

“What Are We Agreeing Upon?” Negotiating Consent in Research with Indigenous Communities in the DRC

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Abstract

Ethical review boards in social science research require researchers to solicit informed and voluntary consent from their research participants. However, how is consent negotiated in the field when working with research participants who have different perspectives on consent, privacy, and intellectual property than what is comprehended in research ethics protocols? This paper cites four critical anecdotes drawn from field research with indigenous communities in the DRC. We argue that these anecdotes are illustrative of ethical dilemmas in relation to consent that emerge when researchers navigate between Eurocentric research practices and indigenous knowledge systems. We show that consent is not a fixed and complete process but an ongoing negotiation between the researcher and his interlocutors.

Keywords: research ethics, indigenous populations, consent, DR Congo

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1 Introduction

Working with indigenous communities presents unique ethical challenges for researchers in the social sciences. In many contexts, indigenous communities are marked by a distinct history of colonization, marginalization, and exploitation. These dynamics have exposed them to neo-colonial practices that involve actors from the Global North (Blanc 2021); but also to forms of domination and exclusion that involve populations from the Global South (Kakule Lyamahesana 2013; Cituli et al. 2022). Their positionality ‘in the margins’ of society has often resulted in mistrust towards outsiders, and a profound need for the protection of their social and cultural identity (Bellier 2006; Burger 2010).

It is therefore crucial for researchers to be aware of cultural practices and traditions in the community they aim to work with, in order to ensure that research is conducted in a respectful manner (Ansoms et al. 2021). These practices and traditions may vary from one context to the other (Miller et al. 2012). Moreover, researchers need to be aware of the ways in which the dynamics of domination and exclusion have marked communities, in order to avoid (re-)emphasizing types of marginalization similar to those to which they have already been subjected (Heath et al. 2007).

Furthermore, social science researchers working with indigenous communities must be aware of cultural taboos that exist within these communities. Many indigenous cultures have traditions, practices, and beliefs that are considered sacred and that are part of the domain of secrecy that binds the community together. Researchers must approach indigenous communities with respect, and must ensure that they don’t ‘trick’ research participants into breaking the taboos that they are not supposed to share with outsiders (Ekmekci and Arda 2017). When researchers do manage to gain the confidence of certain community members, they must ensure that they respect the taboos towards the outside world, regardless

of the scientific relevance of these ‘data’. This requires building trust with the community and engaging in ongoing dialogue and communication throughout the research process (Tauri 2018).

Another crucial aspect turns around the challenges of dealing with communities’ expectations. The majority of indigenous communities, especially in Africa, are often deprived of basic amenities such as decent housing, access to the space in which they anchor their sense of belonging, access to clean water and electricity, and many other aspects that define a decent livelihood. The entrance of researchers into such communities may raise expectations to levels way beyond what research can bring about (Bhattacharya 2007; Pittaway et al. 2010; Mapatano Byakumbwa 2019).

At the same time, we now see that global public opinion has directed its attention towards indigenous communities’ rights in the field of forest conservation. Some strands in the literature point to the ways in which their forms of knowledge offer interesting new perspectives in the debate on the Anthropocene (Dawson et al. 2024). However, there is also a strong risk of appropriation and instrumentalization of the ‘indigenous cause’. This global interest attracts new funding dynamics, which in turn awakens the interest of numerous actors in the political, academic, and civil society spheres (Verdeaux and Roussel 2006). It is therefore crucial for researchers to critically question their own positionality, while recognizing the agency and autonomy of indigenous communities and prioritizing their interests and well-being (Minaya and Roque 2015).

A lot of these ethical challenges present themselves throughout the various phases of research. However, a particularly important moment in the set-up of the interaction between researchers and research participants is the moment when they interact around consent. Consent is a crucial aspect of social science research practices, often defined as the voluntary agreement of an individual or group

to participate in research, after being provided with relevant information about the research study and its purpose. Consent foresees that participants receive a detailed overview of the potential risks and benefits of the research and of their rights, and that they may freely express themselves in favour or against participation in the research (Bhattacharya 2007).

In light of these considerations, this paper aims to delve into the complex dynamics of negotiating consent with indigenous communities in the Democratic Republic of Congo, assessing how the intersections between Eurocentric research practices and indigenous knowledge systems create unique ethical challenges. The structure of our study is divided into several key sections. In the first part, we reflect upon consent procedures and practices as they are discussed in the academic literature. From there, the paper will cite four critical anecdotes that are drawn from field research with indigenous communities in the Democratic Republic of Congo. We argue that these anecdotes are illustrative of ethical dilemmas in relation to consent that emerge when researchers navigate between Eurocentric research practices and indigenous knowledge systems. We reflect on the tensions, but we also offer an insight into how to move forward. We will illustrate how ethical research requires a flexible design that can adapt to nuanced and unexpected changes in the fieldwork environment, necessitating continual reflection and adjustment based on community feedback and interactions. These reflective moments help researchers to evaluate and refine the consent process to ensure it aligns with participants' comfort levels, understanding, and cultural and ethical perspectives.

2 Methodology

This article considers data collected from the Batwa indigenous peoples of South Kivu Province in eastern DRC. The research was conducted using a qualitative approach and

targeted the indigenous communities of the Idjwi and Kabare chiefdoms. The Batwa indigenous peoples of Idjwi are descendants of the Batwa who lived in the Nyamusisi forest before it was destroyed. They currently live in encamped villages close to the Bantu populations (Cituli et al. 2022). The Batwa indigenous peoples of Kabare were expelled from the Kahuzi-Biega forest after it was converted into a national park (Cituli et al. 2022, 2023). Information was collected in October 2021 using semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and observation. In addition to these techniques, documentation was used to enrich the field data. In total, six focus groups and around 30 individual interviews were carried out with Batwa populations, traditional chiefs, and Batwa representatives. This study was organized as part of the second author's doctoral research. The fieldwork discussed in this paper was carried out jointly by the first author, who was the thesis supervisor, and the second, who was her doctoral student.

3 Consent procedures and practices in the literature

The majority of ethics review boards in social science research require researchers to follow procedures through which written consent is solicited from each research participant prior to their involvement in research. It is assumed that written consent ensures that participants have been fully informed of the study's objectives, potential risks and benefits, and of their rights. Consent forms specify the conditions in which research takes place, and also formulate the guarantees in terms of the protection of participants' privacy and confidentiality (Gallagher et al. 2010; Peixoto 2017). Finally, the consent form provides the researcher with a clear record of a participant's agreement to participate, which can serve as evidence that the participant was fully informed and willing to take part in the research. This can help prevent misunderstandings or disputes later

on and demonstrate that the study was conducted ethically and with due respect for the rights and welfare of the participants (Miguel Ferreira and Serpa 2018; Bhattacharya 2007).

However, numerous authors have pointed to the shortcomings of written consent procedures in relation to the complexity of their fields. Many have pointed out the ways in which written consent procedures may be inappropriate for participants who have low literacy levels, or who have not mastered the language of the consent form (Wiles et al. 2005; Gallagher et al. 2010). Others have pointed out that written consent forms impose additional security risks on informants (Lederman 2006). The fact that researchers are walking around with forms on which the names of research respondents are mentioned may be hugely problematic in contexts of surveillance and authoritarianism (Nordstrom et al. 1996; Gordon 2020). Additionally, in certain settings, written consent may not be culturally appropriate or may be viewed with suspicion (Miguel Ferreira and Serpa 2018).

Other authors go beyond pointing to the complexities of the field in order to problematize written consent. They frame the principle of written consent as an illustration of neo-colonial research practices in which a Eurocentric contractual approach is promoted as universal good practice (Brinkmann and Kvale 2005; Wynn 2018). These authors argue that the emphasis on written consent in research is rooted in Western notions of individual autonomy and legalistic frameworks that may not be applicable or appropriate in many other cultural contexts. Such procedures may even enhance and perpetuate the power imbalance between researchers and research participants; and may be used as a tool of exploitation in the business of data extraction (Gordon 2020). Tuck and Yang (2012), for example, argue that the pressure to obtain written consent in research may be used to extract information from vulnerable populations, such as indigenous communities,

without adequate consideration for their cultural values or interests.

Overall, several authors suggest that consent procedures in social science research should be critically examined and contextualized within broader power dynamics and cultural values. They suggest that researchers should strive to engage in more equitable and collaborative research practices that acknowledge and respect the diversity of knowledge systems and values across cultures (Thambinathan and Kinsella 2021; La Scala et al. 2023). In many cases, authors suggest that oral consent procedures may be more appropriate. Oral consent can be obtained through a verbal explanation of the study’s purpose, potential risks and benefits, and the participant’s rights, followed by a verbal agreement from the participant (Pegado et al. 2016; Miguel Ferreira and Serpa 2018).

However, even in the case of oral consent, many ethical problems may arise. First of all, it may not be straightforward for potential research participants – particularly for those who are not familiar with what scientific research comprehends – to understand the research objectives and risks. Making an informed decision about their participation is not easy when they have no frame of reference in relation to scientific research (Manti and Licari 2018). Second, power dynamics between researchers and research participants may prevent the latter from feeling free to consent (or not). For example, individuals and communities living in extremely precarious conditions may feel obliged to participate in research in order to obtain whatever benefits participation may entail (even if extremely modest) (Pittaway et al. 2010). On the other hand, their struggle to survive may impede participation because of lack of time while making a living for themselves and their families (Bhattacharya 2007; Mapatano Byakumbwa 2019).

Finally, obtaining consent may be hard when the process of making the terms of collaboration explicit does not match with the

appropriate cultural values and norms. For example, indigenous communities may have different perspectives on consent, privacy, and intellectual property. Whereas research ethics protocols are often based upon respecting the ‘universal’ practices of the research enterprise, they may not be at all adapted to what local communities expect from scientific research (Bashizi 2019). Organizing the consent phase in a culturally sensitive and respectful manner is far from straightforward.

And thus, what does soliciting consent mean in the field? And how can Eurocentric research practices be reconciled with a respect for indigenous knowledge systems? In the next section, we will present four critical incidents in the field to illustrate the tensions, but also possible ways forward.

4 Consent in the field

We draw on research that has been conducted by two researchers based in the Global South and in the Global North. The first author coordinates a larger research team on rural transformations in the African Great Lakes Region and is a specialist in research ethics. The other author is working on a PhD project on indigenous communities’ ontologies in Eastern DRC and undertook various phases of field research between August 2019 and May 2024. The anecdotes in this paper are drawn from collaborative research in which both authors were involved in October 2021 in two territories of DRC’s South Kivu (North Idjwi and Kabare).

4.1 “*This pen is cheap, but it can sell an entire country*”

In October 2021, we arrived in the village of a Batwa community on Idjwi Island, tightly packed among numerous other land occupations. The residents were housed in dilapidated structures, tightly clustered together. On the village outskirts, a

substantial house was under construction; we later learned it belonged to a close relative of the customary chief. As we prepared to take notes with pen and paper, the community spokesperson cautioned us against having them sign any attendance list. He remarked, “With this pen? It is cheap, but it can sell an entire country.” Another community member recounted a troubling incident, saying, “It’s like the time we almost lost our lands because we had signed the attendance list at a meeting organized in our area.” They detailed how a powerful elite – related to the individual building the large house – had exploited that attendance list in legal proceedings to falsely demonstrate that the community had consented to his plans for land appropriation. Throughout the village, stone pillars served as landmarks that had been installed by official authorities to show where the premises of the large house would end. De facto, this demarcation would oblige over half of the community to relocate.

This anecdote illustrates the profound clash between Western legalistic procedures for obtaining written consent, and the complex socio-cultural realities that characterize the lives of Batwa indigenous peoples of Eastern DRC. This tension arises from several intertwined factors.

First, Batwa indigenous communities have historically experienced territorial dispossession without consultation or formal legal proceedings, but they have also experienced situations in which their presence was instrumentalized in enforced consultation processes around conservation without their opinions being considered (Cituli et al. 2023). These processes were often formalized in written language. Consequently, written

documents – particularly when introduced by outsiders – are viewed with suspicion. In addition, a meeting attendance list had been manipulated by a powerful local actor to justify a land dispossession plan under the guise of a collective agreement. This misuse of written documentation heightens mistrust towards any form of written consent, which is seen as potentially another tool for exploitation.

In addition, the predominance of illiteracy among the Batwa further complicates the use of written consent. Handing a person who cannot read a document to sign can be perceived as disrespectful or manipulative, potentially alienating the community members. Moreover, insisting on written consent in a context where many cannot read or write not only disregards local capabilities but also cultural norms. The metaphor of the ‘dangerous pen’ underscores the perceived risks associated with signing any document, an act that could lead to unintended, harmful outcomes as was illustrated through negative past experiences.

Furthermore, the Batwa’s preference for group consent and decision-making aligns with their community-oriented way of life (Ekmekci and Arda 2017), reminiscent of the Ubuntu philosophy (Koulayan 2008) that emphasizes communal living and collective well-being. This cultural preference suggests that methods for obtaining consent must be flexible. In essence, the anecdote exemplifies how legalistic frameworks designed in and for Western contexts may not be suitable or effective in other cultural settings, particularly where historical experiences and cultural practices shape a very different understanding of written agreements and formal consent. Thus, adapting consent procedures to respect and integrate local norms and values is essential for conducting ethical and effective research in such contexts. Building trust through respectful interaction, rather than through formal written procedures, is crucial in ensuring meaningful and ethical engagement.

4.2 “We are all one community”

October 2021, in the same village. After assuring our research respondents that we would not require anyone to sign a document, we still aimed to ensure that everyone consented to participate in our study. At this stage, our research was still in its preliminary phases without a set agenda of questions; we were essentially conducting an introductory meeting to refine our research topic and methods. Consequently, we initiated a focus group discussion with a spontaneously assembled group of people who were willing to engage with us. We clarified the purpose of our conversation and sought their consent to participate. The village chief gave his approval. When we asked the other participants for their consent, a person remarked, “We are all one community; we agree to participate in your study.” The same scenario occurred a week later when we repeated the procedure with a Batwa community in Kabare. Once again, the village chief consented. However, when we sought to confirm the agreement of the other participants, a woman responded, with slight irritation, “The chief has already told you that we agree to participate in the study.”

Western academic and ethical standards prioritize individual consent, valuing personal autonomy and informed decision-making as foundational to ethical research. Each participant’s agreement is seen as essential for their rights and dignity to be respected. However, in contexts like the Batwa community, where cultural norms emphasize community consensus and collective decision-making, the Western

approach to individual consent can appear both foreign and invasive.

In the indigenous communities we visited, the village chief or elder typically acts as a spokesperson, embodying a governance structure that prioritizes collective decision-making over individual autonomy. This reflects a cultural worldview where decisions are generally made at the community level, and the consent of the chief or elder is seen as representing the collective will. As a result, insisting on individual consent can clash with these community-oriented decision-making processes. For the Batwa, requests for individual consent after the chief’s approval might be perceived as aggressive and disrespectful to their established norms.

Such cultural clashes highlight the critical need for researchers to adapt their consent practices to the cultural and social dynamics of the communities they engage with. Adapting research practices in this way not only respects the community’s cultural heritage and governance structures but also fosters trust and cooperation, thereby enhancing both the ethical integrity and the quality of the research.

However, while adopting a collective consent procedure may align more closely with some cultural norms, it is not without challenges. In particular, it risks overlooking the unease of individual community members who do not wish to participate in the research, but who are unwilling or unable to voice their objections in a collective setting. Researchers must therefore be sensitive to non-verbal cues and metadata – a concept highlighted by Fujii (2010) which refers to the implicit data derived from context and behavior – indicating discomfort or dissent even when verbal consent has been uniformly given.

4.3 A human zoo: “You did not enter through the right gate”

In October 2021, our research team faced a significant disruption: one

of the villages on our Idjwi itinerary was burned down by neighbouring communities just days before our visit. This forced us to reconsider our plans and select an alternative village. Also in this setting, we realized that our research was sensitive and reached out to the village’s chief and a couple of local spokespersons, who assured us that the community was eager to engage with us.

Upon our arrival, we noted the village’s proximity to an NGO project, which initially seemed incidental. The village chief greeted us at the village entrance, but our interaction was swiftly commandeered by a key figure from the NGO. He began conversing in French, a language not understood by the Batwa village chief, effectively excluding him from the discussion. Soon, we were ushered into the buildings of a school linked to the NGO. However, it wasn’t long before several Batwa community members approached us, clarifying that the NGO project nor its coordinator represented their community. Following their lead, we moved into the village, starting our planned discussions in a grove of banana trees.

Our conversation, however, was quickly interrupted by an NGO staff member who handed us a phone. On the line, the NGO coordinator, sounding agitated, denied us access to what he claimed was part of the NGO project, which supposedly included the village. He criticized our approach, claiming that we had not used the ‘correct’ entrance and questioning our ethical integrity. This assertion heightened tensions, leading to a heated exchange between the

Batwa community members and the NGO staff.

As the situation escalated, we were guided away from the village to an area outside the community grounds. Here, the reality of the situation unfolded. Our Batwa interlocutors explained they had been ‘recruited’ by the NGO to reside on its land and form a new community. Their presence allowed the NGO to leverage their precarious situation for the project’s legitimacy. The community’s frustration was palpable, particularly with the NGO’s refusal to allow them to interact with us as researchers. One person poignantly asked, “We live on their land, but does this mean that we have become their slaves?” Another expressed concern about the community losing its autonomy, asking, “Have we lost the right to have our own voice?”

This anecdote provides an illustration of a more general situation in which the Batwa communities in South Kivu have become focal points for various humanitarian and development agencies, which often justify their presence and interventions based on the visible suffering and marginalization of this population group (see also Flexor et al. 2017). While these initiatives aim to provide aid and improve conditions, they frequently adopt a paternalistic approach by speaking on behalf of the Batwa. This dynamic can inadvertently lead to a new form of domination, as these external agents shape narratives and make decisions without adequately involving the Batwa in discussions about their needs and solutions. Consequently, the very efforts claiming to empower the Batwa may instead limit their agency, perpetuating a cycle of external control and oversight.

However, this specific situation was made even more grotesque given that the NGO

coordinator implicitly assumed that the Batwa communities on ‘his’ land were to be considered as property of the project, a metaphorical ‘human zoo’. His claimed authority over access to the land and its inhabitants, and his refusal to allow us to converse with community members, demonstrated how a consent phase in research may result in power manifestations and the creation of conflicts between actors.

Interestingly, the anecdote also illustrated how the various individuals of this ‘created’ community had appropriated a sense of social cohesion that transcended the confines of the NGO project. Despite the project coordinator’s directive – communicated through a trainer – to prevent us from conducting interviews, a significant number of the Batwa present were determined to speak with us beyond the boundaries of the NGO-controlled land. One of the interlocutors said: “Let’s go outside his concession; we’ll see how they will come to stop us from talking to you ... Have we become barnyard animals? Can’t we receive visitors outside their circle since we live on their land? ... We must free ourselves...”

Ethically, our presence endangered them as they would likely face repercussions after our visit. Nonetheless, not listening to them would have been a disregard for their right to speak and a judgment of their inability to express themselves about their living conditions (Rousseau and Kirmayer 2010). It is evident that these power relations affect both the relationship between researchers and their research participants, but also between research participants and intermediary actors (Heath et al. 2007). Indeed, this anecdote underlines the complex interplay of power, consent, and agency in contexts involving vulnerable communities and external organizations. Researchers must navigate these dynamics carefully, ensuring that their practices do not inadvertently perpetuate oppression or silence the voices they aim to amplify.

4.4 “Who are you to tell our story?”

In October 2021, we arrived at the final destination on our itinerary of Batwa communities in South Kivu. This location was particularly significant because the Batwa chief, who acts as a prominent spokesperson for the community, had been actively involved in organizing protests against park authorities, some of which had escalated into violent confrontations. Although the chief was not present upon our arrival, he had instructed the community members to welcome us. We settled in with eight Batwa community members and, after obtaining their consent, began our research interview. About half an hour later, the chief joined the meeting. Initially, he remained silent, allowing the other community members to speak. However, after ten minutes, he interrupted the discussion, turned to us, and challenged us, saying, “Who are you to tell our story? We see you, researchers and NGOs, coming and going. You take our words, but you don’t understand their meaning.”

This anecdote illustrates the complex and dynamic nature of obtaining consent in research, which goes beyond a mere procedural step and requires ongoing engagement with cultural sensitivity, awareness of power imbalances, and a deep understanding. Initially, we obtained consent from eight Batwa community members. However, the chief’s intervention later in the process brought to light the multifaceted nature of consent. His probing question, “Who are you to tell our story?” (similar to “Stop stealing our stories” in Pittaway et al. 2010), emphasized that consent is not simply a one-time agreement but an evolving commitment that necessitates continuous validation

and reassessment throughout the research interaction.

His remarks also touched on a frequent issue encountered by researchers working in culturally different settings – the possibility of instrumentalizing collected narratives in research analysis without fully appreciating their cultural significance or implications. His concern was that although the community members had agreed to share their stories, it remained uncertain whether we, as researchers, could genuinely grasp and respectfully represent what was conveyed to us. This point was echoed in other interactions, such as with another Batwa village chief on Idjwi Island, who expressed both scepticism and conditional openness by stating, “Who are you to speak of our traditions and rites? (....) but as I see you show us consideration, I will speak nonetheless (....) but I feel my ancestors start to look at me (....).” In another setting, where we invited our interlocutors to talk about their knowledge of medicinal plants, a young Mutwa responded, “We do not speak of these matters to outsiders (....) our ancestors might punish us.” This again highlighted the delicate balance required in respecting and understanding indigenous knowledge and beliefs.

Researchers must continuously question their legitimacy in relation to the subject of the research and the community being studied, especially when addressing sensitive topics. This involves an intricate blend of microethics and macroethics (Brinkmann and Kvale 2005; Caldaïrou-Bessette et al. 2017) that governs both the interview setting and broader societal and cultural interactions. Interviewees may feel comfortable discussing taboo topics within the interview context, yet researchers have a duty not to betray this trust by improperly disclosing sensitive information (Melville and Hincks 2016; Silverio et al. 2022).

Thus, consent in research is not a static acquisition but an ongoing negotiation (Bhattacharya 2007; Heath et al. 2007; Miguel Ferreira and Serpa 2018; Klykken 2022),

emphasizing the importance of ensuring that participants feel free to withhold answers to certain questions or to end the interview at any point without judgment (Miguel Ferreira and Serpa 2018). This approach underlines the need for researchers to remain vigilant and responsive to the evolving contexts and complexities of ethical engagement with study participants.

5 Interacting with an ethics committee: a positive experience

Upon our return from the field, and on the basis of the assembled data, the second author of this paper refined his PhD proposal. He managed to obtain an FNRS scholarship that required him to solicit the approval of his project from an ethics committee. This also implied that the first author of this paper – normally member of the ethics committee within her own research institute – would this time sit on the other side of the table. As the promotor of the PhD project, she was part of the team being assessed.

The grant conditions mentioned:

Many projects require prior consideration of ethical problems that might arise or that are inherent to the submitted research project. (...) The way the ethical problems related to the project are handled will be considered in the frame of the scientific evaluation of the proposal. The possible ethical problems related to research may relate to the use and storage of private data, the handling of substances that may cause environmental or biodiversity damage and the research on animals or human beings, for instance (non-exhaustive list). (...) Effective granting will be subject to a favourable opinion of the (Ethics) Committee (FNRS, Questionnaire

regarding human ethics, January 2023 version).

The text reflects a procedural approach to research ethics, highlighting the primarily evaluative role of an ethics committee in assessing the ethical considerations outlined in a PhD proposal. It is assumed that the ethics committee acts as a gatekeeper, determining the release of funding based on compliance with ethical standards, emphasizing the need to address potential ethical issues at the initial planning stage of the research. Funding is contingent upon receiving a favourable opinion from the ethics committee, reinforcing the importance of this procedural approach without necessarily providing guidance or mentorship on how to address potential ethical issues.

Within the form, there was a specific section relating to consent. Section 7, on acquiring free and informed consent, asked us: “Do participants give informed consent to take part in the study? In case of consent given verbally, indicate how this consent will be gained and why written consent cannot be given.” Section 9 on data confidentiality added: “In certain circumstances, the law may require you to disclose certain information to third parties (e.g.: to report a case of abuse). Have you inserted a clause to that effect in the consent form?” Finally, the form also asked researchers to include the informed consent form submitted to the participants – including contact details of the reference person (FNRS, Questionnaire regarding human ethics, January 2023 version).

This text clearly embodies the mainstream approach to research ethics that prioritizes obtaining written consent from participants. In many institutional settings, this procedural approach to research ethics has resulted in a standardized discourse for consent forms with a strong focus on legal and technical issues (Bledsoe et al. 2007). With the anecdotes above in mind, this was certainly a reason for concern.

However, fortunately, FNRS provided flexibility in terms of which ethics committee would evaluate the proposal. This gave us the freedom to reach out to the ethics committee of IACCHOS, our institution. The IACCHOS ethics committee at the Université Catholique de Louvain represents a pioneering approach to navigating research ethics, which is especially distinct in the social sciences. Departing from traditional control-based methods, the committee emphasizes support and dialogue over mere compliance. This supportive orientation is rooted in the belief that ethics should be a dynamic conversation rather than a static set of rules, reflecting the committee’s commitment to fostering a reflective research culture. This approach enables a more nuanced understanding of ethical issues as they arise, allowing for adjustments tailored to specific research contexts and challenges.

One of the notable features of the IACCHOS ethics committee is its commitment to facilitating a reflexive dialogue between the committee members and researchers. In practical terms, this meant that we were invited to discuss the form imposed by FNRS with two committee members to engage in critical reflection around the ethical dimensions of our work. The referees allowed us to enrich our reflection beyond checking boxes on a form, and to consider the ethical reflections around consent (and other matters) not just as a preliminary hurdle but as a continual part of the research process.

Instead of imposing a strict consent formula, the committee accepted that the soliciting of participants’ consent had to be part of a conversation in which participants would be informed about the purpose of the research; and could in return provide individual and/or collective informed consent in terms appropriate to their own cultural reference patterns. The formula accepted by both the ethics committee, the PhD candidate, and his promotor, was the following:

To obtain the consent of our participants, my procedure will consist of reading and explaining the information sheet on my research in the participants’ native language. Being aware of the delicate terrain in which I work, and beyond the explicit consent of the participants, I will be very attentive to group dynamics and other metadata to ensure that my participants are not made uncomfortable. After reading the information sheet, I will wait for them to express their free and informed consent in language similar to the following:

I/We freely agree to participate in your research to achieve its objectives. I/We have been made aware of the objectives of this research and I/we agree to participate. I/we have been informed of our right to interrupt this interview without having to justify ourselves. I/we have been informed that the data collected will be anonymized and kept strictly confidential.

I, the undersigned, confirm that I have informed the participant(s) about the objectives of the research, the terms of their participation, and the possibility of withdrawing during the research. All commitments made to the participants will be respected (Finalized questionnaire regarding human ethics, approved on 23 May 2023).

This positive experience illustrates how the IACCHOS committee’s approach allows for the adaptation of ethical standards to align with what makes practical and ethical sense in the field. By emphasizing reflexivity and the co-construction of ethical understanding, the committee encourages researchers to interpret and apply ethical guidelines in ways that are sensitive to the specific contexts of their studies. This adaptability is crucial in the social

sciences, where research settings can vary dramatically, and ethical nuances may not be adequately addressed by rigid protocols.

Furthermore, in adopting a supportive and interactive approach to research ethics, the committee fosters a nurturing environment where researchers feel surrounded by peers who understand the practical challenges and ethical complexities inherent in social science research. Such a setup reduces the typical anxieties associated with ethical approval processes and shifts the experience from one of compliance to one of engagement and mutual learning.

6 Conclusion

This paper has delved into the intricate dynamics of negotiating consent in research involving indigenous communities in the DRC, highlighting the nuanced ethical dilemmas that arise when Western research practices intersect with indigenous knowledge systems. Through the discussion of critical anecdotes from fieldwork, it becomes evident that ethical challenges are not only prevalent but are magnified in contexts where cultural values and historical experiences significantly differ from the norms typically embedded in Western-centric research ethics protocols. This disparity calls for a more culturally sensitive approach to consent that respects the values and social structures of indigenous communities (Tauri 2018).

The case studies presented illustrate that consent is not merely a procedural checkpoint but a complex, ongoing negotiation that requires sensitivity, respect, and a deep understanding of cultural nuances. The standard practice of obtaining written consent, while a cornerstone of ethical research in many settings, may often not be appropriate or respectful in other places, particularly in communities with different conceptions of autonomy, privacy, and community decision-making.

Breaking out of this logic of data extraction requires a great deal of critical self-reflection. This underscores the need for researchers to engage more deeply with the communities they study, building trust and ensuring that consent processes are adapted to meet the cultural and ethical expectations of those communities.

This requires an adaptable research design that can respond to the nuanced and sometimes sudden shifts in the fieldwork environment. Ethical engagement therefore also means integrating moments of reflection into the research process. These moments allow researchers to assess and readjust their approaches based on ongoing interactions and feedback from the community. For instance, after a first round of field interaction, a researcher might reflect on the consent process, considering questions like: Were participants genuinely comfortable with the terms of engagement? Did they understand the implications of the research? How might the consent process be perceived from the viewpoint of the community's cultural and ethical standards?

In conclusion, this paper argues for a paradigm shift in how consent is approached in social science research involving indigenous populations. By advocating for approaches that prioritize dialogue, mutual respect, and the co-construction of understanding, researchers can better align their practices with the realities and ethical standards of indigenous communities. This perspective has of course a broader relevance: considering the cultural and social context of research respondents, their perspectives, and their expectations should be a key principle in research ethics. This not only enhances the integrity of the research but also ensures that it contributes positively to the communities involved, respecting their rights, traditions, and voices within the research process. Such an approach is essential for advancing ethical research practices that are truly inclusive and respectful of all participants.

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