

DARG Ethical Guidelines

Overview

Members of DARG, and Development Geographers more generally, are placed in a particular position of power and responsibility in the work we do in and on the developing world. Most if not all of us routinely and intuitively follow certain ethical principles in the execution of our duties and activities, and thus it may appear unnecessary to specify how we should and should not go about our professional work. The DARG Committee nonetheless hopes that the drawing together of a set of ethical guidelines and, more particularly, the discussion of the ethical principles that underpin them, may be useful both as a tool for future research and as a field for future debate.

The following Guidelines are intended as principles to which we should all seek to adhere in our future work. They were accepted at the DARG AGM in 2003 in London, but it is hoped that members will contribute to (re)formulation in the future if this is regarded as necessary. The Guidelines were developed largely by Mike Parnwell when he was Chair of DARG.

These Guidelines have drawn heavily from similar guidelines/statements which have been produced by the Association of Social Anthropologists in the UK and the Commonwealth, the British Sociological Association, and the African Studies Association, to which bodies due acknowledgement is made. A slight point of departure is that the DARG Guidelines sometimes refer to 'work' and not just 'research', partly in recognition of the fact that not all DARG members are engaged in academic research, and partly because some of these principles are equally relevant to our work as teachers, consultants and so forth. The following Guidelines have been kept as concise as possible, based on the expectation that wordy documents may put people off.

Broad Principles

Members of DARG should endeavour to incorporate the following broad principles in their work in and on the developing world: honesty, integrity, sensitivity, equality, reciprocity, reflectivity, morality, contextuality, non-discriminatory, fairness, awareness, openness, altruism, justice, trust, respect, commitment.

Permission

Most developing countries have formal requirements and procedures governing access by foreign researchers. Formal regulations governing research permission are typically intended to protect the interests, needs and rights of local institutions (such as partnerships, training and human development, capacity-building, ownership of or entitlements to data and other materials), as well as a felt need to monitor the movements and activities of foreign scholars, and perhaps to exert some control over research agendas and priorities. Sometimes these procedures are complex and cumbersome, and there may often be a temptation to undertake research without

formal permission and visibility. As a principle, DARG members should follow the formal procedures and requirements of host governments concerning research permission and access.

Access, Disclosure, Consent

In negotiating access to the research subject(s) there should at all times be open, truthful and full disclosure of: (a) the objectives and expected outcomes of the research; (b) the source(s) of funding and the expectations of the funding agency; (c) the methods to be employed; (d) the use to which outputs will be put; and (e) the anticipated risks and benefits to the community of the research.

The research should not proceed if the full, voluntary and informed consent of the proposed subjects has not been obtained. It is incumbent on the researcher to formulate appropriate means of ensuring that the informed consent of all relevant actors – not just their representatives: power-holders, gatekeepers – is sought and obtained.

Appropriate and realistic guarantees should be given to the study subjects as to the conduct, outputs and, as far as it is controllable and predictable, the expected outcomes of the research.

Risks

Researchers must be fully aware of the actual and potential, present and future, risks and dangers (e.g. political, social, cultural, human rights, power) that their subjects, collaborators, assistants and others may face as a result of their research (and other) activities, and associated with the data that their research yields. It is incumbent on researchers to make themselves fully aware of the risks and dangers that their research may pose to local communities and individuals, and to take appropriate action to eliminate such risks. Their conduct at all times should be cognisant of these risks and dangers. There is a need at all times to act responsibly, and to expect to be accountable for one's actions. Under no circumstances should our respondents, subjects, assistants, partners, etc. be put at risk in any way as a result of our activities.

Confidentiality, Anonymity

It is imperative that the identities of respondents are protected in discussions, presentations and data sets, and thus appropriate mechanisms should be deployed to guarantee confidentiality and anonymity. Because of the potential risks associated with revealing respondents' true identities, no other consideration should be allowed to supersede this fundamental principle. Respondents have a right to confidentiality and privacy. The right of anonymity should be especially protected when data sets are being accessed by second and third parties.

Privacy, Intrusion

The research process should not lead to undue intrusion into people's private lives. Researchers should recognise and respect people's sensitivities and rights in this regard, and should avoid deploying devices which are designed to 'trick' or coerce

people into revealing dark, shameful, personal or sensitive information or feelings. Researchers should reflect on the fact that we have no legal or moral entitlement to study people in developing areas.

Awareness

An essential prerequisite for appropriate actions and behaviour is a knowledge and awareness of the issues that face us. There is a close connection between the principles that are outlined here and those that are more generally applied in the context of participatory research. Researchers should be aware of power differentials which may affect access to the research process and who is accessed through the research process. Researchers should be aware of issues relating to positionality, such as ethnocentrism and the power of (mis)representation, and should endeavour to act appropriately. Researchers should be aware of our often privileged position of power to influence situations through our work, and should seek to deploy this power appropriately, minimising the negative and maximising the positive influence we may exert. We should be cognisant of and reflective on our background and training and the way that these may influence the way that we think about and represent Other societies, in our research, teaching and other activities.

Contextuality

Researchers must recognise that contexts vary, and should plan, behave and act accordingly. We should appreciate that the cultures, traditions, norms, mores, values, practices, systems and structures of the researched community are likely to be different from previous lived experience, and endeavour to educate ourselves in this regard as a precursor to making contextually appropriate decisions and interventions.

Reciprocity & Partnerships

Research in developing areas is typically characterised by sometimes extreme inequalities in the opportunity for and means of undertaking research. DARG members should thus endeavour to use the research process as a means of reducing these inequalities wherever possible and practicable. Under no circumstances should we take advantage of this situation, even subconsciously. Our work should thus seek to build partnerships and collaboration with institutions and individuals at both the local and the national level in the country of our activities, and contribute to training, capacity-building and professional development. Collaborative research is a principle we should aim towards wherever possible, and this should be based on genuinely equal partnerships whatever the source of funding and the process of research origination. This, in turn, should lead to joint publications in local as well as international outlets, and the joint ownership of research outputs.

Individual (e.g. career) interests should not be placed ahead of those of the collaborator and the researched. Mining developing societies for data is not an option. Research should involve giving as well as taking: genuine reciprocity. Appropriate mechanisms, devices and capacities should be created to facilitate the giving component of the research process.

As a minimum, the researcher should leave the study area in a state that does not compromise the opportunities and prospects for other (most particularly indigenous) researchers to engage in future research, and should ideally have helped to enhance the local capacity for such an endeavour.

Means should be found of ensuring that working with and through local counterparts does not lead to the compromising of other principles which are outlined in these Guidelines.

Discrimination & Exploitation

Researchers must avoid any form of action that might discriminate, consciously or inadvertently, against any particular individual or group, for instance on the basis of gender, ethnicity, age, power/voicelessness, religion, location and so on. We should avoid exploitation in the engagement of local assistants, who should receive a fair return for their endeavour. Efforts should also be made to avoid making excessively high rates of payment, as this may compromise the capacity for subsequent (especially indigenous) researchers to work in the same area.

Wherever possible, research assistants should be procured from the locality of the research, or nearby, and wherever practicable members of the local community should be fully integrated into the research process.

The published (and other) outputs from the research should be made available locally at a locally affordable price. If necessary, negotiations to this effect should be entered into with prospective publishers before publication contracts are signed.

Gifts, Bribes, Corruption

As a principle, DARG researchers should not be party to any form of bribery or corruption during the course of the research process. The giving of gifts is acceptable where this is culturally appropriate or expected.

Honesty, Realism

Rarely do we operate in an ideal world when conducting research in developing areas. We are typically constrained by timetables, funding, capacity and so on. It is therefore important to be honest, frank and realistic about these constraints, to plan accordingly, and not to make promises and commitments to the study communities or collaborators which are beyond our means to honour. We should also be realistic about the likely outcomes from our research and should, again, make no promises or commitments which go beyond our expected means and capacity to achieve. Unrealistic promises of outcomes should never be used as a device to gain research access and co-operation.

Power, Responsibility

We must recognise that the role we play and position we fill often gives us extraordinary power to explore, uncover, interpret and represent areas, aspects and actors of the developing world. We must recognise this situation and work to ensure

that it is not allowed to operate to the disadvantage of the subjects of our activities. We should engage in responsible research at all times.

Altruism, Priority

A founding principle should be that the interests of our subject or task should supersede those of ourselves, in terms of career, income, status and so on. Our first responsibility should be towards the subjects of our research. We should not allow our research agendas, career or other personal interests, the requirements of funding agencies and other institutions, or other conflicts of interest to lead us to compromise on this important principle. Where the nature or circumstances of the investigation would make it difficult for us to adhere to this principle, the research should not proceed. Efforts should be made to ensure that funders and sponsors are aware of, appreciate and are supportive of the need of researchers to adhere to the principles contained within these Guidelines, and should allow scope and space for these principles to be followed.

Positioning

Wherever possible and practicable, efforts should be made to position the respondent community centrally within the research process, including the framing, planning, execution and evaluation stages. DARG members should endeavour to follow, wherever practicable, the principles and practices of participatory research.

Outcomes

Avoid 'intellectual voyeurism'. Outcomes should be as important as outputs, and outcomes should be framed first and foremost with reference to the researched, and not the researcher. Expectations about the outcomes and possible impact of the research should be as accurate and realistic as possible. The expectations of participants and respondents should not be raised unreasonably and unrealistically. The expectations, interests and agendas of sponsors/funders should be carefully weighed against those of our subjects in the developing world, and the latter should ideally supersede, and should never be subjugated to those of the former.

Authentication

Research results typically require interpretation. Where both the research and the interpretation of findings are done by outsiders, there is always a risk of misinterpretation, based on preconceived notions or misunderstanding. DARG members should thus seek to authenticate their findings before leaving the study community through consultation with principal stakeholders and other representative participants in the research (whilst remaining aware of local sensitivities and risks). Discussions should focus on reaching agreement on the findings and their interpretation, on the uses to which the findings will be put, and the anticipated outcomes from the research (the latter two involving the revisiting of topics which should also have been discussed at the point of entry and embarkation).

Ownership

The (e.g. published) results of collective (or individual) research endeavour should be returned to the host communities and countries, ideally in a language and/or form which is most appropriate and useful to the communities concerned. Given that intellectual and moral ownership of the data/information probably rests with the community/country of source, a data archive might also be made available locally through an appropriate and responsible agency or depository, for use by indigenous researchers and scholars, after appropriate efforts have been made to protect the identities of respondents. It is incumbent on researchers to familiarise themselves with the legal rights of respondents, and the legal entitlement of the institutions of the host country, to the data and other outputs from the research process.

Non-Academic Contexts

Members should be aware that non-academic environments, where ‘academic freedoms’ may not pertain, may make it even harder to follow the ethical principles that are outlined in these Guidelines.

Consultancy

Consultants have a responsibility to pursue and present a genuine and honest reading of the situation, and should thus resist pressure for the reported results to match the funding agency’s needs or expectations.

Distasteful Organisations

Very careful consideration should be given to the appropriateness of engaging in research with, or funded by, certain institutions and agencies - such as the military, secret or intelligence services, organisations with poor human rights records, and suchlike – where the risks of research results being used against certain members or groups of society may be high.

Government

The results of government-funded research should remain in the public domain, while fully protecting the identities and interests of the research subject(s).

Professional Reputation

DARG researchers carry with them a responsibility to uphold the professional reputation of Development Geography. Choices of approach, focus, method, behaviour, actions, use of outputs, nature of outcomes and so on should be made with this in mind.