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This article is an overview of a paper I presented at TASA's 2017 Annual Conference. In it, I reflect on some of the ethical issues I encountered in my research, and how I overcame them.

My PhD study investigated intergenerational transmission of combat-related trauma from parent to child, focusing on the Soviet–Afghan conflict, 1979–1989. Questions surrounding ethics of de-identification emerged during fieldwork interviews in Russia. My research included interviews with Soviet veterans and family members of veterans. These interactions raised questions of erasure, ethics, participant safety, and agency. Data collection included face-to-face and Skype interviews, and an online survey aimed at children of surviving veterans. For this article, I will focus on the ethical issues surrounding face-to-face interviews I conducted in Russia.

Discussion around the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan continues to be a sensitive topic in Eastern Europe. Given how difficult it had been to find participants who were willing to speak with me on the record in the first place, I walked into each interview anticipating that each participant would request de-identification. From 12 interviews, only one participant requested anonymity. During fieldwork, I found myself having a discussion I did not anticipate with my research participants. I asked them to consider seriously the issues and risks if I were not to de-identify them in my research, but they wanted to be visible, to be heard; they wanted their stories to reach the outside world.

I began questioning the ethics of de-identification when I returned to Australia; asking how researchers could de-identify marginalised voices, essentially erasing them. I was faced with an ethical dilemma: do I erase their names to protect their safety, or do I do as they wish to afford them their agency?

My research participants are marginalized participants by virtue of the topic of my research, the Soviet–Afghan war, therefore we must examine the question: does de-identification of marginalized participants perpetuate the historical and symbolic erasure of their voices and experiences? As scholars, we want to minimise or eradicate harm that might come to our participants through our research. While we think 'in advance about how to protect those who are brought into the study' (Tolich, 2016: 30) this must be a continual process throughout our project. This is important to note, because protection does not only refer to participants but also to others connected to them. For example, the use of a real name at the request of a participant may expose their family member(s) who were not part of the research.

Consequentialist approaches to ethics posit that 'an action can be considered to be morally right or obligatory if it will produce the greater possible balance of good over evil' (Israel, 2015: 10; also see Reynolds, 1979). This means that the ethicality of an action is determined by balancing its good and bad consequences against each other, and '[i]f the benefits that flow from a decision or action outweigh the risks of either not acting on or doing something else, then the action may be morally desirable or

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defensible' (Israel, 2015: 10).

This is an approach we could take to issues around de-identification; however, a consequentialist approach means that we as researchers must also know what is good or bad (Israel 2015). In studies like mine, it also means knowing or attempting to know what is good or bad for our participants. This action is infantilising, because to make the final call ourselves is to remove participant agency. Additionally, this action may be culturally insensitive given that Western human research ethics committees follow Western cultural guidelines. Moreover, forced anonymity is an act of disrespecting participants (Mattingly, 2005: 455–456) who may have already experienced invisibility and who are then further erased through anonymity by scholars (Scarth and Schafer, 2016: 86).

My study and the ethical dilemmas I faced highlight why researchers cannot take a blanket approach to de-identification in qualitative research – not even for a single study. Each participant's situation must be analysed individually, and issues around erasure, safety (of participants and of others connected to participants), and their agency weighed against each other to reach a conclusion. I propose that if this conclusion is at odds with the wants of the participant, that it must then be taken back to the participant, explained and discussed.

In the end, they might, once again, ask that they are identified, and we must respect their agency, because not to do this perpetuates the symbolic violence of erasing voices that have already been silenced. Further, this action goes against social science ethics: that we must avoid doing long-term and systemic harm, both of which come through erasure and silencing.

References:

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