

Ethics and Sociocultural Impact Assessment

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SUMMARY STATEMENT

This paper analyzes the current state of applied investigative ethics linked to socio-cultural assessments in Chile in different areas of development, including energy, mining, and transportation, among others.

ABSTRACT

Chile has changed. Nowadays, the general public demands greater involvement in environmental assessments. They demand access to all relevant information required by the appropriate Environmental Authority in the decision making process regarding the approval of projects that are susceptible to impact ways of living and customs.

In particular, one observes an increase in interest and knowledge of baseline studies which serve as a foundation for the prediction and evaluation of social and cultural impacts. Furthermore, they demand that research preparation be made in accordance with the same ethical standards that govern academic investigation within the social sciences.

This paper carried out an empirical diagnostic study concerning state of the art ethical investigation within Applied Social Sciences regarding the preparation for baseline studies relating to the Chilean human environment. In particular the analysis focuses on two aspects of the *Code of Ethics of the American Anthropological Association* (2009), namely:

- Researchers should obtain in advance the informed consent of persons being studied, providing information, owning or controlling access to material being studied, or otherwise identified as having interests which might be impacted by the research.

- Researchers must determine in advance whether their host/providers of information wish to remain anonymous or receive recognition, and make every effort to comply with those wishes.

Following this diagnostic study is a meditation on the role of the State in these matters; this generates proposed ethical guidelines

which could be applied to future baseline investigations involving human subjects, with the hope of improving the guideline standards used today in environmental impact evaluation in Chile.

I. INTRODUCTION

Chile has changed. In contrast to the previous passive attitude adopted by the population against socio-environmental changes that were generated by various development projects, towards the end of the 90s one observes the emergence of various environmental groups. These groups have introduced the issue of the environment and territorial defence as central elements in social mobilization.

Under this new social context, nowadays the general public demands greater rights to participate in the environmental assessment process, demanding access to all information relevant to decision-making regarding the approval of projects that could affect their lives and customs. In particular, one observes an increasing demand and knowledge of baseline studies which underpin the prediction and impact of socio-cultural impacts. These groups are also demanding that these studies are conducted in such a way that they must be carried out in conformity of the same methodological and ethical standards used in academic and social studies investigations.

In contrast to these new stipulations of the general public, in Chile no such debate currently exists surrounding the ethical aspects of applied social research. As an example, until this day (March 2013) the *Colegio de Antropólogos de Chile* (Chilean School of Anthropologists) does not have a code of ethics or an ethical board that regulates professional conduct and development in applied or academic research (as in the case of socio-environmental evaluation). Similarly, the Environmental Impact Assessment System in Chile does not consider legal norms or operative guidelines that regulate ethical investigations linked to these socio-cultural studies in development projects.

Certainly, the lack of regulations or guidelines does not imply, *per se*, the absence of transgression. It seems that each time there are more visible conflicts generated by complaints concerning poor practices in conducting socio-cultural impact studies. Some of the most notable include: a lack of free, prior and informed consent, for example prior to the implementation of interviews or questionnaires; an absence of the protection of anonymity and/or indicating where the information has originated from; the use of deception in order to obtain data; a lack of means of verification for example interview transcripts which would help create greater transparency of the process of data analysis.

For example, in total studies of environmental impact (approved) in the energy (35), mining (24) and transport (2) sector presented in the evaluation made between January 2008 and January 2013, none of these documents informed the consent of the subjects that participated in the investigation.

II. ETHICS AND INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES

A clear example of conflict generation due to a lack of ethical principles during research can be found in investigations that involve indigenous communities. Certainly, a contributing factor that gives greater visibility of their demands in the collective conscience of the general public relates to, *inter alia*, a greater acknowledgement of their members' civil rights. A key part in this acknowledgement is the ratification made by the Chilean state in September 2008, of the International Labour Organisation (ILO) Convention N° 169.

As a consequence, faced with projects that may directly affect them, indigenous communities have adopted the attitude of demanding greater participation rights and access to all information relevant to the evaluation of the socio-cultural implications. They often adopt a critical stance of the methodological process and ethical conduct during the research of baseline studies and particularly in sensitive matters such as those with potential effects on their daily lives and customs and the involvement of their cultural heritage.

In order to illustrate the above I will refer to a specific case, which relates to an electric power transmission project, in whose sphere of influence indigenous groups are located. The consultant in charge of this particular study conducted social research that included a series of semi-structured interviews with local indigenous leaders.

Notwithstanding the above, once the environmental impact study was published and the participating members of the general public had been informed, the same leaders that were interviewed launched a formal request to the environmental authority requesting that said socio-cultural study be declared void.

Similarly these leaders requested that the environmental authority remove the evaluation dossier and any reference to themselves or their organizations from the Internet. The mere mention of their names in the study was interpreted by the indigenous community as support for the project. Their letter of complaint suggested that this had led to the serious loss of social legitimacy for

traditional authority figures in their indigenous community, thereby affecting their credibility and integrity.

III. ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSIONS

The case presented is interesting as it undoubtedly illustrates the sort of conflicts that may arise from the absence of ethical norms and clearly defined methodological practices in socio-cultural studies. Indeed, the absence of laws, regulations, or guidelines that address this matter means it is not possible for the environmental authority to demand high ethical standards neither from consultancy firms nor from project owners. In turn this will always result in a weak link in the legitimacy of the environmental assessment process. At any given moment those who oppose a project may question the validity and credibility of the database used to backup arguments that dismiss significant impairment of the lives and customs of the people who live in the area of influence of a particular investment project.

By virtue of the foregoing, the Environmental Assessment Service has opted to regulate research ethics in a set of guidelines for the preparation of baseline studies for the human environment (indigenous and non-indigenous populations), which will be mandatory for both consultants and project owners subject to environmental assessment in Chile.

In essence the ethical considerations contained in these guidelines are organized according to three main texts, namely: the Ethics Code of the American Anthropological Association (2009), the Performance Standard by the International Finance Corporation (2012) and the Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Human by the Tri-Council Policy Statement of Canada (2010). It is worth noticing that three topics addressed in the case presented above are addressed in these Guidelines, namely:

- 1) Consent shall be informed: Researchers shall provide to prospective participants full disclosure of all information necessary for making an informed decision to participate in a research Project.
- 2) Consent shall precede collection of, or access to, research data: Research shall begin only after the participants have provided their consent.
- 3) Consent shall be documented: Evidence for consent shall be contained either in a signed consent form or in documentation by the researcher of another appropriate means of consent.

IV. PERSPECTIVES

As stated, and in contrast to what happens regarding in biomedical sciences in Chile, the ethics of social research remains an unexplored field, where nothing has been achieved and any contribution made would be a profound one. Under these circumstances, the desire to advance a particular field always runs the risk of falling into the temptation of importing external models without prior critical assessment. In this context, this paper lays out a description of the present situation of this matter in Chile. The hope is that with it, one can provoke in the audience a space for dialogue and an exchange of experiences and ideas.

V. REFERENCES

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