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Cultural Discrimination in Research Design: The Responsibilities of Ethics Committees

By

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Research design is central to ethical research. Discriminatory research design is a key risk for researchers examining diverse cultural groups without conscious commitment to anti-discrimination values or knowledge of their culture. Culturally discriminatory research design is defined here as research proceeding from negative paradigms or assumptions about people on the basis of race, colour, ethnicity, language, nationality or religion. Cultural discrimination is expressed in the social power relations between groups, whose definitional boundaries organize categorical distinctions, often used to assign relative value and privilege the most socially powerful groups commanding economic and political power. Such discrimination can be direct or indirect. Direct discrimination is defined as the uncritical mobilization of dominant groups’ negative stereotypes of cultural minorities. Indirect discrimination involves research which examines policies or programs grounded in dominant culture negative stereotypes that have been uncritically accepted by the researchers. This paper draws on anonymized elements of planned research projects and considers both direct and indirect cultural discrimination in research design and the responsibilities of ethics committees. Human research ethics committees provide a point of scrutiny with responsibility to alert researchers to risks of basing research on negative cultural stereotypes, as well as protecting participants from being subjected to research reproducing and reifying negative discourses about them. This issue has become an increasing concern in a globalizing world of human displacement and migration creating a rise in the presence of minority cultures in host countries. As a nation established through colonization and immigration Australia has a long history of negative cultural stereotypes of Indigenous Australians as well as a legacy of the White Australia policy, which still echoes in attitudes to each wave of non-European immigration. The task of eliminating cultural discrimination in research design is vital to sustaining research integrity and ensuring that research is not used to reproduce, reinforce or justify cultural discrimination.

*Keywords*— Cultural Discrimination, Cultural Stereotypes, Participant Risk, Research Design.

Bio:

Associate Professor Elspeth McInnes AM BA Hons 1 PhD is Chair of the University of South Australia Human Research Ethics Committee. Elspeth is a sociologist with teaching and research expertise in qualitative and quantitative research focusing on public policy and educator practices relating to young children’s wellbeing and protection in contexts of family violence and abuse, child maltreatment, parental separation and other adverse social contexts of traumatic stress. Elspeth has co-edited 3 interdisciplinary books on trauma and authored over 30 book chapters and academic journal articles.