The collaborative relationship in this regard is based on the understanding of each other's interests, expertise and knowledge.

The other form of collaboration occurs between academic researchers and communities (Katz and Martin 1997; Lieberman 1986). This can be in the form of collaborative and participatory research (CPR) (MacLean, Warr, and Pyett 2009, 407). The definition of CPR, as provided by MacLean et al. (2009) paints a picture of decolonised research process whereby

the researchers do not go to communities to collect data and write articles and books for themselves and other academics. Such collaboration is seen as resistant to "sterile research impulses of authoritatively entering a culture, exploiting cultural members, and then recklessly leaving to write about the culture for monetary and/or professional gain, while disregarding relational ties to cultural members" (Ellis et al. 2011, 274). Instead, "collaboration and participation of communities or their representatives (beyond simply being involved as research subjects) is critical to the conduct of the research, and [...] the aim of research is to achieve some benefit for communities concerned" (MacLean et al. 2009, 407). This form of collaboration, according to MacLean et al. (2009), has an ethical advantage of empowering communities through the development of skills and making them partners in designing research projects for strategies to address the identified problems. These authors argue that collaborative research with communities requires the development of trust, which forms a huge part of ethics and which develops through the time spent between the community and the researchers. Therefore, there should be adequate interaction, consulting and negotiation between the involved parties, with roles clearly defined and maintained. MacLean et al. (2009) note the importance of the availability of funds as well as the commitment from all parties involved.

Collaborative research can be carried out between university academic researchers and industry. According to Abramo et al. (2011), university-industry research collaboration benefits both partners through technology and knowledge transfer. These authors define university-industry research collaboration as collaboration "between two or more organisations (at least one university and one private enterprise) that has resulted in a co-authored scientific publication" (Abramo et al. 2011, 167). Thus, to them publication partnership is an indispensable aspect of collaboration. On the other hand, Hermans and Castiaux (2007) identify sharing of tacit knowledge about skills and capabilities as part of this type of collaboration: it happens through "socialising through observation and discussion, fostering trust which can be defined in this context as a set of beliefs and expectations about the ability of the partner to perform the collaborative tasks and his disposition to act as agreed" (Hermans and Castiaux 2007, 47). What is notable is that in this latter form of collaboration there are interactions and relationships that are created, the same way as in the other forms. In all of them, relationships, interactions, trust and funding are important aspects that necessitate the completion of projects by all the collaborators.

WHY DO COLLABORATORS DISENGAGE FROM RESEARCH PROJECTS?

I begin this section by speaking about disengagement as a concept. As indicated in the introduction, there is limited literature that relates to this article's conceptualisation of

disengagement. There is literature about topics such as moral disengagement, which refers to the cognitive disassociation with internal moral standards, and which can lead to unethical behaviour (Bonner et al. 2016; Newman et al. 2019; Ring and Kavussanu 2018). The conceptual definition of disengagement that is closer to the focus of this article is that which is provided by researchers such as Given (2008) and Snow (1980), among others. These authors speak of disengagement as a stage in research where ethnographic researchers have completed the research process and are leaving the research field. Given (2008, 225) argues that this becomes a time of anxiety for both the researchers and the participants, depending on the time spent on developing the research relationship:

> "The more time invested and spent in a community, and with a group of research participants, the greater the intensity of personal relationships. The greater the intensity of personal relationships, the more difficult it is to leave the field and return to separate lives."

Given (2008, 225) regards disengagement as "necessary to mark the end of the researcher-participant relationship even if a researcher maintains a relationship that is established during research". This form of disengagement raises an interesting dynamic of the attachment that develops between researchers and the research participants during the research process, but researchers may disengage before the projects are completed.

There are many reasons that may lead to this disengagement. Firstly, some university researchers work under neoliberal ideological systems which, according to Mutch and Tatebe (2017, 222), favour "individualism over collectivism, encouraging competition". This view is also held by Ball (2015) and Kallio et al. (2016). For example, in the South African higher education arena, researchers get more subsidy for sole-authored articles than co-authored ones. The more the authors, the less the subsidy each author receives. The collaborators may, therefore, realise this financial penalty and disengage at the dissemination level of the project or before. This situation, unfortunately, nullifies the benefits of collaboration discussed above. It might be argued that the promotion of individualism in higher education disregards the needs of the researched who might benefit better from knowledge- and resource-sharing across the collaborators.

Secondly, it may also happen that a collaborator receives funding for a research project while the other project is still in progress. In this case the researcher is placed in a dichotomised decision-making position or what Molefe (2017b) refers to as hierarchical prioritising: the community or the individual. Because of the managerial demands of the higher education system, one would experience what Molefe (2017a, 55) refers to as "agent-related partiality", where a researcher would prioritise her own projects over others'. This is because obtaining

research funding creates independence for researchers, to be able to conduct research without asking for institutional funds. This was my reason for disengaging from one project. While the other colleague's project was taking off, I received funding for another project. I had already developed a proposal for my contribution to the colleague's project and that contribution never materialised. The irony of this, however, is that the researchers leading research projects need collaborators but the system under which they work encourages individualism. This situation distorts the purpose of research, which should be to provide solutions to the problems faced by the disadvantaged communities, which are the most researched communities (Smith 2012).

Thirdly, other collaborators may grow impatient and disengage from research projects. Mitev and Venters (2009) share an experience of a collaborative multidisciplinary project in the UK which was meant to develop knowledge towards environmental sustainability. The collaboration was between a construction industry and university researchers. They note that some collaborators from the industry were less committed, lost interest and patience and therefore left the project, leaving less experienced ones. Therefore, the "complex" knowledge that would be produced if the whole team had endured was minimised.

The fourth reason for disengagement is unethical behaviour of collaborators. Vogel (2005) provides an example of one high-profile science researcher on the cloning human and embryonic stem (ES) cell who breached the ethics contract, causing one researcher to disengage. The unethical conduct included unfair collection and utilisation of data from the research field (Resnik, Shamoo, and Krimsky 2006). This example contradicts Syed et al.'s (2019) argument that collaboration has a positive effect on ethics. Most importantly, it is an example of how researchers may be imperialist and inconsiderate of the participants' needs but prioritise their gains from the research projects.

The reasons for disengagement may also include time constraints, work overload and job burnout (Balwant 2018; Trehan, Kevill, and Glover 2018; Ylijoki and Ursin 2013). The concepts of academic bullying, harassment, exploitation and other structural dynamics are also not uncommon in other topics of higher education practice. Empirical research on this topic may unearth many other possibilities for disengagement from research projects. The question, however, is what the ethical implications are for such actions, particularly in relation to collaborative research projects. In the following section I present the theoretical lens I use to address this question.

RELATIONAL RESEARCH ETHICS

My approach to this analysis takes an ontological view that researchers do not exist in isolation, but are connected to social networks that are comprised of many human beings and non-human

entities (Ellis et al. 2011; Patel 2016, 49). Patel (2016, 57) argues:

> "Research is a relational and ontological practice. It is always entangled with specific researchers in specific spaces and with specific outcroppings [...] a closer attention and rigor should be paid to [...] ongoing responsibilities and relations among people, places and practices."

According to Chilisa et al. (2017, 327), such research has "decolonisation intention as its driving axiological characteristic [...] a critique of the dominance of EuroWestern language and thought, cultural and academic imperialism".

Trustworthiness is key in this ontological stand of relational ethics. For example, Israel (2015, 7) argues, "We behave in ways that are right and virtuous: for the sake of those who put trust in us and our work; for those who employ us, fund our research, and otherwise support our professional activities; and as a result of our own desires to do good". Similarly, Davies and Dodd (2002, 281) argue that when "trustfulness, openness, honesty [and] respectfulness" are understood as part of research ethics, ethics becomes part of the research process rather than a separate part. Whitbeck (1995, 405) mentions that "trust is necessary because the trusting party cannot control or monitor the trusted party's performance". In other words, all those involved in a collaborative project should individually be ethical actors in the project.

Four other issues regarding trust in research are worth mentioning. First, qualitative researchers have identified four principles of trustworthiness, namely credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Krefting 1991; Lincoln and Guba 1985; Shenton 2004). Shenton (2004), Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Erlandson et al. (1993) recommend a prolonged engagement with the participants and familiarity with their culture and context to ensure credibility of the research process and the findings. During this prolonged process of engagement with people and their context, attachment may be strengthened.

Second, Rossman and Rallis (2010, 382) identify an often overlooked interlink between research ethics, the relational ethics, and trustworthiness:

> "Trustworthiness should also be judged by how well the researcher got the relational matters right [...] these relational matters are central not only to ethical considerations but also to judgments about the overall trustworthiness of a study."

Similarly, Israel (2015, 2) argues as follows:

> "When we behave ethically as social scientists, we maintain the trust of the various 'publics' with and for whom we work. In some cases where prior trust might have been violated, we may have to work hard if people are once again to have faith in us."

Therefore, when research is viewed as a relationship, ethics and trustworthiness should be prioritised.

Third, the medical and psychology researchers, DuBois et al. (2016, 392) provide an analysis of how research combines ethics and professionalism. They argue that researchers are professionals and that "professionalism in research requires traits such as being competent, honest, collegial, persistent, and compliant with the rules of funding agencies, such traits are required to generate new knowledge in a systematic manner in modern complex research environments". These authors explain how these traits overlap between ethics and professionalism. For example, competence means that a researcher is able to accomplish a research goal, and failure to accomplish such goals breaks the codes of ethics in terms of the expectations from and trust of the researched population.

Fourth, there is also what Rossman and Rallis (2010) refer to as "everyday ethics". They argue that research is not a linear process whose ethical procedures can be predetermined. Instead, there are everyday moral challenges that evolve as the research process and engagement with people proceeds. Therefore, every decision regarding the research process must be thought of as having moral dimensions and therefore worth reflecting on and reconsidering.

In understanding research as relational, researchers should take note of the five research ethics approaches identified by DuBois and Antes (2018, 550): "normative ethics; compliance with regulations, statutes, and institutional policies; the rigor and reproducibility of science; social value; and workplace relationships". According to DuBois and Antes (2018, 552), normative ethics involves the consideration of rightness and wrongness of actions during a research process. Such consideration should include all stakeholders that support a research project, "including not only researchers, but research institutions, funding agencies, taxpayers, publishers, and members of the public who consume the fruits of research". Compliance, according to these authors, is about following research-related policies, regulations and laws. I would argue that when relational ethics is adopted, these regulations and laws should be analysed critically as they may not prioritise the needs of the researched. For example, some researchers argue that the guidelines and reviews for research ethics "are insufficient to ensure morally responsible research" (Johnsson et al. 2014, 30). Rigor and reproducibility of science ask whether the research project has been authentic and whether other researchers may replicate it or not. This is an important aspect to consider if the benefits of collaborative research, as discussed above, are to be realised. Then, there is social value, which is concerned about the relevance of the research project to societal needs, looking at the involvement of communities in the research process and the dissemination processes in which the project's impact can be

evaluated.

DuBois and Antes (2018) newly identify a fifth dimension, namely workplace relationships. It is about respect among the project members, setting the deadlines and abiding by them, open communication, and moderated power relations. Respect is key in this aspect of relational ethics. For example, Smith (2012, 125) argues, "respect is a reciprocal, shared, constantly interchanging principle which is expressed through all aspects of social conduct". These five dimensions are interrelated, and it is insufficient to satisfy one and ignore others.

Block et al. (2012, 70) argue that the question of ethics in research is not static but should be "considered and reflected upon from the time a research project is conceived until its findings are presented in the public domain". This statement suggests that collaborators in a research project are bound by ethics at all stages. Therefore, they should understand that there is a difference between the procedural ethics of institutional policies, and ethics in practice as experienced (Block et al. 2012; Guillemin and Gillam 2004). Block et al. (2012, 70) explain that ethics in practice involves

"... identifying and responding to context dependent circumstances and ethical contingencies – or 'ethically important moments' – that arise over the course of research projects. Such moments may occur when a remark or a situation, or perhaps just a growing sense of unease, disrupts the planned research procedures, revealing an ethical complexity which demands a response from the researcher."

Therefore, as Rossman and Rallis (2010, 380) argue, there should be "research praxis – that is, informed action, the back-and-forth between reasoning and action". Adams (2008, 177) provides a definition of general ethics that is appealing for this article, namely that it is "an involvement in a caring, compassionate approach toward understanding what it means to be human and what it means to act morally". Thus, as Madikizela-Madiya (2017) argues, "[r]esearchers should consider the balance of harms and benefits to all those involved in research […]".

Smith (2012, 124) raises another point regarding research conducted with or within indigenous communities, that research ethics "extend[s] far beyond issues of individual consent and confidentiality ... [but includes] respect for and protection of the rights, interests and sensitivities of the people being studied". If research ethics can be understood this way, its implications in relation to disengagement would be realised even if the reasons for disengagement are personal, professional or political (as discussed above).

THE ETHICAL IMPLICATIONS OF DISENGAGEMENT FROM RESEARCH PROJECTS

Three levels of ethical implications of disengagement from research projects could be drawn from the discussions above. These are implications at the research team level, the funders' level and the participants' level. At the participants' level I speak of community as both participants and collaborators. This analysis includes the implications on social justice, equity, or societal good.

Implications at the research team level

Disengagement has three ethical implications at the research team level. The first implication is broken trust. Trust, which is a big part of the formation of the collaborating team, is found at two levels: 1) the project inception level, where the project leaders identify qualities that they trust to run the research project and achieve its goals, and 2) the research process level. The ethical implications at the inception level may be overlooked if ethics is regarded as involving only the interaction or relationship between the researchers and the participants. However, although the disengagement may not have direct consequences for the participants, it is unethical because the virtue of trustworthiness of the disengaging researchers to the project leaders becomes challenged and the whole research process is destabilised. Thus, unless the reasons are negotiated, such disengagement may be regarded as disrespectful or undermining of the other project members and may strain relations. However, this point is not ignorant of the fact that the decision to disengage may be taken due to the unethical treatment or behaviour of the project members as was the case with the human cells research mentioned by Vogel (2005) and Resnik et al. (2006).

In cases where the collaborators are of different academic experiences, trust is broken if the more experienced collaborators disengage during the research process. For example, the graduate and postdoctoral collaborators may have trusted on the disengaging researcher's knowledge and skills. Such disengagement limits their opportunities to learn and to conduct research.

In particular, the project leaders are directly affected by disengagement from research projects, especially in cases where they were not the reason for disengagement. When the researchers submit proposals for funding, they commit to conducting ethically bound research and to report to the funders on the proceedings and the findings of the research project. When others disengage, the project leaders are left to attend to those expectations alone. I argue that such circumstances impinge on research ethics even if the project leaders fulfil their personal commitment, because they may have promised a certain number of research publications and

those may not be attainable if the number of collaborators is reduced. As collaborative research is a social process, disengagement denies the other researchers the expertise, the skills and the knowledge that could be useful for the project (Hayat and Lyons 2017; Lee and Bozeman 2005).

Implications at the research funders' level

In cases where a collaborative project is funded, researchers are ethically bound to report to the funders on how the research funds were utilised and what the research findings were. The funders release funds because they see value and potential for change in the situation or for the development of relevant knowledge and skills. Therefore, actions that cause failure of such reports may be unethical. The implications of this kind of unethical conduct could be more intense if the funded project was intended to help academic researchers and communities find common solutions to identified problems (Bartlett 2016; Heffner 1981; Katz and Martin 1997). Potential solutions may be lost if the disengaging researchers had essential or crucial expertise to offer.

In addition, the funds may not necessarily be returnable to the funders if, for example, the research tools had already been purchased or the research team had already been transported or accommodated to attend to activities related to the research project. Thus, if the project discontinues because a collaborator disengages, financial loss is the consequence, but also respect and other relational aspects of ethics are defied. For example, if funding is provided fairly rather than on the basis of elitism or politics, the funders spend time selecting the qualifying projects to fund. If the projects fail due to disengagement, the time is lost. The selection is also informed by the trust invested in the names and the calibre of researchers listed in the application (Whitbeck 1995).

Implications at the participants' level

In using the term "participants" in this section I include community collaborators in participatory projects as well as those that participate in projects other than action research. At least three aspects can be identified from the discussions above as indicating ethical implications at the participants' level. First, the literature indicates that during the research process, the researchers and the research participants may develop some form of attachment as they interact and begin to trust one another (Given 2008; Snow 1980). This refers to research that is not colonial in nature but is conducted on the basis of respect for and beneficence towards the participants. Depending on the stage at which the disengagement takes place, that attachment and trust are broken prematurely. The inherent anxiety mentioned by Given (2008) about disengaging at the end of the project is deliberately created for participants in this

premature disengagement. This situation may deny other prospective researchers an opportunity to enter the community in future. In addition to this possible denial, knowledge that could be created in and for that community is blocked by the act of disengagement. Thus, the participants' prospects are repudiated.

Second, researchers have an obligation to report back to the participants and possibly to discuss the findings with them. This obligation is crucial in some domains, such as the medical field (Ferris and Sass-Kortsak 2011; Ondenge et al. 2015). Disengaging from research projects may deny the participants this right to knowledge and engagement, depending on the consequences of such disengagement.

Third, the need to avoid causing harm to participants, respect their autonomy and preserve their privacy is highlighted as among the core ethical principles in research. People give consent to participate in research projects based on the information they are provided when the request is made. Sometimes the participants say things they would otherwise not have said if they did not trust the information they were given when requested to participate. When the researchers disappear with that kind of information in which they were made vulnerable, their trust is challenged, and this is a critical ethical implication. On the other hand, the collaborators may find that the research process is unjust and therefore causes harm rather than the social good. In that case, it would be unethical of them to continue with the research collaboration and the ethical act would be to disengage or take necessary actions to the benefit of all involved.

In instances where disengagement takes place unjustifiably, the research leaders and those collaborators that remain have a task of maintaining the created relationships and attachments. This process either leaves the primary researchers with the tasks related to accountability and performance management or the participants and other collaborators waiting.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Five conclusions can be drawn from the discussion above. First, there is a gap in the ethical considerations as depicted in the literature because research ethics is not only a matter of how researchers should interact or relate to the research participants in the research field. Reflecting on the implications of disengagement as conceptualised in this article should be among the key elements in research ethical considerations. This issue should form part of the research ethics policies and practices.

Second, some university researchers disengage because of the colonised higher education environments in which they work. For example, the case where I had to choose my project over another colleague's is an example of how academic work environments focus on the promotion of individual benefits rather than the consideration of relational ethics. This situation calls for

collaborative researchers to decolonise the systems and their own actions through scholarship, urging a larger conversation about institutional priorities.

Third, collaborators in research projects may fail to realise that disengagement may unintentionally be disrespectful to participants, deny them the beneficence they may have consented to and deprive them of possible informed decisions and actions towards addressing the problems in their communities.

Fourth, while literature critiques the praxis nature of research ethics reviews, I believe that where they are regarded as necessary, they should include clauses about engagement with participants and disengagement from research projects as elements of respect during the research process. Based on the arguments made in this article, I agree with Davies and Dodd (2002, 281) that "ethics is always in progress" and that it should never "be taken for granted". When researchers have engaged in ethically approved research, they must regard the relations with participants and funders as part of ethics and they should consider displaying positive relations with to those stakeholders (Rossman and Rallis 2010).

Fifth, the discussion in this article has pointed out that the issue of protecting the rights and interests of the participants by causing no harm is more complicated than the literature portrays. As Dooly, Moore, and Vallejo (2017) argue, the adverse effects on participants may be difficult to anticipate and disengagement is one of those aspects that are often overlooked when such a topic is discussed. Therefore, among other stipulations, the ethics clearance procedures should demand a commitment from collaborators to complete the research project. In this way, the project leaders would deliberate with the collaborators from the inceptions level on how to address this demand. In addition, it cannot be ignored that some researchers disengage due to unethical or coercive behaviours during the research process. Such cases should also be part of research ethics consideration. Most importantly, though, is that respect should be the cornerstone of research ethics to honour relationships and humanity, such that disengagement from collaborative projects is adequately communicated to the affected persons in the project.

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