Ethics Reviews Meet the Global South: Hidden Barriers to Contextualized Knowledge Generation

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Abstract
Ethics reviews intended to safeguard research integrity can effectively distort or block empirical work and hinder knowledge production from understudied Global South contexts. Rigid ethics review protocols developed for Western contexts often fail to account for the informality, unpredictability, and trust-building practices inherent to Global South contexts. This commentary suggests context-sensitive ethics review practices, allowing authentic knowledge production from the Global South.

Keywords
ethics review, Global South, informal economy, researcher experiences

Business and society (BAS) scholarship increasingly challenges theoretical expectations and methodological conventions that distort knowledge generation from Global South contexts (Halme et al., 2024). While this shift relieves scholars seeking authentic insights from these regions, ethics review procedures remain a major obstacle. Designed to protect human subjects and

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uphold research standards, these procedures assume a formalized, risk-averse system (Alvesson & Stephens, 2024) that often clashes with the realities of Global South research. This notion is echoed in *Southern Theory*, which highlights how academic practices, theories, and methods are shaped by Global North perspectives, often overlooking the specificities of the Global South (Connell, 2020)—such as informal economies, relationality, trust-based interactions, and diverse power dynamics. Likewise, the bureaucracy of ethics review protocols—designed for Western contexts and formal organizations—is enforced by committees unfamiliar with Global South realities. With their emphasis on formalized consent procedures, standardized documentation, and blanket risk assessments, such protocols overlook that ethical considerations are deeply context-dependent and shaped by local norms.

These misalignments can cause delays, stall projects, raise concerns about future funding, and negatively impact the researcher's well-being. We propose alternative approaches that support ethical, contextually grounded research in the Global South.

When Ethics Clash With Context: Rethinking Review Procedures for the Global South

"*Is it worth doing this or is it better to commit suicide?*" asks Alvesson and Stephens (2024, p. 377) article to highlight how ethics reviews breed cynicism and game-playing in academia. While their title phrasing is stark, we argue that ethics review procedures based on the institutional logic of the Global North can be even more damaging for knowledge generation in the Global South. We introduce three problematic assumptions that disproportionately burden Global South research.

The Dominance of Formality: Universalizing Western Bureaucratic Norms in Ethics Reviews

Ethics review processes can implicitly assume Western ethical standards are universally superior (Christakis, 1992). These guidelines favor preplanned, structured research, assuming formal documentation guarantees compliance and integrity. Yet, in many Global South contexts, research takes place within informal, personal trust-based, and relational systems, and ethics reviews should be culturally attuned to these local realities.

Ethics committees frequently demand detailed plans—specific participant numbers, preapproved interview lists, and formal consent procedures—even

before fieldwork begins. Such rigid planning is unrealistic to predict for management research, particularly for often sensitive BAS research in the Global South. Studying informal waste picking in Türkiye, Tulin relied on snowball sampling and immersed herself in the streets and junkshops. Some days she conducted multiple interviews; on others, she struggled to find one participant. Similarly, Iqra and Maryline found that managers in Pakistan and entrepreneurs in Kenya rarely responded to emails. Instead, access needed to be negotiated through face-to-face introductions and trust built over informal channels such as WhatsApp—methods often unrecognized by ethics committees insisting on formal email acceptances.

Ethics protocols also struggle with the blurred boundaries between formal and informal conversations. At the extreme, these formalized procedures may lead Global South communities to perceive researchers from Global North institutions as inhumane and "extractive," even when this is unintended. The formalized multipage—often English language or multi-language consent forms requiring signatures can create fear in the informal sector's semi- or illiterate participants and ultimately exclude the very communities the research could give voice to.

Heightened Sensitivities: How Ethics Reviews Overstate Risk in Global South Research

Ethics reviews often apply a blanket approach when labeling Global South countries as "high risk," disregarding the nuanced realities of individual settings, where some locations do not pose a high risk. This broad categorization not only imposes bureaucratic controls but also alienates researchers. For Maryline and Iqra, this disconnect was deeply personal. The risk categorizations often felt exaggerated when applied to contexts one had grown up in and understood intimately. As an example of exaggerated risk mitigation, the ethics committee asked Iqra for a plan for escorting the interviewed managers out of their own factory should a fire break out during the interview.

In informal settings, where family, religion, and politics are deeply woven into daily life and business, ethics review procedures often overlook how casual conversations during interviews or workshops can veer into sensitive topics. In politically unstable environments, participants fear being recorded or signing documents due to potential repercussions. Ethics committees often miss these nuances, leading to impractical demands. While researching Türkiye's informal waste sector, Tulin encountered unprompted stories about family, religion, and government criticism—especially around corruption, taxation, and neglect of waste workers. These organically shared accounts

posed challenges during the ethics review, as she had to justify collecting sensitive, but "unplanned" data.

Beyond Compliance: Navigating Emotional Strain and Ethical Researcher Reflexivity in Global South Fieldwork

Navigating complex ethics review processes deeply affects researchers' well-being and commitment, as bureaucratic demands often overshadow the actual research. Instead of preparing researchers for the ethical dilemmas they will face in the field, these procedures foster fear, pressure, and self-doubt. The checklist approach prioritizes procedural compliance over meaningful ethical engagement with participants from marginalized settings, leaving researchers questioning their ability to continue. For instance, when asked to list every potential interviewee in advance, Iqra felt simultaneously a loss of opportunity and fear: if an unlisted potential respondent spoke to her during a factory visit, it could technically breach ethical guidelines. This fear turned research planning into a risk-avoidance exercise.

In the BAS domain, qualitative research often touches sensitive contexts that evoke complex emotions—guilt, anger, privilege, hope, and exhaustion. Yet, when researchers share these feelings with ethics committees, they're often met with suspicion, as if acknowledging emotional struggles signals potential ethical misconduct. The pressure to mitigate "risky" research adds further strain, reinforcing the problematic idea that fieldwork in the Global South is inherently problematic.

Support for Navigating Ethics Reviews in Global South Research

Enhancing Ethical Engagement Through Dialogue

Early career researchers (ECRs) are particularly vulnerable to rigid ethics protocols, often lacking guidance on navigating challenges such as trust-building and culturally sensitive consent. Standardized training rarely addresses these realities, leaving ECRs dependent on scarce informal mentorship. While senior scholars such as Minna can help manage complex ethics processes and the emotional toll, they also face limitations. Ironically, not fieldwork risks but obstructive ethics protocols and their mental strain on ECRs made Minna consider dissuading ECRs from research in the Global South. Instead, institutions could promote open ethics discussions, fostering mutual learning between researchers and ethics committees, thus saving time and avoiding distressing confusion for both.

Improving Ethical Oversight by Integrating Contextual Expertise

Ethics committees need context-sensitive frameworks reflecting Global South realities. Reviewers should receive training to recognize biases and move beyond procedural checklists, understanding informal communication, trust dynamics, and fieldwork unpredictability. Committees should include contextually informed experts and allow flexible plans—expecting researchers to predict everything in advance is unrealistic when trust and empirical research develop organically.

Contextualizing Consent for Informal Sectors

Contextually informed documentation is equally crucial in BAS research. For example, expecting informal entrepreneurs or waste pickers to sign lengthy consent forms is impractical. Literacy levels vary, and many may prefer oral communication. Recording verbal consent—clearly explaining key details and securing agreement—is often more appropriate. A concise one-pager outlining rights and confidentiality, free of legal jargon, can help avoid overwhelming participants.

Tailoring Risk Assessment to Distinct Contexts

Risk assessments should be dynamic dialogues, not static forms, and ethics reviews should differentiate between levels of risk, avoiding blanket categorizations that label entire countries as dangerous. Researchers should engage in meaningful discussions with committees about research integrity and ethical dilemmas. This will lead the committees to understand the researcher's view of the settings and acknowledge the researchers' emotional burdens, rather than scrutinizing them.

In sum, ethics reviews must move beyond rigid, Global North-centric protocols to embrace the relational, unpredictable, and context-dependent realities of Global South research. Without such a shift, well-intentioned safeguards risk becoming barriers to knowledge production and researcher well-being. Through dialogue, flexibility, and contextual understanding, institutions must enable ethically sound research that truly reflects the world it seeks to study.

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