THE ETHICS OF ANONYMITY AND CONFIDENTIALITY: READING FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AFRICA POLICY ON RESEARCH ETHICS

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ABSTRACT

Orthodox research is guided by renowned ethical principles which are rooted in the philosophy of positivism. The positivist paradigm assumes that the researched are vulnerable and need to be protected from harm by disabling their identity. Adherence to these orthodox ethical norms is regarded as the litmus test of a virtuous research practice. Any deviance from these ethical norms is viewed as a serious violation of the research ethical code. However, whilst the significance of these ethical principles is renowned, there is a differing agenda driven by ethicists and some researchers that seek to question their ethicalness and universal appropriateness. This is based on the conviction that these principles are not attuned to other unique systems such as indigeneity. This article looks specifically at the ethicalness of the principles of anonymity and confidentiality as embodied in the Unisa Policy on Research Ethics (2007). This was a qualitative study informed by an interpretive philosophical paradigm that used document analysis as a method for assessing the ethicalness of anonymity and confidentiality as espoused in the University of South Africa (Unisa) Unisa Research Policy. This article concludes that although there is a discernible good intent from the institution detected from the Unisa Policy on Research Ethics (2007) stipulations, there is a lack of clarity or distinct direction towards the ethicalness of ethical codes. It recommends that Unisa needs to relook its' research ethical principles and align them with socio-political realities of the African indigenous milieu.

Keywords: Anonymity, confidentiality, ethical principles, ethicalness, research policy and University of South Africa.

INTRODUCTION

Orthodox research is guided by renowned ethical norms. In the olden days science including research was thought to have self-regulatory and policing capabilities however, it became evident that science cannot regulate, correct or even police itself (Steneck, 1994). In research, failure to self-regulate resulted in misconduct that involved human and animal abuse. Research ethical principles were developed as an agenda to address the abuse and also ensuring that research remained a scientific and moral enterprise (Connolly, 2003; Giordano, *et al.*, 2007; Smith, 1999; Steneck, 1999; Wiles *et al.*, 2008). These principles are rooted in the philosophy of positivism which assumes that the researched are vulnerable and need to be protected by disabling their identity (Truman in Giordano, O'Reilly, Taylor and Dogra, 2007). The essence of these ethical codes is the prevention of harm which embodies the protection of the dignity, rights, privacy, safety, identity and well-being of participants, researchers, non-participating members of the public, and the environment (Evans, 2004;

Giordano *et al.*, 2007; Resnik, 2011). Adherence to these orthodox ethical norms is regarded as the litmus test of a virtuous research practice. Any deviance from these ethical norms is viewed as a serious violation of the research ethical code. It is assumed that any deviation might primarily compromise the integrity of the research findings (Giordano *et al.*, 2007; Grinyer, 2002; Wiles, n.d.; Wiles, Crow, Heath and Charles 2008). These ethical principles include anonymity, confidentiality, consent, beneficence, non-malificence, voluntary participation and integrity. These ethical codes are meant to ensure that research is designed, reviewed and undertaken in accordance with the highest standards of quality, integrity, ethical propriety and governance, and legal compliance (Connolly, 2003; Giordano, *et al.*, 2007; Smith, 1999; Steneck, 1999; Wiles *et al.*, 2008).

Whilst the significance of these ethical principles is renowned, there is a differing agenda driven by ethicists and some researchers (Chilisa, 2007; Evans, 2004; Giordano *et al.*, 2007; Grinyer, 2002; Gorman and Tooms, 2009; Lavallèe, 2009; Macaulay *et al.*, 1999; Martin-Hill and Soucy, 2005; Smith, 1999; Weber-Pillwax, 2004; Wulff, 2010). This new agenda emanates from the realisation that the orthodox ethical principles are not only paternalistic, perpetuating western hegemony and social inequalities (Connolly, 2003; De Crespigny, Emden and Kowanko, 2004), but that they are also patronising by making the researched to be indiscernible and marginalised under the pretence of "protecting them". This agenda is basically going against the grain, calling for the development of new ethical paradigms of research that have a decolonising agenda that seeks to address the blind application and universalisation of orthodox research methodologies (De Crespigny, Emden, and Kowanko, 2004; Dunbar and Scrimgeour, 2006; Evans, 2004; Kahakalau, 2004; Mertens, 2007 and Scheurich, 1997 in Chilisa, 2007; Wiles, n.d.). These calls advocate for the introduction of participant-dependent choices when it comes to the implementation of research ethical codes.

This article focuses on anonymity and confidentiality. It is informed by the thesis that the researched should be given an opportunity to decide whether they themselves want to be anonymous or their information to be treated confidentially. The terms confidentiality and anonymity tend to be used interchangeably in research but are in fact distinct, but related concepts (Giordano *et al.*, 2007; Wiles *et al.*, 2008). The concept of confidentiality is closely connected with anonymity; in social research anonymity is the vehicle by which confidentiality is operationalised. By definition, confidentiality is regarded as spoken or written in confidence, charged with secrets while anonymity is defined as of unknown name, of unknown authorship (De Crespigny; Emden and Kowanko, 2004; Giordano *et al.*, 2007; Grinyer, 2002; Resnik, 2011). Anonymity on the other hand is one way to apply confidentiality. Anonymity in practice means that information on the identity of research participants (names, nationality, ethnic origin, age, occupation, place of residence, etc.) should be removed from the final research reports (Vainio, 2012). Anonymity is traditionally a means of removing the contributor's name in order to protect them from harm

mostly in qualitative studies which usually presents narratives or views of partici-participants.

Given that both anonymity and non-anonymity have benefits as well as limitations as explicated in table 1 below, it is critical for researchers to carefully determine the gains and losses for participants and researchers/ institutions. Thus, they have to determine the gains and losses for the researched and the researcher. The long standing notion that the researched are vulnerable and need to be protected needs to be revisited because conclusive or enforced anonymity does not always serve the interests of the researched. Instead, it perpetuates unequal power relations by disempowering the researched by disclaiming their right to ownership or even recognition (Evans, 2004; Gorman and Tooms, 2009; Grinyer, 2002; Lavallèe, 2009; Macaulay *et al.*, 1999; Martin-Hill and Soucy, 2005; Smith 1999; Weber-Pillwax, 2004; Wiles *et al.*, 2008; Wulff, 2010).

Table 1: Limitations and benefits of anonymity and non-anonymity.

Limitations of enforced anonymity	Benefits of anonymity	Limitations of non-anonymity
Anonymity portrays the researcher as a steward of knowledge, thus, it elevates the researcher to a position of power, no collaborative partnership or sharing of control. The participants are disenfranchised. It is paternalistic, it negates participants' autonomy and the right to make choices. It denies participants the right to ownership of knowledge and inherent outcomes. It deprives the participants the voice that confers personal meaning. It presents participants as objects rather than subjects worthy of being partners. It presents participants as vulnerable and powerless. It presents them as a means to an end not as ends unto themselves. It compromises the reliability of the study by promoting obscurity of the participants. It extends the prospect for misconduct such as fraud and corruption of data.	Anonymity promotes scientific and methodological integrity of the study. Given that research is a moral enterprise with a social and public responsibility or obligation to protect the participants, anonymity is a safe option for researchers. It protects participants from stigma, liability for illegal activity, embarrassment, loss of reputation and possible litigation. Through anonymity the privacy of participants is respected by protecting identity and avoiding stigmatisation. The notion of confidentiality is underpinned by the principle of respect for privacy. It encourages participants to be free to express radical or extreme views.	The tension arising from the conflict of maintaining scientific and methodological logic that champions the empowerment of the researcher versus enabling participant autonomy via the negation of confidentiality and privacy. Maintaining a critical balance of confidentiality and autonomy by providing reciprocal protection. Loss of confidentiality and anonymity might have implications for the validity or integrity of the research. Exposing the identities of participants can be harmful particularly if readership of a publication find the content controversial. The choice of participants to defer confidentiality might usurp the autonomy of others.

Table 1: Information adapted from: (Castleden and Garvin (2008); Chilisa, 2007; Connolly, 2003; De Crespigny; Emden and Kowanko, 2004; Evans, 2004; Freed-Taylor, n.d.; Giordano *et al.*, 2007; Smith, 2007; Svalastog and Eriksson, 2010).

Given that research has to be conducted within an ethical order, it is important to appreciate that there are distinct and unique realities that develop from specific social systems, laws and worldviews that should be considered (Castleden and Garvin, 2008; Connolly, 2003; De Crespigny; Emden and Kowanko, 2004; Gorman and Tooms, 2009; Hart, 2012; Weber-Pillwax, 2004; Wiles, n.d.; Wiles *et al.*, 2008). Informed by an indigenous ethical order, a new discourse and agenda has emerged in the past few years. The agenda seeks to transform the research space by questioning the universalisation and the appropriateness of research ethical norms in certain settings (Chilisa, 2007; Connolly, 2003; Evans, 2004; Grinyer, 2002; Giordano *et al.*, 2007; Smith 2007). Interestingly, the new drive does not deny the importance of orthodox research ethics it does not advocate for absolute non-anonymity for participants because this could inadvertently cause damage to participants, the community, the research institution and the environment. Instead it calls for flexibility, open-mindedness and appreciation that anonymity and confidentiality should be participant-dependent choices, they should not be blindly implemented. The new agenda supposes that non-anonymity gives participants a voice that confers personal meaning, it empowers participants, it elevates them from subjects to partners, allowing their words to be heard, whereas anonymity obscures this possibility (De Crespigny; Emden and Kowanko, 2004; Giordano *et al.*, 2007; Grinyer, 2002; Wiles *et al.*, 2008). As research is one of the core responsibilities of universities, they need to redefine their research ethos by providing appropriate leadership and set the overall tone regarding the integrity of the research practice (Steneck, 1994).

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Most researchers go to far-reaching lengths to safeguard participants' identities because anonymity for participants is supposed to be an integral feature of ethical research (Evans, 2004; Grinyer, 2002; Weber-Pillwax, 2004; Wiles *et al.*, 2008). This has led to the assumption that anonymity and confidentiality is an ethical prerequisite, entailing that participants not only deserve the protection, but that they actively desire it (Castleden and Garvin 2008; Chilisa, 2007; Connolly, 2003; Smith, 2007). In actual fact various authors maintain that it is a 'rule of thumb' according to orthodox research that data should be presented in such a way that respondents should remain unrecognisable (De Crespigny; Emden and Kowanko, 2004; Evans, 2004; Svalastog and Eriksson, 2010; Wiles *et al.*, 2008). Although it is accepted that confidentiality and anonymity are fundamental in research, it cannot be generically assumed that all research participants prefer their persona and personal information to be absolutely imperceptible (Giordano *et al.*, 2007). In fact there is evidence that some research participants not only like to be identified and associated with the information but they want to maintain ownership of the information (Smith, 1999). For instance, in an indigenous setting the researched open up and share their

knowledge which is integral to their cultural complex that encompasses lan-language, systems of classification, resource use practices, social interactions, ritual and spirituality, it is understandable that they would want to relinquish their core philosophies and histories (Grinyer, 2002; Smith, 1999; Svalastog and Eriksson, 2010; Wiles *et al.*, 2008).

Given the foregoing arguments, it begs the question, to what extent is anonymity and confidentiality of real benefit to the participants? That is, what are the gains and losses of anonymity and confidentiality to participants? Is it not time to redefine the standing of the researcher as an authority against the researched who are marginalised and objectified as a means of "protecting them from harm". Is it not time to assert the interest of research participants by redefining "misconduct in research" and/or unethical or immoral behaviour in research? This is critical as (Nyamojoh, 2001; Chilisa, 2007) stated that some research subjects have bemoaned what they call marginalisation through objectification as expressed in the sentiments below:

> It is such a disappointment not to be able to use my own name. I've earned the right to my own words, my journey. I feel angry at the situation, denied what is mine by birthright – my name which is connected with my truth. You can use my name; you don't have to steal my story (Bass and Davis, 2002 in Giordano *et al.*, 2007; Svalastog and Eriksson, 2010).

In a similar statement Bell-Hooks (1990: 152) in Chilisa (2007) maintains that by disregarding the interests of the researched the researcher seems to be saying to the researched:

> No need to hear your voice when I can talk about you better than you can speak about yourself No need to hear your voice. Only tell me about your pain. I want to know your story. And then I will tell it back to you in a new way that it has become mine, my own. Rewriting you, I write myself anew, I am still author, authority, I am the colonizer, the speaking subject, and you are now the centre of my talk". (Bell-Hooks, 1990: 152 in Chilisa, 2007).

The views above capture the downside of enforced anonymity and confidentiality. The enforcement implies that researchers make decisions on behalf of the research participants, denying participants autonomy and the right to make choices (Castleden and Garvin, 2008; Connolly, 2003; De Crespigny; Emden and Kowanko, 2004; Giordano *et al.*, 2007; Wiles, n.d.). Enforced anonymity and confidentiality not only violates the basic rights of participants, it also perpetuates unequal power relations between the researcher and the researched (Castleden and Garvin, 2008; Chilisa, 2007; Connolly, 2003; De Crespigny; Emden and Kowanko, 2004; Evans, 2004; Wiles *et al.*, 2008). Thus, by imposing anonymity on the research participants, the researchers are acting paternalistically implying that their imperatives outweigh those of the participants (Giordano *et al.*, 2007; Svalastog and Eriksson, 2010). Further, it denies participants of ownership rights and privileges, it objectifies and disempowers them. For instance, in the name of upholding confidentiality the researcher's voice features prominently at the expense of the information giver who may disappear into oblivion (Dube,

Ndwandwe and Ngulube, 2013). By obscuring the participants it opens an avenue for corruption through data distortion, misrepresentation and theft. In some instances the distortion is so severe that even the participants cannot recognise themselves. Further, critics contend that disabling the identity of the participants through confidentiality and anonymity makes it difficult to corroborate the findings and, thus, compromises the reliability and credibility of research findings. This depraved situation has resulted in scandals that have plagued academic research whereby researchers have fabricated the results as it is not easy to trace back the piece of information to anyone as the results will be as anonymous as the informants (Giordano *et al.*, 2007; Grinyer, 2002; Resnik, 2011). These have led to a marked upturn in scholarly and professional discussions of research ethics in universities that seek to address scientific misconduct through poor ethical judgment.

RESEARCH PURPOSE AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This article examines from an indigenous perspective, the ethicalness of the principles of anonymity and confidentiality as embodied in the Unisa Policy on Research Ethics (2007). It focused on the policy stipulations to determine whether confidentiality and anonymity were participant-dependent choices. The thesis of this article is to assess the extent to which these research ethical principles are attuned to indigenous philosophies and worldviews. This thesis is informed by Unisa's commitment to be "the" African university in service of humanity. To achieve the purpose the following questions were asked:

• Which ethical principles inform ethical research practice in Unisa?

• What is the meaning, nature and application of anonymity and confidentiality?

• To what extent is the application of anonymity and confidentiality attuned to an indigenous setting?

• How far does the policy recognise indigeneity by embracing flexible or all-encompassing research ethical codes?

Research methodology

This was a qualitative study informed by an interpretive philosophical paradigm that used "artefact" analysis to make inferences on the ethicalness of anonymity and confidentiality as espoused in the Unisa Policy on Research Ethics (2007). This article presents preliminary findings resulting from the artefact analysis. The analysis focused on the policy stipulations to determine whether confidentiality and anonymity were participant-dependent choices. The study investigated how the issue of non-anonymity is treated at Unisa. It also looked at the dilemmas and challenges that might arise in as far as anonymity and confidentiality are concerned.

Unisa Policy on Research Ethics (2007): An exploration

Like other academic institutions the primary purpose of Unisa entails teaching and learning, community engagement and research. The institution through its four colleges, institutes and other entities executes its research mandate, which includes diverse niche areas as per the orientations of the different constituencies. The research practice at Unisa is informed by the Unisa Policy on Research Ethics that was approved by the University Council on 21 September 2007. The Unisa Policy on Research Ethics (2007) sanctions all research undertaken within the institution to be ethically cleared. Ethical clearance is granted by the Ethics Committees at departmental, college and institutional levels. These structures are mandated with the responsibility of upholding an ethical research ethos in the university. The university champions ethical practice as evidenced in institutional pronouncements including policy provisions. The institution has a hotline for reporting any form of unethical behaviour.

Pertaining to the ethics and integrity of research practice, the Unisa Policy on Research Ethics (2007) advocates the following objectives: making ethics an integral part of research; preserving and promoting the autonomy, the quality, the legitimacy and credibility of research; protecting the rights of participants through a strong research ethics review system.

Objectives of the policy:
- To make ethics an integral part of the planning and methodology of research.
- To preserve and promote the autonomy, quality, legitimacy and credibility of research.
- To protect and promote the rights of research participants and honour their trust in researchers and research.
- To strengthen the research ethics review system in the University where research involves human participants, animals, or other living or genetically modified organisms.

Table 2: Unisa Research Policy on Ethics (2007).

The policy ratifies the following ethical principles:

- anonymity and confidentiality;
- autonomy;
- integrity;
- respect;
- ownership and
- privacy.

Given its locality and other realities Unisa as an institution conducts research mainly in the African locale which is characterised by miscellaneous indigenous worldviews. Unisa should therefore have research ethical principles that will

ensure that research remains a scientific and moral enterprise that maintains the highest standards of quality, integrity, ethical propriety and governance within an indigenous milieu. This study focuses on reviewing the ethicalness of the ethical principles of anonymity and confidentiality as espoused in the Unisa policy.

ANONYMITY AND CONFIDENTIALITY AS ESPOUSED IN THE UNISA POLICY

The Unisa Policy on Research Ethics (2007) specifies that "confidentiality and anonymity should be safeguarded or upheld". It further stipulates that codes, pseudonym and other identifiers should be used to break obvious connections between data and individuals/organisations/institutions where possible". Currently, the focus of the policy is to protect the privacy of participants, it is silent about their right to non-anonymity. However, the policy permits deviation when it is not methodologically feasible to uphold these principles. This is an interesting point, what does methodologically feasible mean? Does it include the needs and interests of participants or does it only refer to the appropriateness of the research methodology? Does this statement mean that the policy inadvertently grants participants a space to make choices about non-anonymity? To what extent may this freedom impact on the credibility and feasibility of the methodology? Clearly, this is a grey area that needs to be clarified so that anonymity and confidentiality are not blindly applied, they are carefully considered with the purpose of enhancing research credibility and the rights of participants.

This is a catch-22 situation where a critical balance has to be maintained between institutional directives, methodological directives and social responsibility including societal concerns. It has emerged in the literature that loss of confidentiality and anonymity might have implications for the validity or integrity of the research (Castleden and Garvin, 2008; Connolly, 2003; De Crespigny; Emden and Kowanko, 2004; Evans, 2004; Freed-Taylor, n.d.; Giordano *et al.*, 2007; Svalastog and Eriksson, 2010). Further, the choice of participants to defer confidentiality might usurp the autonomy of others. In the same vein exposing the identities of participants can be harmful particularly if readership of a publication find the content controversial. This means that the major challenge is to maintain a balance between confidentiality and autonomy.

AUTONOMY OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

Autonomy is one of the ethical principles enshrined in the Unisa Policy for Research Ethics (2007). The policy recognises that "research participants are autonomous agents with the right to choose whether or not to participate in research". This is an indeterminate stand that although the policy mentions that the vulnerable have to be protected, it emphasises the autonomy of participants. Where will the line be drawn between autonomy of the participants, the perception of their vulnerability and their right to be protected? From reading the policy it is clear that the autonomy that the policy recognises is about the right to

decide whether to participate in research or not. The policy is silent about partic-participants' right to choose non-anonymity. The autonomy of the researched is thus

curtailed, as there are undertones that suggest the researcher is still powerful in this relationship. It appears as though if participants decide to participate, they will depend on the researcher to determine whether they will be anonymous or not. Given the well-known standpoint that anonymity has to be guaranteed in a research, it will be necessary for the institution to dissect policy statement and make a distinct statement that will clear any misperception. The Unisa policy needs to redefine the scope, nature and focus of the phenomena of the autonomy of participants in line with the transformation agenda of empowering them.

INTEGRITY OF RESEARCH

Primarily, the policy states that "the researcher has to conduct research according to an ethical order to maintain his/her integrity and that of the university". The policy threatens that Unisa may impose disciplinary measures or stop research when ethical principles are violated or the integrity of the University is jeopardised. Given that the university has not come up with a clear, unambiguous standpoint on anonymity, confidentiality and autonomy, the issue of the integrity of research remains a grey area surrounded by unclear parameters. This might be a challenge for researchers who are sensitive to the participant's right to non-anonymity. Since this right is not clearly stipulated in the policy its implementation may be regarded as a violation of orthodox ethical codes.

RESPECT FOR THE RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

The policy stipulates that "researchers should treat research participants as unique human beings within the context of their community systems, and should respect what is sacred and secret by tradition". It further advances that research should "preferably be undertaken with, and not merely on, an identified community". These noble statements are commendable as they portray respect and recognition for diverse worldviews including indegeneity. It is evident that the university elevates participants to the level of worthy partners and not merely objects that are vulnerable and powerless it presents them as ends unto themselves not as means to an end. Basically, this principle requires researchers to be mindful of the distinct and unique realities that develop from specific social systems, and world orientations. This means that from the conceptualisation to the implementation and execution of research projects, researchers need to prioritise not only the participants but should also appreciate their needs and interests alongside other priorities. Therefore, the ethical clearance process has to encompass these considerations up to and above the priority of not causing harm. Thus, the ethicalness of research should reflect deliberate consideration and respect of participants and their environments.

OWNERSHIP OF RESEARCH OUTCOMES

University research production – since the introduction of a national research subsidy scheme in 1987 – initially remained quite stable (ranging between 5000 and 5500 article units between 1988 and 2003) BUT then increased dramatically to reach more than 8000 units in 2010. The best explanation for this dramatic increase is the introduction of the new research funding framework in 2003 (and which came into effect in 2005) which provided much more significant financial reward for research units and clearly provided a huge incentive to institutions to increase their output. Publishing in high impact journals

The first assertion of the policy states that as a general rule, "all intellectual property resulting from research which was conducted with Unisa funds, or use of its facilities, vests in Unisa". It however states that agreements may be entered into according to which the outcomes and benefits of research are shared with the researchers, funders and/or participants or communities involved. This principle brings interesting assertions to the fore. One is the ownership of research output and the benefits that accrue thereof. The policy positions Unisa as the sole owner of research outcomes and benefits although agreements can be made to share the outcomes and benefits. This has been a bone of contention for indigenous researchers and ethicists who argue that indigenous knowledge belongs to the community not the researcher who is a harvester and an outsider (Smith, 1999).

Because of the investments Unisa makes towards research, it rightly or wrongly assumes ownership of the research outcomes. This is just the first level of the dilemma of ownership. Most research findings are published as articles in accredited or non-accredited journals who also assume ownership of the article. This places the information far away from its original source, the indigenous community in terms of language and source. The information is now owned by a journal and whoever wants to access it has to comply with the journal prescriptions.

The second assertion highlights that the researchers must not commit plagiarism, piracy, falsification or the fabrication of results at any stage of the research. When examined closely this principle somehow seems to contradict the principles of anonymity and confidentiality. Anonymity and confidentiality ensure the obscurity of the research participants by disabling their identity, rightfully or wrongly. In instances where the research participants were not given a fair chance to choose anonymity or non-anonymity, can enforced anonymity be regarded as plagiarism, piracy, theft and fabrication of results? Is it ethical that researchers present, use and benefit from the information that is not theirs? If a participant agrees to participate in a research project does that mean he/she willingly transfers or waivers ownership right to the researcher? To what extent is Unisa concerned with the beneficence for and fairness towards research participants. Clearly, the policy is vague on this point, it articulates the interests university and the researcher, but does not come out clearly on the issue of indigenous communities' rights to ownership.

PRIVACY OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

The policy asserts that "all research participants have the right to privacy to the extent permitted by law". The policy further illuminates that "privacy includes autonomy over personal information, anonymity and confidentiality, especially if the research deals with stigmatising, sensitive or potentially damaging issues or information". Once again there is controversy that can be detected from reading this principle together with the others. If privacy as contained in the Unisa policy embodies a level of autonomy over personal information, anonymity and confidentiality, where is the balance? What does it mean to have a level of autonomy over personal information? What does it mean to have a level of autonomy over anonymity and confidentiality? Given that the participants do not have control or ownership of information, what does privacy mean and how far does it go? In the same vein, given that the research participant does not sanction their anonymity or confidentiality, what does privacy mean and how far does it go?

CONCLUSION

This article sought to determine whether confidentiality and anonymity as embodied in the Unisa Research Ethics Policy were participant-dependent choices. Overall, the policy is still leaning towards the ideals of positivism that assume the researched are vulnerable and need to be protected. The policy guarantees confidentiality and anonymity whenever it is methodologically feasible. Clearly, the policy still upholds the paternalistic and positivist belief of the absolute protection of the research participants by disabling their identity. Although the policy upholds integrity of research as well as the respect for and privacy of research participants, and although it presupposes that research participants are autonomous agents with the right to choose whether or not to participate in research, it remains porous on the application and adherence to ethical codes. The policy does not clearly delineate the scope, nature and focus of the phenomena of the autonomy of informants *visa â vis* the integrity of the research and the responsibility of the researcher. Thus, it presents a vague stance about how the application of orthodox ethical codes will be managed to ensure fairness to the researched and appropriateness of these ethical codes. Largely, it remains hazy with reference to how Unisa "as the African university in service of humanity" will address issues of Euro-centric hegemony in research that have resulted in the objectification of participants, the renouncement of ownership rights through the blind implementation and/or universalisation of research ethical codes (Chilisa, 2007).

In conclusion, Unisa needs to relook its' research ethical principles and align them with socio-political realities of the African indigenous milieu. It can be concluded that the policy does not offer participant-dependent choices with regard to anonymity and confidentiality. Although there is a discernible good intent from the institution detected from the policy stipulations, there is a lack of clarity or distinct direction towards the ethicalness of ethical codes. This study confirms lack of clarity on the appropriate implementation of ethical codes to indigenous settings as well as measures to detect and address violations or lapses of ethical research practice.

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