

Over-researching migration ‘hotspots’? Ethical issues from the Carteret Islands

Johannes M Luetz

The situation of the Carteret Islanders, often characterised as the first ‘climate change refugees’, has attracted much research interest. What is the impact of such interest? And are standard ethics compliance processes appropriate?

A few years ago, as part of my research into climate change-related migration, I carried out a pilot study to measure how best to engage with individuals and communities in remote atolls to the north and northeast of Bougainville, an autonomous region of Papua New Guinea.¹ This location was specifically chosen following prior field research² looking into suggestions that islanders in this part of the world might be particularly affected by climate change-related rises in sea level, which have multiple causes and which vary across oceans depending on location.³

Over several weeks, the pilot study engaged research participants (both migrants and hosts in communities of origin and destination) in various locations; importantly, this included the Tulun Atoll, also known as the Carteret Islands or Kilinailau, a remote group of low-lying islands. Web search results indicate extensive media interest in the atoll and the present and anticipated forced relocation of its population of more than 2,000 due to imminent danger of inundation and permanent submersion. In short, media publicity appears to have made the Carteret Islands one of the most widely reported regions of interest in the world, with feature stories published by major global news outlets.⁴ Given a certain tendency in news reporting toward sensationalist representations with headlines such as ‘Pacific Atlantis: first climate change refugees’⁵ and recurrent characterisations of the Carteret Islanders as the world’s ‘first environmental refugees’ or ‘first climate change refugees’, the pilot study also set out to learn more about the preferred self-description/s of the islanders themselves.⁶

The pilot study raised important ethical issues and questions, including:

- How do communities perceive extensive and sustained outside interest in their situation?
- Is it possible to over-research locations or populations of interest, and how might this impact on the people or impinge on the results?
- Is there an ‘ideal’ amount of research? Given the unforeseen effects that research can have on communities in migration ‘hotspots’, is it better to err on the side of less research rather than more?
- Do communities in hard-to-access locations benefit sufficiently from media publicity and do they receive follow-up about research findings and outcomes?
- Might recurrent research visits, sustained over time, generate unrealistic expectations about possible future assistance regarding adaptation, relocation/resettlement and/or financial support?
- Does frequent interviewing generate ‘research fatigue’, and might habituation to repeated questioning over time itself influence or skew the research results?
- Does publicity ultimately contribute to the protection of vulnerable people by making their situation/s more widely known, or is it conceivable that vulnerable communities might even be in need of protection **from** publicity?
- Does publicity promote ‘disaster tourism’?
- Might it be ethical to regulate access to certain locations in some circumstances, or might such gatekeeping be experienced as unhelpful, patronising or inhibitive of

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knowledge creation and thus become **un-ethical**?

- Should Human Research Ethics Committees at universities incorporate additional guidelines into their research ethics procedures (for example, ensuring that findings are, at the very least, shared effectively with research participants), or might the cumulative administrative burden associated with governing burgeoning ethics compliance needlessly encumber or even impede future research?

While these questions cannot all be answered, it is likely that over-reporting on the Carteret Islands has, at least in part, contributed to a diminishing sense of local agency. Islanders could be forgiven for assuming that high levels of outside interest, sustained over years, would surely result in some kind of financial and/or practical assistance – which for the most part has not happened. In this sense, the media cycle has posed problems.

Ethics compliance – for whose sake?

To me, as a researcher, the large amount of paperwork involved in recruiting

research participants for the study and documenting ethics compliance seemed time-consuming and cumbersome. The Participant Information and Consent Form consisted of pages of written information addressing such areas as participant selection process and purpose of study; description of study and risks; confidentiality and disclosure of information; complaints and feedback to participants. In view of low rates of education and literacy in the region of investigation, it needs to be asked whether extensive printed information in English is necessarily the best mechanism. Furthermore, participants were required to choose from a selection of options to indicate how their comments should be attributed. Participants were then required to date the form, print and sign their names in the presence of a witness (who was also required to print and sign their name, and state their relationship to the participant and/or provide additional information about themselves).

Research participants were also handed a Revocation of Consent form. This provided them with the option of revoking their consent if they subsequently changed



The two islets Huene One (foreground) and Huene Two on the Tulun Atoll.

their minds about having participated. However, bearing in mind that at the time of the research visit there was no electricity, email, mobile phone infrastructure, post office or regular ferry service on the atoll, using the revocation document would have posed significant practical hurdles for any islander wishing to revoke their prior consent. In any case, none were received.

A third form comprised a Confidentiality Statement for Interpreters to be signed, printed and dated, which also needed to be signed and printed by a witness. By signing the form, the interpreter also consented to “adhere to [university] ethics guidelines and procedures”. A fourth document, the Appearance Release form, was intended to ensure that any people filmed or photographed during the research consented to its use in “promotional, educational and editorial material including publications, marketing material, videos, television and webcasts”. The fifth and final document, the Location Release form, requested signed permission from signatories to allow the researcher to film and take photographs on the signatory’s property.

In practical terms, satisfying the administrative requirements of research ethics imposed by the university’s human research ethics advisory panel and the institution’s media department seemed to hamper researcher–participant interactions. After I had established a level of trust following a simple introduction, the subsequent production of forms requiring deliberation, explanation, comprehension and multiple signatures seemed to raise immediate suspicions about the motivations behind the research and whether the study really did have the people’s best interests at heart. Participants seemed visibly wary about why there was a need for this much legal formality. It is not inconceivable that earlier high-visibility media visits may have contributed to this scepticism. In this sense, over-reporting may well have contributed to islanders being particularly apprehensive about confirming written ethics consent.

To synthesise, conducting the pilot study raised several questions. For example, are

contemporary research ethics primarily concerned with protecting the interests of the study participants? Or are sponsoring institutions predominantly investing in protecting their own reputational interests, especially in view of today’s progressively litigious legal environment? And can one ever really obtain ‘informed written consent’ in research with displaced people, if the context is a communal culture with limited literacy and a strong oral tradition? Furthermore, what are the commonalities (and differences) between research ethics and media ethics? Finally, despite the pervasive media coverage of the Carteret Islands, there seems to be comparatively little genuine systematic empirical research available in the peer-reviewed literature. It seems that while the Carteret Islands may well have been over-visited and over-reported, it is unclear – if a rigorous definition of research is to be applied – that they have in fact been over-researched at all.

Johannes M Luetz jluetz@chc.edu.au

Senior Lecturer, Postgraduate Coordinator and Research Chair, Christian Heritage College, Brisbane www.chc.edu.au; Adjunct Academic, School of Social Sciences, UNSW Sydney <https://socialsciences.arts.unsw.edu.au>

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